

DRAFT

**The Changing Pattern of Interaction between Vietnam and the  
US: From Confrontation to Cooperation**

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The last year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked another milestone in the relationship between Vietnam and the US, a relationship in many ways still gripped by history. The visit by the US President Bill Clinton to Vietnam in November 2000 was truly a historic event in the relationship between the two former adversaries and it also opened up a new chapter in the Vietnam-US relations. It was the first visit by an American president to a unified Vietnam, a quarter of century since the last American troops pulled out of the South of Vietnam. Why did it take that long for the two adversaries to come to terms and to build a normal relationship that serves interests of both nations? What drove the normalization process that began a decade ago and culminated in 1995 when the two countries established diplomatic relations? And what lies ahead?

## **Background**

From the early years when Vietnam was still fighting for independence from France, the Vietnamese great leader Ho Chi Minh was already seeking the US support and friendship. During the World War II, Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh movement took side with the Alliance against fascism. In the Declaration of Independence in 1945, President Ho Chi Minh borrowed the famous words of the American Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable rights: the right to life, the right to be free, and the right to achieve happiness. Those immortal words appeared in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All nations in the world are born equal; every nation has the right to life, happiness and freedom " and President Ho Chi Minh solemnly declared to the world: "Vietnam has the right to enjoy freedom and independence, and in fact, has become a free and independent country. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to devote all their spirit and strength, life and property to preserving their freedom and independence". Despite President's Ho Chi Minh good will and desire to have relations with the US, since the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 up until 1995, Vietnam and the US never had normal relations.

Sympathizing with the spirit of fighting for independence of the American people and believing in the ideals enshrined in the US Declaration of Independence as well as the seemingly anti-colonialist stance of the US, Ho Chi Minh was hopeful that the US would help Vietnam to gain back independence from France. In fact, Ho Chi Minh wrote to US President Truman in October 1945, asking for the US support in the resistance war against France. At first, the US remained neutral as they did not oppose France but did not assist France to regain control over Indochina either. But with the birth of the People's Republic of China, the US changed its previous stance vis-à-vis the French war in Vietnam. A National Security Council study on the eve of the proclamation of the PRC stated "the extension of Communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us; if Southeast Asia is also swept by Communism, we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussion of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world"<sup>1</sup>. Fearing the "Communist threat" in Asia and needing the support of France in containing the Soviet Union in Europe, the US took a fundamental shift in its policy

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<sup>1</sup> Pentagon Papers, 1971, p. 37

towards the French war in Vietnam. The US began supporting the French. On June 27, 1950, Truman announced the US's plan to increase assistance to France by providing military personnel as well as weapons. By the last years of the French colonial war in Vietnam, the US provided three-quarters of the costs of the war<sup>2</sup>.

Mistakenly viewing Vietnam as a pawn on the global chessboard, the US completely disregard Vietnam's struggle for independence and made Vietnam part of the Cold War. And soon, when France was about to lose the war in Vietnam, the US was quick to find another proxy by setting up and supporting the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the South of Vietnam. In 1964, the US began its direct intervention in Vietnam, thus starting the saddest chapter in US-Vietnam relations. The war caused the US 58.000 lives and divided the nation until now. On the part of Vietnam, millions of soldiers and civilians lives were lost during the course of the war. Bombing of unprecedented intensity ravaged the entire country. And even until now, when a quarter of century has past, the Vietnamese peoples are still suffering from the consequences of the war.

Coming out of the war, with the long-standing tradition of humanitarianism, Vietnam began seeking reconciliation with the US. Under the Carter administration, the two countries attempted to normalize relations. Negotiations failed partly because mutual hostility and distrust between the two countries still endured in the aftermath of the American defeat in the war and partly because of the division within the US administration on the issue of normalizing relations with Vietnam. Carter's Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was very enthusiastic about normalizing relations with Vietnam as in his view, it would increase American influence in Vietnam and prevent the Soviet Union and China from having too much weight on Vietnam. On the other hand, the President's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was not supportive of normalizing relations with Vietnam as he called the latter: "such peripheral issues as Vietnam"<sup>3</sup>. As Brzezinski view later prevailed, normalizing relations with Vietnam was no longer a priority in American policy towards Asia. When Vietnam realized that the Carter administration was not capable of delivering the aid promised by the discredited president Nixon, it still pressed on for normalizing relations with the US. However, the window of opportunity for the two countries was already closed with the US choosing to normalize relations with China. This dramatic shift in the US strategic orientation had serious ramifications for Vietnam. The US strategy of "playing the China card" against the Soviet Union and also against Vietnam<sup>4</sup> together with the troubled state of Sino-Vietnamese relations at the time virtually left Vietnam with very limited foreign policy choices. The US antagonistic policy towards Vietnam was later reinforced by the outbreak of the Cambodian conflict. Despite the fact that the US harshly criticized the Khmer Rouge brutal massacre in Cambodia, the US still took side with China in opposing Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia and turned the issue into the principal obstacle for US-Vietnam normalization.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, 1987, p.169

