

Aircraft carrier visit cements Vietnam's alignment with Washington

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The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and accompanying warships left the Vietnamese city of Danang yesterday, concluding a four-day visit. It was the first time a US aircraft carrier had entered a Vietnamese port since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and is the outcome of growing political ties and military relations between Washington and Hanoi.

The American ambassador to Vietnam, Daniel Kritenbrink, declared as the ships departed: “Through hard work, mutual respect, and by continuing to address the past while we work toward a better future, we have gone from former enemies to close partners.”

The American military, together with Vietnamese victims of US war crimes, were used as the props in propaganda stunts to demonstrate the “reconciliation” between the two countries. A group of sailors were sent on March 7 to a centre that cares for people suffering terrible deformities and illnesses due to the ongoing impact of Agent Orange.

Between 1961 and 1971, the US and its proxy forces in South Vietnam sprayed over 75 million litres of the toxic chemical, destroying over 20 million hectares of forest and contaminating agricultural land. At least four million Vietnamese were exposed. Some one million are disabled or suffer chronic illness. Decades later, children are still being born with severe birth defects due to genetic disorders caused by Agent Orange.

In a tragic and bitter historical outcome, the Stalinist nationalist movement that dominated the heroic, decades-long struggle of the Vietnamese people for liberation from colonial rule has effectively placed the country back under US imperialist domination.

From the late 1980s, the Stalinist regime in Hanoi ingratiated itself with US imperialism, as part of its efforts to integrate Vietnam into the flows of globalised investment and production. It offered up the

Vietnamese working class as a cheap labour force for transnational corporations. Full diplomatic relations with Washington were restored in 1995.

The regime itself has transformed into the open representative of a venal capitalist class, presiding over ever-widening social inequality and brutal exploitation and political repression. The Carl Vinson visit is only the latest demonstration that the Vietnamese ruling elite is prepared to serve as an American imperialist proxy in exchange for access to US markets, profit and wealth.

Vietnam's strategic importance to US imperialism stems primarily from how it can be used to intensify Washington's struggle to undermine and block Chinese geo-political influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Geographically, Vietnam occupies the east of the Indo-China peninsula, with a 1,281-kilometre land border with China, and is directly adjacent, across the South China Sea, to the key Chinese naval base on Hainan Island. It is among the countries that have territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea. What is at stake includes corporate control and exploitation of rich deposits of natural gas and oil beneath its waters.

Hanoi claims the Paracel Islands—some 130 tiny islets and reefs—which China has held since 1974, when it seized them from the South Vietnamese US puppet state. Vietnam also asserts sovereignty over the Spratly Island chain, and has military installations on some of its main islets and reefs, which China claims as its territory.

The two countries have a history of conflict in the South China Sea. In 1988, a military clash took place over Vietnam's attempt to occupy Johnson Reef in the Spratlys, resulting in the death of dozens of Vietnamese troops.

In 2014, China sent an oil exploration rig into

Vietnamese-claimed waters west of the Paracel Islands, leading to a tense stand-off between the two governments. In 2017, Beijing used threats of force to pressure Vietnam to cancel plans to begin drilling for gas in an area that Hanoi insists is part of its exclusive economic zone.

Hanoi has actively encouraged American imperialism to defy China's maritime claims. Since October 2015, the US Navy has periodically sent warships on "freedom of navigation" intrusions into the 12-mile zone surrounding Chinese-held islands.

Vietnam has also urged India, which the US has labelled one of its key "strategic partners," to play a far more belligerent role against China.

While the Carl Vinson was in Danang, Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang was in New Delhi for talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In statements directed against China, Tran declared that all countries in the region should "protect the freedom of navigation and unimpeded trade and not let the Indo-Asia-Pacific be balkanised into spheres of influence manipulated by power politics, hindered by protectionism, or divided by narrow nationalism."

Tran called for "efforts to foster the maritime order and settle disputes peacefully on the basis of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)."

In 2016, the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, Netherlands, found in favour of a US-backed Philippines' challenge to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. It ruled that China's claim to "historical rights" to sovereignty over waters near the Paracel or Spratly islands were "contrary to the Convention and without lawful effect to the extent that they exceed the geographic and substantive limits of China's maritime entitlements under the Convention."

In a statement to the court, Vietnam had supported the Philippines' case. It also made clear its rejection of China's claims and asked that the ruling note its claim over the Chinese-held Paracels.

The 2016 ruling that China has no "historical rights" has become one of the main grounds for the US and its allies and partners to launch diplomatic and military challenges to Beijing.

Within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Vietnam is pushing for resolutions condemning China's reclamation of land and

construction of alleged military facilities on various South China Sea islets and reefs. At the same time, it is urging the US to conduct more "freedom of navigation" (FONOP) provocations.

Washington has consciously used the Carl Vinson visit to generate widespread media speculation that the aircraft carrier, or one of its escorts, will conduct a FONOP during its current deployment in the region. As the battlegroup sailed to Vietnam after visiting the Philippines, Rear Admiral John Fuller told the reporters who were invited onboard: "We know where international law says we can operate, and I know where international law says we can't. And we're going to do what international law says we can do."

If the Carl Vinson does not conduct an operation, the British government has encouraged rampant speculation that one of its frigates, the HMS Sutherland, which is currently visiting Sydney, will carry out the next provocation. British Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said last month that when the Sutherland left Australia, "she'll be sailing through the South China Sea and making it clear our Navy has a right to do that."

Regardless of what unfolds in the South China Sea over the coming weeks, it looms as one of the flashpoints that could trigger a military confrontation by the US and its allies against China. By its alignment with Washington, the Vietnamese regime is functioning as an agent and enabler of imperialist intrigues and provocations that could result in a catastrophic war.



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