

US defence secretary increases military ties with Vietnam

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On June 4, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta travelled to Vietnam to discuss the increase of the US military presence in the country. He visited the strategic port of Cam Ranh Bay, becoming the highest ranking American official to do so since the end of the US war in Vietnam.

Panetta arrived in Vietnam from the Shangri-la Defense Summit in Singapore where he delivered a speech over the weekend announcing that Washington would be shifting the majority of its naval forces to the Asia-Pacific region. This move is a calculated step that threatens China's ability to deploy its military forces and to access global trade routes.

Cam Ranh Bay is regarded as the best deep water harbour in Southeast Asia, and has historically been a vital military asset. Control of Cam Ranh Bay played a key role in maintaining the military dominance of first French and then US imperialism in the country.

Panetta delivered a speech in Cam Ranh Bay from the deck of USNS Richard E. Byrd, a merchant marine supply ship, currently undergoing repairs by Vietnamese contractors. He stated that the US "pivot" to Asia required that Washington be "able to use harbors like this as we move our ships from our ports on the West Coast towards our stations here in the Pacific."

In 2010, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung announced that Cam Ranh Bay would be refurbished to facilitate the docking and repair of foreign naval ships, including submarines. Since then US supply ships have been visiting for repairs, but combat ships have not yet been allowed into the port.

The main purpose of Panetta's visit was to expand military ties between Washington and Hanoi and to negotiate for more frequent port calls for US naval vessels in Vietnam. Panetta met with the Vietnamese Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh. Panetta stated that he was interested in taking US ties with Vietnam "to the next level," so that the US could "help Vietnam deal with critical maritime issues." This is a clear statement of the US agenda in Vietnam. The sharp re-assertion of US imperialist interests in the Asia Pacific region, and the deliberate policy of containing China, have been couched in language of "protecting freedom of navigation" and "critical maritime issues." The increasing military ties between the US and Vietnam are targeted at China.

Vietnamese Defence Minister Thanh responded by requesting that the US lift sanctions against the sale of lethal military equipment to Vietnam. Washington has had an arms embargo on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam since 1984. During a visit to Vietnam in August 2011, US Senator Jim Webb, a member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, called for the lifting of the embargo. In a visit to Vietnam in January 2012, Senators McCain and Lieberman made it apparent that token gestures at "improving the human rights record" would be sufficient for ending the embargo.

According to a Congressional Research report on the state of US-Vietnamese relations published on May 18, 2012, Washington sold \$100 million worth of non-lethal military equipment to Vietnam from 2007-2010. In 2009 the United States began supplementing these sales with Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance.

China in the region.

The talks were cemented with a cynical exchange of the personal effects of the war dead. Thanh and Panetta exchanged diaries and personal letters which had been taken from the corpses of Vietnamese and American combatants during the war. There was much fanfare and numerous photo ops as the military heads smiled, shook hands, and exchanged the writings of American and Vietnamese war dead. The last letters of Sgt. Flaherty and which were now being given to Panetta described the US imperialist venture in Vietnam as “a dirty and cruel war.”

The negotiations between Panetta and his Vietnamese counterparts highlight the willingness of the Vietnamese Stalinist regime to accommodate the interests of US imperialism. Over the past decade Hanoi has developed closer economic and strategic relations with Washington. The Vietnamese regime has transformed the country’s economy into a platform for cheap labor, and the United States is both Vietnam’s top export market and its chief source of foreign investment. There was \$17 billion in bilateral trade between the US and Vietnam in 2011, a ten-fold increase over the amount 2001 when the US first extended “normal trade relations” treatment.

Panetta is now moving on to India, where he will seek to cement closer ties through the US-Indian strategic partnership, again directed against China.

While Panetta travelled to Vietnam, Martin Dempsey, chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, left the Shangri-la Summit to visit the Philippines. Over the past two years Washington has played a crucial role in the dramatic escalation of tensions between China and the Philippines over rival claims to the South China Sea. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs announced that Dempsey had concluded an agreement for increased port calls by US naval vessels in the Philippines.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino will be visiting the United States later in the week, and speaking with President Obama in the Oval Office. Aquino stated that he would be discussing the Philippine claim to the South China Sea and the on-going naval standoff with



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