<sup>3</sup> As quoted Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, Collier Books, 1988, p. 151

<sup>4</sup> Gareth Porter, "The Foreign Policy of Vietnam", in David Wurfel and Bruce Burton (eds) *The Political Economy of Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia*, Macmillan, 1990, pp 231

During this period, the unified Vietnam was the victim of the embargo imposed by the US on North Vietnam since 1951. After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, the embargo was extended to cover the whole country. These sanctions included the prohibition on commercial and financial transactions and private investment in Vietnam. The Vietnamese assets in the US were also frozen. Taking advantage of its predominant position in the leading international financial institutions, the US persuaded other member-countries of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank to withhold loans to Vietnam. Thus, still burdened by heavy consequences of several decades of war, Vietnam found itself isolated as a result of the US total embargo, which was then one of the major factors leading to the profound economic crisis in Vietnam in the late 70s and 80s. The embargo also extolled a heavy price on the US business community and protracted the process towards reconciliation between the two nations after the war ended. Thus, from the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 until late 80s, Vietnam-US relations were best characterized by confrontation and hostility.

### **The path to normalization**

Global and regional changes towards the end of the 80s paved the way for the resolution of the long-standing Cambodian conflict. Relaxation of tensions at the global level acted as catalysts for a major change in Vietnam's perception and view of the world. The imperative of economic reform in Vietnam became clear by then as the country's economy was in dismal conditions after years of war and conflict. Thus, a fundamental shift took place in 1986 when the Sixth Party Congress adopted the Doi Moi policy, which had far reaching ramifications for Vietnam's relations with the outside world. Vietnam's new foreign policy line "more friends, less enemies"<sup>5</sup> was adopted at the Sixth party Congress marked a turning point in Vietnam international relations. Ideology was no longer the principal determinant of international relations. The Seventh Party Congress reaffirmed the commitment of Vietnam to Doi Moi process, and took a step forward in Vietnam's new foreign policy outlook. The Seventh Party Congress stated "Vietnam wants to be a friend of all countries in the international community, striving for peace, independence and development"<sup>6</sup>.

The new foreign policy of Vietnam and the consequent resolution of the Cambodian conflict were the major forces propelling the changes in the American approach towards Vietnam. The very first step taken by the US in the normalization process was the visit to Vietnam by General John Vessey, President's Reagan Special envoy in 1987. His mission was mainly to seek cooperation with the Vietnamese government to resolve the MIA/POW issues. The two countries reached an agreement on solving humanitarian issues left by the war. As the Cambodian conflict was no longer a hindrance to improvement in relations between the two countries, the MIA/POW issue now became top priority in US's policy towards Vietnam. Vietnam's cooperation on the MIA/POW issue was another very important factor inducing positive changes in the Vietnam-US

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<sup>5</sup> Documents of the Sixth National Congress of the CPV, Hanoi Foreign Truth Publishing House, 1986, p.34-35

<sup>6</sup> Documents of the Seventh Congress of the CPV, Hanoi Truth Publishing House, 1991, PP 36-37

relations. Former President Bill Clinton later affirmed "Vietnam's willingness to help us return the remains of our fallen servicemen to their families has been the biggest boost to improve ties"<sup>7</sup>

The change of government in the US has somewhat slowed down the process toward normalization. In 1991, President Bush announced the four-phase road map towards normalization. The pace of the US government to normalize relations with Vietnam depended upon the progress made on the MIA issue. The Bush administration made the first steps in loosening its embargo on Vietnam. Before leaving office, in 1992, President Bush granted permission for US companies set up representative offices, sign contracts and do feasibility studies in Vietnam. But the bigger steps in the process of normalizing relations with Vietnam were left to President Bill Clinton, whose personal record relating to the American war in Vietnam was one of the issues that were under attack during the 1992 presidential elections. Clinton's stance on the American war in Vietnam and his avoidance of military service may have affected the pace of normalization to some extent because of its domestic vulnerability. On the other hand, Clinton's apparently willingness to vindicate his past belief and deed could be a positive factor in the normalization process. Indeed, it was Clinton who made the decisive steps in the process of reconciliation. In 1993, Clinton eased the sanctions against Vietnam by authorizing the US to support international lending for Vietnam and allowing for US firms to joint in development projects. In 1994, President Clinton lifted the decade-long embargo to allow the US firms to export to Vietnam and to do business in Vietnam. And in 1995, the two countries established normal diplomatic relations.

