

Biden in Vietnam: The leader of American imperialism returns to the scene of one of its great crimes

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President Joe Biden's two-day visit to Vietnam, a stopover during his return to the US from the G-20 summit meeting in India, saw only the most perfunctory and superficial reporting in the American media.

The coverage obsessed about trivialities relating to domestic US politics. Did the 80-year-old president drool or babble more than usual at his middle-of-the-night press conference in Hanoi? Would, on the contrary, a five-day round-the-world trip show that Biden still had the stamina needed for a second term in the White House?

Or the media discussed the advantages the trip might provide for American imperialism: what were the prospects for Vietnam aligning with the anti-China axis being constructed by Washington, which has already enlisted Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand and India?

The business press reviewed how much money the trip would generate for US multinational corporations (a lot, as Vietnam Air confirmed a \$10 billion purchase of jetliners from Boeing, and semiconductor manufacturers are to be "incentivized" to set up production facilities in Vietnam, another effort to diversify the sourcing of chips vital for US manufacturing and the US military).

There was little discussion of the bitter history of 30 years of warfare that resulted in the eventual liberation of the French colony of Indochina and the establishment of the independent countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, in the course of which Japanese, French and American imperialism were responsible for the killing of millions of people.

This history is rarely discussed in the American media or in the US educational system, and is now outside the personal experience of the vast majority of the American population. It is 50 years since the last American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. Earlier key events, such

as the 1968 Tet Offensive by the Vietnamese liberation forces, the 1964 Tonkin Gulf "incident," which became the pretext for massive US military escalation, let alone the catastrophic French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, are dimly remembered, if at all.

The death toll from the series of wars in Vietnam—against Japanese occupiers in 1944-45, against the French colonial regime reestablished with US support, 1946-1954, and against the United States and its puppet regime in the South, 1959-1975—has been estimated at more than 4 million, the majority of them civilians, and nearly all of them Vietnamese (just under 60,000 American soldiers were killed).

While savage face-to-face massacres of civilians by US soldiers, such as at My Lai, exposed by journalist Seymour Hersh in 1969, became well publicized in the course of the war, the vast majority of the deaths were inflicted through depersonalized methods such as saturation bombing, artillery fire, the use of napalm and other chemical weapons, and the declaration of "free fire" zones, which authorized jets and attack helicopters to shoot anything that moved.

One rare passage in the press coverage of Biden's trip noted that Vietnam still endures the "legacy of the war... where unexploded ordnance still kills and maims people every year..." Behind this brief reference is a chilling reality: In the 11 years from 1964 to 1975, the United States dropped twice the bomb tonnage on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia than was expended by all sides in the entirety of World War II.

Fifty years later, the casualty list from the war continues to grow, from children picking up pieces of cluster bombs in the Vietnamese countryside to veterans committing suicide or dying of defoliant-induced cancers in the United States.

The victory of the Vietnamese liberation fighters in April 1975, with the iconic pictures of helicopters evacuating the last American personnel from the roof of the US embassy in Saigon, was a colossal blow to American imperialism. It marked a definite turning point in the world position of the United States, which had begun to decline economically in the 1960s.

US imperialism suffered a defeat from which it has never really recovered, above all at home. The Pentagon has been compelled to maintain an all-volunteer military. This was first instituted after the end of the draft in 1972. Universal conscription, even with substantial exemptions, had contributed heavily to both the conflicts within the army in Vietnam and the upsurge in antiwar sentiment among young people at home.

The all-volunteer principle inherently limits the size of the American military force, which was drastically strained by the simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and would be entirely inadequate in the event of full-scale war with Russia or China. But a return to universal conscription would incite domestic unrest on a colossal scale. American youth do not want to give their lives to defend the military objectives of the giant banks and corporations, at the direction of a corrupt political system controlled by the class of billionaire capitalists.

Biden's trip to Vietnam was focused on preparing such an outcome, however, by lining up Vietnamese support for the militaristic posture of American imperialism in the Far East. This was inaugurated publicly by Barack Obama in his "pivot to Asia" speech in the Australian parliament in 2011. The Pentagon is carrying out a mobilization in which fully 60 percent of US military assets are to be deployed in the Asia-Pacific region. US generals regularly discuss the likelihood, even the imminence of a war with China, some placing its likely outbreak as soon as 2025.

For propaganda purposes, US officials and the corporate media always portray China as the aggressor power and the US actions as purely defensive. Speaking Monday, the same day Biden completed his trip to Hanoi, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall told the Air and Space Forces Association annual conference that China is building up its military capabilities to fight the United States: "Whatever its actual intentions may be, I could not say, but China is preparing for a war, and specifically for a war with the United States."

Of course, it is US military forces that are deployed within a few miles of the Chinese coast, vast US arms supplies that are going to Taiwan—part of China, as close to the mainland as Cuba is to Florida—and US officials

such as Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin who are constructing an alliance system of nearly all of China's neighbors directed against Beijing.

The cynicism of American foreign policy can be seen by this historical comparison. In 1979, when Washington viewed the Soviet Union as its major global antagonist, it allied itself with China, following the Nixon-Mao rapprochement, and backed a Chinese invasion of Vietnam—which ended in a military debacle. US policy-makers viewed Vietnam as a Soviet client state which had overthrown the genocidal Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, a Chinese ally. For several decades, the US itself became the sponsor of the bloodstained Khmer Rouge as it fought a guerrilla war against the Cambodian government installed by Vietnam.

Now, 44 years later, Washington views China as its main rival, and it seeks to cultivate relations with Vietnam. Biden visits Hanoi, holds the first ever state visit between a US president and the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, effectively acknowledging the legitimacy of the one-party Stalinist state, which has fully restored capitalism. He even, according to press reports, offered to sell Vietnam F-16 fighter jets, which Biden has so far withheld even from the US puppet regime in Ukraine fighting a proxy war for NATO against Russia.

Truly, as Lord Palmerston said of Britain when it was the dominant world power in the 19th century, "There are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, only permanent interests."



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