

US-Vietnam nuclear talks heighten frictions with China

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In a move that will further raise regional tensions, the US is conducting negotiations with Vietnam over a deal to allow the purchase of nuclear fuel, as well as American nuclear technology and reactors. The talks, details of which were leaked to the US media last week, are another sign that the Obama administration is engaged in an aggressive strategy of countering Chinese influence throughout the Asian region.

The most detailed account was published in the *Wall Street Journal* on August 3. Based on the comments of a top US official, the article explained that Washington was in “advanced negotiations” with Hanoi over an agreement to share nuclear fuel and technology with Vietnam. Significantly, the deal would allow Vietnam to enrich its own uranium to produce fuel for its power reactors, subject to monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

While the agreement is yet to be finalised, the proviso allowing uranium enrichment has already provoked criticisms in the Middle East, where the US reached a nuclear deal with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that ruled out uranium enrichment. “It is ironic... as nonproliferation is one of the [US] president’s top goals that the UAE model is not being endorsed here [with Vietnam]... People will start to see a double standard,” a senior Arab official cautiously told the *Wall Street Journal*.

The cynicism of the Obama administration’s projected nuclear deal with Vietnam is underscored by its campaign against Iran over the same issue. Washington has imposed punitive sanctions and threatened military action against Tehran for building enrichment facilities and producing low-enriched uranium, under IAEA monitoring, to fuel its power reactors—precisely what Hanoi would be permitted to do.

In his comments to the *Wall Street Journal*, the senior US official justified the double standard with the claim that Iran was planning to build nuclear weapons—an assertion that Washington has never proved. “Given our special concerns about Iran and the genuine threat of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, we believe the UAE... agreement is a model

for [that] region. These same concerns do not specifically apply in Asia. We will take different approaches region by region and country by country,” the official said.

In reality, the “different approaches” have the same driving force—the strategic and economic interests of US imperialism. In the case of Iran, the Obama administration is exploiting the nuclear issue as a means of fashioning a regime favourable to US ambitions for dominance throughout the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. In the case of Vietnam, the White House is forging close strategic ties as part of broader plans to block Chinese influence in South East Asia.

The *Wall Street Journal* acknowledged that the US-Vietnam nuclear deal was “the latest example of the US’s renewed assertiveness in South and South East Asia, as Washington strengthens its ties with nations that have grown increasingly wary of Beijing’s growing regional might”. Asked whether China had been informed about the talks, the senior US official replied: “This is a negotiation between the US and Vietnam. We don’t ask China to approve issues that are in our own strategic interest.”

In an indication of Beijing’s opposition, a senior Chinese nonproliferation official told the state-run *China Daily* that the US-Vietnam talks showed “double standards” and “challenged the present international order”. The *Times of India* commented that the US negotiations had taken Beijing by surprise. The article noted that China had signed its own nuclear agreement with the Vietnamese government in July last year and had hoped to be chosen to build Vietnam’s planned nuclear power stations.

Like other South East Asian countries, Vietnam is attempting to balance between the US and China, even as rivalry between the two powers intensifies. While acknowledging that an initial nuclear agreement with the US had been reached in March, Vietnamese officials downplayed the negotiations toward a final pact, saying they were yet to begin. Vietnam’s Atomic Energy Institute director Vuong Huu Tan said his country had no plans to enrich uranium, adding: “Vietnam doesn’t want to make its

international relations complicated.”

As a result of its rapid economic expansion, Vietnam is suffering power shortages and plans to build as many as 13 nuclear power plants, with a combined capacity of 16,000 megawatts, over the next two decades. US, Russian, Japanese, Chinese and French corporations are vying for the contracts to build them. Russia’s Rosatom Corp has been chosen to build the first plant, but American corporations such as General Electric and Bechtel obviously want a nuclear agreement between the two countries that would put them in the running.

However, the US decision to offer Vietnam an agreement on favourable terms goes beyond immediate economic calculations. The Obama administration is determined to forge closer ties with Vietnam as part of increasingly blatant moves to develop “strategic partnerships” and consolidate current military alliances with countries throughout Asia. Confronted with the challenge of China’s rising economic strength, the US, which is waning as an economic power, is relying on military and strategic muscle to defend its position.

The leaked news of US-Vietnamese nuclear talks follows US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s provocative statements on the South China Sea at last month’s Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) security forum in Hanoi. The South China Sea, along with the Spratly and Paracel islands, has been the subject of sharply conflicting claims between China and several ASEAN countries, including Vietnam.

In the past, the US has maintained a neutral stance on the competing claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea. At the ASEAN meeting, however, Clinton sided with Vietnam and other ASEAN members, calling for a “regional code of conduct” in opposition to China’s claims in the strategically sensitive area. China’s foreign minister Yang Jichi condemned Clinton’s comments, describing them as “virtually an attack on China”.

While in Hanoi, Clinton also commented on growing US-Vietnamese cooperation on a range of security, economic and environmental issues. “The Obama administration is prepared to take the US-Vietnam relationship to the next level,” she declared. “We see this relationship not only as important on its own merits, but as part of a strategy aimed at enhancing American engagement in the Asia Pacific.”

Despite the bitter legacy of US imperialism’s war on Vietnam until 1975, the Stalinist regime in Hanoi has had no qualms about developing its relations with Washington. Like its counterpart in China, the Vietnamese government has transformed the country into a cheap labour platform and is increasingly dependent on the US for trade, investment and

economic aid. The US is now Vietnam’s largest market, accounting for 20 percent of exports, and in 2009 was the largest source of foreign investment.

Even though Vietnam wants to avoid antagonising China, there is longstanding rivalry between the two countries. With the tacit support of the US, China launched a war against Vietnam in 1979 aimed at crippling the regime, which had just toppled Pol Pot in neighbouring Cambodia. While China and Vietnam have since patched up relations, the two countries have a disputed land border, and have clashed over control of the Spratly Islands. Increasingly, Hanoi is tilting toward the US as a means of prosecuting its own regional ambitions, particularly against China.

In a demonstration of closer military ties, the US sent the aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, to Vietnam last Sunday to mark the 15th anniversary of the normalisation of relations between the two countries. In recent years, the US has sent warships to visit Vietnam, raising fears in Beijing that ports such as Cam Ranh Bay will, in effect, again become major US bases, as they were during the Vietnam War. The visit by the USS Washington was particularly provocative—both because of its size and fighting capacity, and also because the same warship engaged in joint naval exercises with the South Korean navy off the Korean Peninsula last month. China publicly warned against such war games so close to its coastline.

At the ASEAN summit last year, US Secretary of State Clinton bluntly declared that the US was “back in South East Asia”—reflecting criticisms of the previous Bush administration for having neglected Asia. The nuclear talks with Vietnam confirm that the Obama administration is accelerating its reckless strategy of undermining China’s position in Asia, regardless of the potential for confrontation and conflict.



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