Therefore, it took the US more than two decades to come to terms with Vietnam. While the US quickly mended its relations with countries such as Japan and Germany after the war, one would naturally ask the question why it took so long for the US to normalize relations with Vietnam despite the latter efforts to establish relations with the US soon after the war ended. Analysts and historians cite various reasons explaining this abnormality. The central reason may have been that the US has been so traumatized and divided because of the American war in Vietnam and its consequent defeat, the only defeat in the US history, that building consensus to establish relations with Vietnam was a painful process for successive US presidents. The humiliation of defeat still affects the US relations with Vietnam today when some people in the US are talking about winning in peace what it lost in war. The Cold War environment war also partly responsible for the long-drawn-out hostility between the two countries. Vietnam's Doi Moi policy and the new foreign policy of being friend with all countries in the world community striving for peace and development helped lay the basis for normalization with the US. The end of the Cold war also facilitated the process of normalization as it did alter the strategic calculations of the US.

### **Moving beyond normalization: progress driven by compatible interests**

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in July 1995, bilateral relations have progressed steadily in political, economic, humanitarian and cultural terms, even though

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<sup>7</sup> Remarks by President Bill Clinton to Vietnam National University, Hanoi, November 17, 2000

the pace of progress varied from one period to another. The first three years after the establishment of diplomatic relations witnessed the most significant achievements in bilateral relations. Exchange of high-level visits was frequent as indicated by US Secretary of State William Christopher official visit to Vietnam in August 1995, Secretary of Treasury Robert Rubin in April 1997, US Secretary of State M. Albright in June 1997. From the Vietnamese side, Minister of Agriculture Nguyen Cong Tan, Minister of Finance Nguyen Sinh Hung, Minister of Planning and Investment Tran Xuan Gia visited the US. In May 1997, the two countries exchanged their first Ambassadors. Later the same year, the US and Vietnam established Consulates General respectively in Ho Chi Minh City and San Francisco. The two governments also reached the agreements on copyrights and on the consolidation and rescheduling debts owed by the former Saigon regime. In economic terms, the first three years after the establishment of diplomatic relations have seen remarkable improvements. The volume of trade between the two countries rose from only \$7 million to \$1,4 billion in 1997.

The pace of improvement in bilateral relations became somewhat moderate during the period from 1997 until 1999 particularly in economic terms. There are four major reasons explaining this slowed down pace. First, the Asian Financial Crisis had indirect implications for the US-Vietnam relations especially in commercial and investment terms. With their currencies drastically reduced, export goods from the crisis-hit countries surged significantly at the expense of Vietnam's export goods. Two-way trade in 1998 was only \$935 million, down from \$1,4 billion in the previous year. In terms of investment, Vietnam suffered from the overall reduced attractiveness of the region as a result of the Asian Financial crisis. Second, in the absence of a bilateral trade agreement, exports from Vietnam are still subject to high tariffs, which made them even less competitive as compared with those from other ASEAN countries. Vietnam pays over 20% duties on its dutiable exports in the aggregate while Thailand with MFN pays only 8-9% duties on its smaller base of dutiable exports. As one of only six countries that do not enjoy NTR with the U.S. (along with Laos, Cuba, North Korea, Afghanistan, and Serbia), Vietnam has faced tariff levels averaging 40 percent, more than ten times the tariff levels for countries with NTR. Third, as steps to normalize political relations have been completed, attention shifted to economic aspects of the relationship. But the process of economic normalization seemed more complicated and more time-consuming, momentum in the relationship seemed to slow down a little bit during this period. Finally, as Vietnam's economic performance has shown signs of slow-down since 1997<sup>8</sup>, American businesses interests in Vietnam have gone down. After several years of growth, US investment in Vietnam began to decline.

The momentum of the Vietnam-US relations picked up again in the year 2000 as the two countries signed the long negotiated Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in July. This has been the most comprehensive trade agreement the US has ever signed with another country. This trade pact is more than 100 pages long as compared with the 10-page long trade agreement the US signed with China in 1979. In fact, it is much more than a trade agreement as it covers not only trade in commodities and services but also investment

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<sup>8</sup> While Vietnam's GDP grew at rates of 9.5% in 1995, 9.3% in 1996, the growth rate began to go down to 8.2% in 1997 and 5.8% in 1998.

and intellectual property rights. The agreement was negotiated on the basis of the WTO rules, which recognize Vietnam as a developing country at a low level of economic development. Therefore, the agreement also marks an important step for Vietnam in its drive to join the WTO. The World Bank estimates that Vietnam's exports will rise to about \$768 million in the first year after the agreement comes into effect. Vietnam's exports to the US particularly garments, footwear, wooden items, household plastic products and processed food are expected to gain the most after the treaty agreement is ratified. With the BTA now signed, a solid foundation for the Vietnam-US relations has indeed been established. Expanded economic ties will undoubtedly increase mutual interference between the two economies, thus sustaining momentum for future overall relationship.

