

The National Congress of Vietnamese Americans

POSITION PAPER
ON
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Policy Recommendations



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The current visit of Defense Minister Pham Van Tra of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) to the United States, scheduled for 8 to 14 November 2003, marks a new and important stage in Vietnamese-American relations. Starting with the lifting of the embargo on Vietnam in February 1994 almost five years after the Vietnam People's Army withdrawal from Cambodia (Fall 1989), the United States and Vietnam have exchanged ambassadors in July 1995, followed by Vietnam's entry into ASEAN and a few years later into APEC. These relations have warmed up and proceeded apace until the signing of the Bilateral U.S.-Vietnam Trade Agreement in December 2001, which opened the way to a whole broad range of bilateral exchanges, including trade and investment, putting well behind us the war that ended over 28 years ago, in April 1975.

Not only that, the upcoming visit of an American warship to Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, scheduled for mid-November, though symbolic, says quite a bit about the redress of the American position in Vietnam as compared to its defeat over a quarter century ago. The National Congress of Vietnamese Americans (NCVA) welcomes all these positive signs of U.S.-Vietnam improved relations. However, it would like to point out that many impediments remain due to:

The nature of the two regimes that in theory remain at opposite poles on the scale of freedom and democracy. The SRV, as its name implies, remains a one-party dictatorship of the proletariat on the Marxist-Leninist mold.

The vastly different concepts entertained by the two regimes and societies regarding a whole range of issues that are important to the American public: human rights, religious and other freedoms, political and civil rights etc.

The vast gap in development stages between the two nations.

Residual issues from the war: the MIA-POW question, Agent Orange, humanitarian concerns, refugee and orderly departure issues.

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To show that the above issues are no mere figments of the imagination, let us review what Defense Minister Pham Van Tra himself explains in a recent interview with VNN (Vietnam News Network) before his departure for the United States. According to this interview, Mr. Tra gave the following account of his visit to the U.S., the very first ever by a defense minister from the formerly enemy regime during the war:

He goes to the U.S. as a result of an invitation issued two years ago by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, presumably the current secretary Donald Rumsfeld. (By saying so, Mr. Tra is not true to the historic record since the first invitation extended to him to visit the U.S. came from Defense Secretary William Cohen when he visited Hanoi in March 2000. This invitation was followed up by the current defense secretary, which only goes to show that this American initiative was a bipartisan initiative supported both by the Clinton and Bush administrations.)

While in the U.S., he is expected to meet with his counterpart, Secretary

Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. He is not expected to meet the President, when he was specifically asked about this.

In regard to his activities while in the U.S., he expects to be shown a number of U.S. military bases although which ones was not determined ahead of his official visit.

Among the topics of discussion with the U.S. side, he claims that while war reparations will not be part of the agenda, the two sides will no doubt talk about the MIA-POW question, a priority concern on the part of the U.S., and Agent Orange victims, a prime concern on the part of Vietnam. On this Agent Orange issue, Mr. Tra claims that there are two million victims in Vietnam, of which number 1.2 million are children.

Mr. Tra specifically disclaims any talk of a military alliance with the U.S. On the other hand, he did mention the question of weaponry and military hardware about which he made a strange comment. Nobody would dispute the fact that the U.S. and Russia are among the top producers of weaponry and military hardware in the world. However, Mr. Tra continues, "we have our way of fighting, which is people's warfare, which is invincible." (This comment would make no sense whatsoever if Tra was trying to compare apples and oranges since there was no possible comparison between weaponry and tactics. The only way in which one could read Tra's statement is to remember that back in 2000 there was a visit by a delegation of colonels from the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) to the Pacific Command Headquarters in Honolulu, Hawaii, in which there was mention of the possibility that the VPA could be invited to provide training for the American side in guerrilla tactics--in exchange for unnamed benefits.)

(In connection with this strategic move on the part of Vietnam, it would be relevant to mention here that at the end of October, Hanoi sent Lieutenant General Phung Quang Thanh, Tra's right hand man since he is Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of the Joint General Staff, to Beijing to reassure the latter, in a meeting with Vice President Zeng Jinghong on October 28, that Tra's upcoming visit to the U.S. does not in any way threaten China-Vietnam relations. In other words, whatever Tra plans to discuss with the U.S. would not go beyond a certain limit which would be considered threatening to the current balance that Hanoi is trying to maintain with Beijing.)

Finally, Mr. Tra mentions that he does not expect the question of human rights to come up in his discussions with his U.S. interlocutors. However, if the issue comes up he is ready, too, he says.

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That was the gist of the talks this week as envisioned by Hanoi's defense minister before he left Hanoi. Several comments are in order here.

First, while the cover for Pham Van Tra's visit (the MIA-POW question, Agent Orange, military exchanges) on the surface sounds valid it does not take a defense minister to iron out such issues. The accounting for the MIA-POWs is a long process, with which the official U.S. side (i.e. the Pentagon) seems satisfied (even though the

League of Families is still unhappy with some of the results or the pace of recovery), and the point can easily be impressed on Hanoi by a high-ranking American Defense official visiting Hanoi. Mr. Tra's visit, in and of itself, will not speed up the final accounting.

