

Obama welcomes Vietnam's Communist Party head

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In a significant step toward forging a de-facto alliance against China, US President Obama met with Nguyen Phu Trong, general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, in the White House on Tuesday.

The *Washington Post* highlighted the importance of the visit by noting: “The unusual nature of Trong’s visit is accentuated by the fact that Obama rarely receives foreign leaders who are not official heads of state in the Oval Office.”

Trong is not the Vietnamese head of state or prime minister, whom Obama has met previously. However, as head of the ruling party, he is a powerful figure in the Stalinist regime and the arbiter on key foreign and military policies. Thus, his very presence in the White House sends a strong message regarding Hanoi’s closer ties to Washington.

While the public statements of Obama and Trong were guarded, there was no mistaking the thrust of the behind-the-scenes talks.

“We discussed the importance of resolving maritime disputes in the South China Sea and throughout the Asia-Pacific, in accordance with international law to ensure ... prosperity and freedom of navigation,” Obama declared at a joint media conference.

China was not mentioned by name but Obama’s remarks are a repetition of the standard US propaganda accusing Beijing of acting illegally and aggressively in its activities in the South China Sea and threatening “freedom of navigation.”

In reality, the Obama administration has since 2010 deliberately inflamed territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a means of driving a wedge between China and its neighbours in South East Asia, including Vietnam. In recent months, Washington has recklessly raised tensions over China’s land reclamation activities, threatening to send warships or warplanes to

directly challenge Beijing’s territorial claims.

On Wednesday, Trong met privately with right-wing Republican Senator John McCain who was more explicit, telling Agence France Presse: “There’s no doubt that the Chinese behaviour has certainly accelerated that process of [US-Vietnam] cooperation and improved relationship. There’s just no doubt about it.”

The Obama administration was also keen to cement Trong’s support for finalising the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)—the comprehensive trade and investment pact through which Washington is seeking to secure its economic domination in Asia. The US is planning to hold a gathering of TPP trade ministers in Hawaii later this month in a bid to complete the delayed deal.

In anticipation of lucrative economic openings in Vietnam, the US Chamber of Commerce held a dinner in Trong’s honour on Wednesday.

The apparent incongruity of the head of Vietnam’s Communist Party being feted in Washington, 40 years after the fall of Saigon and US military withdrawal, was not lost on Obama, Trong or the media.

Obama obliquely referred to the “difficult history between the two countries”—that is, to Washington’s brutal neo-colonial war in the 1960s and 1970s, involving over half a million American troops, that devastated the country and cost the lives of more than three million Vietnamese (see: “Forty years since the fall of Saigon”).

Likewise, Trong sought to bury this “bad, difficult chapter in our history,” declaring: “We have been able to rise above the past to overcome differences, to promote our shared interests, and look towards a future in order to build the comprehensive partnership that we have today.”

Trong's embrace of Washington is, in the final analysis, the outcome of the reactionary Stalinist program of "Socialism in One Country" on which the Communist Party has been based. Incapable of finding a way out of the intractable economic problems that emerged following the end of the war within the national framework, the regime has been implementing its Doi Moi policy from 1986 to open up the country to foreign investors.

The resumption of diplomatic relations with US imperialism followed in 1995, cementing Vietnam's integration into the world capitalist economy as a major cheap labour platform. The *Wall Street Journal* noted: "Depending on the final negotiations, the TPP could make Vietnam, which sent \$30.6 billion in goods to the US last year, a global manufacturing hub for textiles, apparel and other industries."

Closer military ties with the US have followed. As the Obama administration ratcheted up pressure on China through its "pivot to Asia," the Vietnamese regime has moved more openly into the US camp. Since 2007, visits by American warships to Vietnamese ports have become a regular feature of military relations, along with a growing number of joint exercises.

Vietnam has joined the Philippine legal challenge to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea—a move that is strongly supported and assisted by Washington. Last year, with US backing, Vietnam whipped up anti-Chinese xenophobia over the placement of a Chinese oil exploration rig in territory claimed by Hanoi but administered by Beijing. Vietnamese and Chinese ships clashed near the rig and anti-Chinese riots resulted in four deaths, the torching of 400 Chinese factories and the evacuation of thousands of Chinese nationals.

In June, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter visited Vietnam and signed a Joint Vision Statement with the Vietnamese government consolidating military ties, including the co-production of weapons and defence supplies. Last year, the US lifted a ban on supplying lethal maritime weaponry to Vietnam, opening the way for the assisted purchase of two sophisticated patrol boats.

While Carter has repeatedly denounced China's land reclamation in the South China Sea, he was virtually silent on Vietnam's activities on the many more reefs

and atolls that it controls in the disputed waters.

Trong's visit will undoubtedly further consolidate the opening up of Vietnam to American investors and the US military. The Pentagon is particularly keen to gain access to the naval facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, a major US base during the Vietnam War.

As is the case with other partners, the US has rapidly shelved the "human rights" rhetoric that it exploited in the past to extract concessions from Hanoi. The Obama administration brushed aside protests over the lack of democratic rights in Vietnam, making it clear that these would not be an obstacle to closer relations.

"Just trying to shun and isolate a country can in some cases not put as much pressure on them as actually engaging them," White House press secretary Josh Earnest told the media.



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