

Obama appeals for closer US-Vietnamese ties

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In a thoroughly cynical speech yesterday in Hanoi, US President Barack Obama made a public pitch for closer economic and military ties between Vietnam and the United States directed against the unstated enemy—China.

The previous day, Obama announced that the US was lifting its four-decade arms embargo on Vietnam—a longstanding demand of the Vietnamese regime to ensure that its armed forces can access hi-tech American military equipment. While no immediate deals were struck and other announcements were limited, Obama undoubtedly extracted commitments that will align Hanoi more closely with Washington against Beijing.

Obama's "Address to the People of Vietnam" made clear in unmistakable terms that the US is seeking a strategic partnership against China. As part of its "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration has deliberately inflamed age-old territorial disputes in the South China Sea involving China and its neighbours, including Vietnam. Tensions between Beijing and Hanoi erupted in 2014 over the placement of a Chinese oil rig in disputed waters and led to violent anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam.

During his speech, Obama received applause from the handpicked audience when he declared: "Vietnam is an independent, sovereign nation, and no other nation can impose its will on you or decide your destiny." Everyone in the National Convention Centre in Hanoi understood that he was referring to China, and raised not the slightest murmur of protest at the utter hypocrisy involved.

US imperialism waged a bloody, protracted war in Vietnam and throughout Indochina in an effort to subordinate the region to American interests that cost the lives of at least three million Vietnamese and many American soldiers. The physical scars remain from the devastating air war that involved not only massive

quantities of conventional explosives but millions of gallons of toxic chemicals.

Moreover, the US continues to conduct military actions and wage wars that flout national sovereignty in complete disregard for international law. Just days before arriving in Vietnam, Obama boasted of ordering the drone strikes that murdered Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour and ignored Pakistan's protest that the unauthorised US attack breached the UN Charter.

In yesterday's Hanoi speech, Obama repeated what are now standard declarations in relation to the South China Sea, stating that "the international order upon which our mutual security depends is rooted in certain rules and norms." The insistence that China abide by the existing "international rules-based order"—that is, a world in which the US sets the rules—is nothing less than the demand that Beijing subordinate its interests to Washington.

Obama reiterated Washington's determination to uphold "freedom of navigation and overflight" in the South China Sea and ensure the "peaceful resolution of disputes, through legal means, in accordance with international law." The US is currently backing a Philippine legal case in The Hague based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to challenge Chinese maritime claims. Vietnam has supported the Philippine challenge.

US contempt for international law is summed up not only by its failure to ratify UNCLOS, but its repeated military provocations in the South China Sea against China. Even before the Philippine case has been decided, US warships have on three occasions deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-claimed and controlled islets.

Obama made no direct mention to China in his speech, but he made a deliberate historical reference

which would have been lost on no one in Vietnam, or China for that matter. Posturing on the need for gender equality, he declared: “From the Trung Sisters to today, strong confident women have always helped to move Vietnam forward.” The Trung Sisters were Vietnamese military leaders who led a rebellion against Chinese domination in 40 AD and are promoted in Vietnam today as national heroines.

Obama also made an appeal for closer economic collaboration between the US and Vietnam and touted the importance of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), signed last year. The Obama administration regards the TPP, which involves 12 Pacific countries but not China, as the means for advancing American economic interests in Asia and marginalising China.

Washington is well aware that Vietnam remains heavily reliant on trade with China. Obama pledged to work with Vietnam to “unleash the full potential of your economy” through the TPP, which would “let you sell more of your products to the world” and “attract new investment.”

The US president said the TPP would have “important strategic benefits” as “Vietnam will be less dependent on one trading partner and enjoy broader ties with more partners, including the United States.” In other words, the US is offering a comprehensive compact to the Vietnamese regime, with economic benefits that would allow it to lessen its reliance on China.

During his speech, Obama made ritual expressions of concern for human rights but stressed that “the United States does not seek to impose our form of government in Vietnam.” He held a special meeting with various hand-picked human rights activists, yet did not object when Vietnamese police prevented at least three from attending the meeting. These gestures were aimed at neutralising criticism in Washington that he should have extracted concessions on democratic rights before lifting the arms embargo.

Obama is no more interested in democratic rights in Vietnam than anywhere else in the world, including inside the United States. Rather, “human rights” is a convenient political tool to apply pressure to governments and justify interventions and wars. If Hanoi did a diplomatic about-face and shifted its orientation toward Beijing, it would soon find itself subject to a barrage of propaganda condemning its

human rights abuses.

Obama’s trip confirms that the opposite is the case: the Vietnamese regime has made a significant tilt toward Washington that will strengthen the hand of the US as it ratchets up its preparations throughout the region for war with China. Obama stressed that in talks with Vietnamese leaders “we have agreed to elevate our security cooperation and build trust between our men and women in uniform.” While the overt signs of cooperation were limited to enhancing the Vietnamese coast guard, the US will be demanding much more in the coming weeks and months.

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[24 May 2016]



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