The question of Agent Orange victims is of course a major humanitarian concern, especially 28 years after the end of the war, as some of the victims are dying off without in any way being helped. There are, however, many problems with Mr. Tra's statistics and Hanoi's scientific claims. For one thing, no Agent Orange has been used to defoliate parts of the thick jungle of Vietnam in the course of fighting with the Communist enemy troops since January 1973 when the Paris so-called "Peace" Agreements provided for the total withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. This means that over 30 years ago, no Agent Orange has been used in Vietnam. A Vietnamese person exposed to the toxic effects of Agent Orange may incur some sort of disease (or cancer), and this in turn may affect his or her babies' health, say for a few years after he/she absorbed the dioxin or other toxic elements found in Agent Orange. But babies grow up, and it's mathematically impossible, after 30 years, for babies to still be produced at such productive rate that they would come to nearly two-thirds of the total population of Agent Orange victims. Furthermore, while there is some scientific evidence found in the U.S. for specific effects of Agent Orange on Americans and South Vietnamese (now Vietnamese Americans) exposed to it during the war--most often in the form of stomach cancer and sometimes chronic headache--there is simply no evidence whatsoever that one of these effects would be to produce deformed fetuses, one of the main claims by Hanoi. It is this scientific discrepancy (is it be possible that the same chemical agent would produce different effects on Americans and South Vietnamese on the one hand, and North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers or civilians on the other?) which makes it impossible for both sides to agree about the effects of Agent Orange. And if there is no agreement, how can one talk about helping anyone in this case?

There is another dimension to Agent Orange that is hardly ever mentioned by Hanoi and in this instance, its spokesman, Defense Minister Pham Van Tra (who neither is a scientist or a statistician), and that is, Agent Orange is indiscriminate. It was repeatedly used in the southern battlefields, especially in the Central Highlands, and often used on the jungle-covered Ho Chi Minh Trail that went through parts of Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War. From this fact it is obvious that if anyone was affected by Agent Orange, he/she would most likely be a southerner whether he/she was a Vietcong civilian or military person, or whether he/she was a Republic of Vietnam (i.e. government) Army person and/or civilian caught in the battle area--for instance, the Montagnards in the Central Highlands who (fortunately for them) lived in sparsely populated regions. At any rate, if the statistics mean anything they must show a much higher proportion of south Vietnamese (on both sides) fallen victims to Agent Orange. In fact, it is a clear proof of "invasion from the North" if most of the victims claimed by Hanoi proved to be North Vietnamese.

It is thus evident that Mr. Pham Van Tra did not come to the U.S. for simply discussing about the above issues. His role is to initiate something more important, a fledgling military cooperation program between Hanoi and Washington. This might start in a very low key, for instance, officer training for the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) in

exchange for VPA officers coming to train U.S. military personnel in guerrilla tactics. This could lead to more sophisticated types of cooperative action, for instance, joint exercises--the type that the U.S. annually carries out with the Thai or Filipino armies and combined forces. Visits by U.S. warships to Vietnamese ports and the contingent use of Cam Ranh Bay in case of war (especially against terrorism) are all in the cards. At a higher level, American arms for the VPA may not be ruled out altogether, although this probably would not be divulged right away--in consideration of the very delicate situation of Vietnam vis-à-vis the Chinese.

There is a tendency in Hanoi these days to play down the visit by Mr. Pham Van Tra. It is said that he is on the way out (by the time of the next Party Congress) and that his voice no longer counts. His visit, in other words, as played by Hanoi is simply a ceremonial visit with very little consequence. This flies in the face of truth.

It may be that Pham Van Tra will be sacrificed at the next Party Congress, as Nguyen Co Thach, the main architect of Vietnamese-American rapprochement, was kicked out of the Politburo a few years back in deference to the Chinese. In that case, it is most advisable to watch the lesser lights accompanying Pham Van Tra on this trip: the colonels who may deliberately stand in the background but who are being groomed to take on and develop the Vietnamese-American military relations once Pham Van Tra has set the stage. That is probably the deepest meaning of Defense Minister Pham Van Tra's official current visit to the U.S.

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The truth, it seems, is that Defense Minister Pham Van Tra (and Hanoi who let him come to the U.S.) has had to swallow his pride and acknowledge the fact, 28 years after the end of the Vietnam War, the supreme military preeminence of the United States. He (and Hanoi) does this in order to get out of the bind that Beijing is laying a trap for them: to keep the Socialist Republic of Vietnam militarily weak and politically, ideologically dependent on Beijing so that it could take advantage of Hanoi's weakness and impossible situation: imposing China's superiority in the South China Sea, forcing Hanoi into unequal treaties (such as the border treaty of 1999, ratified in June 2000, the Gulf of Bac Bo/Tonkin reapportioning of territorial waters, signed in December 2000 but so far unratified because of internal opposition inside Vietnam, the fishing rights treaty which Beijing has been prodding Hanoi to sign but which Hanoi so far resists because of widespread opposition both inside and outside Vietnam).

For being able to stand up to Beijing Hanoi has no choice but to go with the United States but it is afraid of coming out and saying so. In other words, Hanoi in the person of Mr. Pham Van Tra comes begging. For that purpose he is willing to forego a lot of claims that Hanoi had laid to in the past: no war reparations, not even monetary reimbursements for the victims of Agent Orange (only a recognition on the part of the U.S. of its responsibility in the matter), and even the use of "Saigon" as the name for "Ho Chi Minh City" when he mentioned the upcoming visit by a U.S. warship to "Saigon Port."

While we share Hanoi's apprehensions in regard to the China factor and the China threat, the U.S. side should adopt a high ground posture with regards to demands for vastly improved human rights (especially the freedom of religion for the Unified Buddhist Church and the Protestant "house churches," and a free press and totally unhampered Internet access for Vietnamese citizens like Dr. Pham Hong Son or Lawyer Le Chi Quang, among others) in Vietnam. For only such a move in Vietnam's strategic directions could bring about real trust between our two nations, a relationship based on common values and underlying assumptions.

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