

Top US general suggests lifting ban on arms sales to Vietnam

John Roberts
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During a four-day visit to Vietnam in mid-August, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joints Chiefs of Staff, indicated that Washington might lift its decades-old ban on supplying and selling weapons to the country. Hanoi has long sought such a move.

Ending or easing the US ban on arms sales would be a significant further step in the Obama administration's efforts to forge closer economic and strategic ties with the Vietnamese regime—directed particularly against China.

Dempsey's visit in mid-August, and another by US Republican Senators John McCain and Sheldon Whitehouse a week earlier, followed a tense standoff between Vietnam and China over the placing of a Chinese oil rig in disputed waters in the South China Sea from May 2 to July 16. The setting up of the oil rig led to confrontations between coast guard vessels from the two countries and violent anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam against Chinese businesses and citizens.

Dempsey met with Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, Defence Minister Phung Quang Thanh and armed forces chief General Do Ba Ty.

At a press briefing on August 16, Dempsey declared that Washington wanted to be “an honest broker” in Vietnam's territorial disputes with China. But as everyone in the room understood, Washington is clearly taking sides against China, encouraging its neighbours to take a tougher stance in pressing their case. During the briefing, Dempsey referred to the South China Sea as the “East Sea,” adopting the Vietnamese term.

The Obama administration repeats the mantra that it is “neutral” in the territorial disputes, but, since the beginning of the year, has begun to openly question the legitimacy of Chinese territorial claims. The US has quietly supported the Philippines in its legal challenge

to China's claims in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS).

In relation to Japan, Obama has unambiguously stated that it would back Tokyo in a war with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea—even though it continues its posture of “neutrality.”

Asked about the US weapons ban, Dempsey said: “There have been increased discussions about it and my sense is there's increased support for [removing] it.” He said his advice was that it should begin with “assets that would make the [Vietnamese] People's Navy more capable in the maritime domain” by providing intelligence, and reconnaissance ability and “potentially some weapons for their fleet they currently don't have.”

In other words, Dempsey wants to provide the means for Vietnam to be part of “a stronger multi-national response” to China's claims. The US is pursuing a reckless policy of gathering together Beijing's neighbours and arming them for conflict with China. The US has already provided the Philippines with coast guard cutters and has secured a basing agreement to put US forces adjacent to the South China Sea.

Japan, Washington's close ally in the anti-China campaign, announced earlier this month that it would supply Vietnam with six patrol boats to increase its capacity for surveillance in the South China Sea. Tokyo has reached a similar deal with the Philippines.

During his visit on August 8, Senator McCain told reporters in Hanoi that he was confident of bi-partisan support in the US Congress for lifting the ban on weapon sales. He said that the US was ready to work with Vietnam to develop stronger military ties, including more visits by American warships. Washington has been seeking access to the deep water

port of Cam Ranh Bay, which it built during its neo-colonial war in Vietnam. Currently Hanoi limits US naval visits to one a year.

The lifting in the weapons ban has been under discussion in US foreign policy circles for months. The Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies called for the arming of Vietnam at a conference in early July. Obama's nominee as US ambassador to Vietnam Ted Ossiis also foreshadowed such a move in June.

In a comment entitled "The case for US arms Sales to Vietnam," the *Wall Street Journal* called for the US to bolster Vietnam's defence capabilities, including the lifting of the ban on "lethal arms sales" and for the supply of "maritime domain awareness systems, frigates and other vessels and anti-ship weapons." Such a move would also undercut Russia as a supplier of military hardware to Vietnam, which has just signed a deal with Moscow to supply six submarines.

Vietnam's relations with China have deteriorated markedly since last October when Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Hanoi and signed 12 trade agreements, part of a plan to increase bilateral trade to \$US60 billion by 2015. Vietnam and China also signed an agreement for the joint exploration of natural resources, including oil, natural gas and fish stocks, in the Gulf of Tonkin, one of the disputed areas.

The Vietnamese regime viewed China's unilateral decision to set up the oil rig in May as a breach of their understandings. Beijing insisted that it was within its rights as the exploratory drilling was close to the Paracel Islands that it controls. Nevertheless, China withdrew the oil rig a month ahead of schedule in a bid to ease tensions.

Divisions have emerged within the Vietnamese regime over the issue. In late July, 61 prominent members of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), including a former ambassador to Beijing, issued an open letter to the leadership demanding Vietnam "get out of China's orbit" and calling for legal action against China. Former vice science and technology minister Chu Hao described the leadership's reaction to the oil rig affair as revealing "their feebleness."

The Stalinist VCP has been pursuing a program of capitalist restoration and opening up to foreign investment since the 1980s. Closer ties with Washington will also mean closer economic integration

through the Trans Pacific Partnership and deepening social polarisation. The US is pushing for the dismantling or restructuring of the country's 1,300 state-owned enterprises that produce 40 percent of GDP and an opening up of the agriculture sector which employs 48 percent of the workforce.

A sure sign of Washington's determination to forge closer ties with Vietnam, is the playing down of the "human rights issue" that has been declared in the past to be a barrier to US arms sales. US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour Tom Malinowski joined Senator McCain by declaring that Hanoi has taken "positive steps" to address the issue over the last six months, including its token release of seven political dissidents.



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