

Washington partially lifts ban on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam

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3 October 2014

After meetings held Thursday between Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and US Secretary of State John Kerry and National Security Adviser Susan Rice, Washington announced that it was partially lifting its decades-long ban on the transfer or sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam.

Washington's new policy toward Hanoi will allow the sale of lethal defense equipment for "maritime security purposes." The announcement marks a significant escalation of Washington's war drive against China.

The United States has not transferred weaponry to Vietnam since the end of its war in Vietnam in 1975. In 1984, President Reagan enacted an embargo on the sale of arms to Hanoi. Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995, Washington has used the trade ban, under the pretense of concern for human rights, as a means to pressure Vietnam to open up its economy for exploitation by US capitalists, and to privatize its State Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

In 2006, Washington approved the sale of non-lethal arms to Hanoi. In late 2011 the Obama administration formally announced its so-called 'pivot to Asia'—the drive of US imperialism to diplomatically isolate and militarily encircle China. At every turn Washington has ratcheted up the pressure on Beijing, turning the disputed South China Sea into a powder-keg.

From May to July of this year, confrontations between Hanoi and Beijing over a Chinese oil rig deployed in disputed waters came perilously close to armed conflict.

Seeking to escalate its pressure on China, Washington has over the past four months mounted a campaign to lift the ban on the sale of lethal weapons. US Senator John McCain has repeatedly called for the lifting of the

embargo. In June, Obama's newly appointed ambassador to Hanoi, Ted Osius, issued a similar call, as did General Martin Dempsey, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in August.

The US State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki attempted to present the new policy as a "partial lifting of the ban" in response to positive developments in Vietnam's human rights record. It is nothing of the sort.

The fact that the trade and sale of arms to Hanoi is limited exclusively to "maritime security" is because Washington has Beijing in its cross-hairs. By using the broad label "maritime" rather than naval, Washington is poised to sell or transfer fighter jets, surveillance drones, as well as armed ships. Every bit of weaponry transferred under this deal will be targeting China.

Psaki absurdly told the press conference that the deal was "not targeting China." A transcript of the press briefing shows a reporter responding that "as much as you want to say it doesn't ... it is to anyone who can—has—(laughter)—to anyone with any kind of vision, I think [it does]."

As seemingly every head of state from Southeast Asia does, Minh traveled to the offices of the influential think-tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the day before he met with Kerry. Addressing the audience at the CSIS, he stated that "never before have we seen a greater risk for miscalculation and incidents that might escalate into military conflicts, as in the past few months."

A panel discussion at the CSIS after Minh's keynote address included principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Scott Marciel. Marciel called for the lifting of the arms embargo, citing the "improved human rights record" of Hanoi. He deployed the insipid phrase, much bandied

about in Washington, that there was expanding democratic space.

A document released by the CSIS in June 2014, *A New Era in US-Vietnam Relations*, heralded the fact that “there are some areas of human rights in which Vietnam is ahead of many of its neighbors, including women’s rights and attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities.”

Vietnam is a country deeply scarred by US imperialism. In living memory, Washington’s war in that country produced three million dead, and left the soil contaminated with dioxin and riddled with unexploded ordinances. Washington has no right to speak to anyone of human rights, least of all Vietnam.

The references to human rights under what remains a Stalinist police-state regime are a thinly veiled pretext for Washington’s moves in the region. Marciel, in his comments, concluded by dispensing with the pretext entirely. He stated that “we are hoping to see continued progress, but it’s not a specific quid pro quo link.” In other words, the deputy assistant secretary of state was openly acknowledging that the transfer of lethal weaponry to Vietnam was not tied to human rights in any way.

By lifting the ban on the sale of lethal weaponry to Vietnam, Washington is also seeking to reorient Vietnam’s military ties away from Russia, which has multi-billion dollar arms sales contracts with Hanoi, including the sale of Kilo-class submarines and Sukhoi fighter jets.

In the weeks leading up to the announcement of the lifting of the embargo, a high-level delegation from Vietnam traveled to Washington to continue negotiations over the terms of Vietnam’s entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP is Washington’s attempt to determine the “economic architecture” of the Asia Pacific region in the interests of US imperialism.

The Vietnamese top-level bureaucrats, both under pressure from Washington and in the furtherance of their own interests, are using the terms of the TPP to justify the dismantling of the SOEs by privatizing them, a process which they are calling “equitization.” Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has called for the equitization of over 500 SOEs.

There can be no doubt that Washington used the lifting of the arms embargo as a crucial negotiating

factor in the most recent round talks over the terms of the TPP.

Around the globe, Washington has deployed its military might in an increasingly desperate bid to maintain its global hegemony. This has brought the world to a state of permanent war, where numerous regional conflicts, each fueled by US imperialism, threaten the possible outbreak of global war. With the announcement that it will be selling and transferring lethal arms to Vietnam for “maritime security,” Washington has brought that much closer the outbreak of war with China.



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