

Obama seeks Vietnam military ties amid rising tensions with China

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President Barack Obama arrived in Hanoi late Sunday for a three-day visit aimed at aligning Vietnam more directly with Washington's "pivot to Asia."

Forty-one years after the last US troops were forced to flee the country aboard helicopters taking off from the Saigon embassy rooftop, US imperialism's aim is to draw Vietnam ever more deeply into US war preparations against China.

Among the items reportedly on the Pentagon's wish list are the pre-positioning of military equipment in Vietnam, on the pretext of preparing for "disaster relief," and increased access to the strategic ports of Cam Ranh Bay and Danang to the north, both of which served as major bases during the US war (1963–75) that killed an estimated 3 million Vietnamese.

On the eve of the visit, Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor, told reporters, "What we want to demonstrate with this visit is a significant upgrade in the relationship between the United States and Vietnam as partners on many issues, even as we have areas of difference ..."

Giving voice to one of the main themes of Obama's Asian tour, which is to include a visit to Hiroshima, where the first of two atom bombs was dropped leading to the death of up to 350,000 Japanese, Rhodes added: "It does show how history can work in unpredictable ways. Even the worst conflicts can be relatively quickly left behind."

In other words, the memory of past imperialist crimes can be suppressed in order to prepare the coming ones. This is what administration officials have described as Obama's "forward-looking vision."

Rhodes acknowledged that one of the issues that would be discussed between Obama and the leaders of the Stalinist bureaucracy that rules Vietnam was the complete lifting of an arms embargo, allowing

Washington to sell all manner of lethal armaments to its former enemy.

The embargo was partially lifted in October 2014, when the US agreed to supply Hanoi with lethal maritime weaponry, providing credit for the purchase of two gunboats.

A decision on scrapping the embargo entirely has yet to be publicly revealed, and there are apparent divisions in the US ruling establishment over whether to utilize "human rights" objections to arms sales as a means of extracting more far-reaching concessions from the Vietnamese government.

At present, Russia is the source of 90 percent of Vietnam's arms supplies, something both the White House and the US military-industrial complex are intent on changing. In recent months the Obama administration has also attempted to pressure Vietnam into reducing its bilateral military cooperation with Russia.

Russian warships currently are allowed an unlimited number of visits to the Cam Rahn Bay port facilities, while the US is restricted to only three a year. Moreover, Vietnam has allowed Russian military aircraft to use its airbase at Cam Rahn Bay. Washington has protested the facility's use by Russian refueling planes, which it says have allowed Russian strategic bombers to extend their range over much of the Pacific.

The principal target of US efforts to achieve close ties with Vietnam, however, is China. Washington has worked assiduously to ring the Asian giant with military bases and to stoke tensions stemming from competing claims by China and other Asian countries—the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei—over islands and maritime boundaries in the South China Sea.

These tensions boiled over in 2014, when the Vietnamese government denounced China for setting up an oil rig in waters of the South China Sea claimed by Vietnam. A subsequent xenophobic campaign sparked violent anti-Chinese riots.

In 2015, Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party, visited Washington and received an Oval Office meeting with Obama, a reception rarely given foreign leaders who are not official heads of state. After the White House visit, the Vietnamese Stalinist leader was guest of honor at a dinner organized by the US Chamber of Commerce.

Then as now, another key topic of discussion is the Transpacific Trade Partnership (TPP), a proposed US-dominated trade and investment bloc that has been designed as the economic component of Washington's drive to encircle and confront China.

Vietnam is seen as a key element in this system. Since 1986 and the ruling party's adoption of the policy known as *Doi Moi* (renovation), the country has attracted an ever increasing flow of foreign capitalist investment, emerging as the region's rising cheap labor platform under conditions in which its minimum wage—US\$142.50 a month—is roughly half that paid in China.

Under the terms of the TPP, Vietnam is expected to implement new sweeping economic reforms including the wholesale privatization of state-owned enterprises and the tearing down of remaining barriers to foreign investors and imports.

Obama's visit comes in the midst of a new escalation of friction between the US and China as the American Navy continues to stage provocative "freedom of navigation" exercises aimed at sparking confrontations. Last week the Pentagon claimed that two Chinese fighter planes carried out an "unsafe intercept" of a US EP-3 spy plane carrying out operations over the South China Sea.

Beijing denied the accusation, saying that its jets had kept a "safe distance" from the US spy plane and had made no "dangerous moves."

The official Chinese news agency Xinhua published a scathingly dismissive comment on Obama's trip, describing it as part of his "farewell to the White House" and advising the US president to "reflect upon his policies that failed to contribute to regional peace

and stability." It went on to warn that US-Vietnamese "rapprochement should not be used by the United States as a tool to threaten or even damage the strategic interests of a third country."

Meanwhile, speaking to reporters in Beijing last Thursday, China's vice minister of foreign affairs, Liu Zhenmin, issued a warning against the US provocations in the South China Sea.

"The Chinese people do not want to have a war, so we will be opposed to the US if it stirs up any conflict," he said. "Of course, if the Korean War or the Vietnam War are replayed, then we will have to defend ourselves."

Obama is the third US president to visit Vietnam. The first was Bill Clinton, who went in 2000, like Obama, at the end of his presidency, after having lifted a long-standing trade embargo five years earlier. George W. Bush staged a very brief visit to the country in 2006, limiting his activities to joining a search for the remains of a US pilot shot down nearly 40 years earlier and a visit to the Ho Chi Minh City stock exchange.



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