The historic signing of the BTA was followed by the first visit by a US President to Vietnam. While the MIA/POW issue still dominates the US agenda towards Vietnam, economic aspect has also been manifest in the activities of the US President in Vietnam. More than 50 U.S. executives accompanied Clinton, from such giants as Boeing, Coca-Cola, Nike, and General Electric. The presence of such a large delegation indicated the growing economic ties between the US and Vietnam. During the visit, Clinton announced the \$200 million OPIC line of credit for investment in Vietnam and the creation of a new high-level economic dialogue between the US and Vietnam. In essence, the Clinton visit was a vivid manifestation and evidence of the progress made over the past few years. It also highlighted the two countries' commitment to put the past behind and to build a new, cooperative partnership. The visit's symbolic value as well as its substantive achievements in terms of agreements signed during the time of the visit would clearly help sustain the momentum for the bilateral relationship for some time to come. Beside the tangible benefits of the visit for both countries, one can also discern the intangible ones. The reconciliation between the two countries has been seen as a highly positive development for regional countries as it not only helps further integrate Vietnam into the region but it also help sustain US engagement in the region.

Media attention turned to Vietnam during the Clinton's visit has highlighted the image of a new Vietnam to the American public and to the whole world. The familiar image of Vietnam, torn by conflicts and wars has receded and replaced by a new Vietnam that is in the process of opening up to the world, a Vietnam that has been successfully integrated into the region over the past few years. This image of Vietnam has also been captured by Clinton when he said: "America is coming to see Vietnam as your people have asked for years-- as a country, not a war. A country with the highest literacy rate in Southeast Asia; a country whose young people just won three Gold Medals at the International Math Olympiad in Seoul; a country of gifted, hard-working entrepreneurs emerging from years of conflict and uncertainty to shape a bright future"<sup>9</sup>.

Bilateral cooperation in other areas has also been strengthened since normalization. Cooperation on humanitarian issues has been particularly successful. From 1993 until late 2000, the two sides have undertaken 39 joint field activities, repatriated 288 possible sets of remains and identified the remains of 135 formerly unaccounted for American

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<sup>9</sup> Remarks by President Bill Clinton to Vietnam National University, Hanoi, November 17, 2000

servicemen<sup>10</sup>. On more than one occasion, former President Clinton has applauded “Vietnam is fully cooperating in good faith with the United States to achieve the fullest possible accounting for American unaccounted for as a result of the Vietnam War”. Vietnam has also been actively cooperating with the US on the issue of resettlement of refugees. Over 500,000 Vietnamese have emigrated and settled in the US through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) and other related programs such as the Resettlement Opportunity for Vietnamese Refugees program (ROVR), Former Reeducation Camp Detainees program (also known as HO program). Progress has also so been made in other areas of cooperation such as education, combating narcotic trafficking and preventing the spread of Aids.

The underlying compatible interests between the two countries in humanitarian, economic, as well as political terms have made these considerable achievements in the US-Vietnam relations over the past few years possible. It is these common interests that will continue to provide the basis for the US-Vietnam relations well into the future.

The two countries shared common humanitarian interests in healing the wounds of the war. For the US, it is the fullest possible accounting of American servicemen missing in the war in Vietnam. This issue is still one of the top priorities in US policy towards Vietnam not only because of its pure humanitarian nature but also because of its domestic vulnerability. In his Testimony before the Subcommittee on Trade of the House Committee on Ways and Means, Senator John Kerry, one of the prime drivers of the normalization process along with other congressmen such as John McCain, said: “We have an interest, a responsibility, and a national need to heal the wounds of a nation and put the past behind us once and for all. The step by step process of normalizing our relations with Vietnam is a means of healing those wounds”<sup>11</sup>.

For Vietnam, overcoming the still heavy consequences of the war is even more imperative. Millions of people are still suffering from the enduring effects of the Agent Orange that the US used extensively during the war in Vietnam. The Head of Vietnam’s National Committee for investigation of the consequences of the chemicals used during the Vietnam estimated that Vietnam would need at least a century to overcome the consequences of Agent Orange spraying. Studies have shown high rates of reproductive abnormalities such as miscarriages, premature and stillbirths in the sprayed areas. As many as 2 million people were exposed to the toxic chemicals and it is estimated that up to 50,000 deformed children have been born to parents exposed to this herbicide. Millions of unexploded mines still risk people’s lives now 25 years after the war. And while the US searching for only more than a thousand of American service men missing in the war, for the Vietnam the number is far greater. There are more than 300,000 Vietnamese still remain unaccounted for as the result of the American war in Vietnam.

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<sup>10</sup> “Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement: Historic strengthening of the US-Vietnam relationship”, <http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/>

<sup>11</sup> Statement of the Honorable John F. Kerry, U.S.S., Massachusetts, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Trade of the House Committee on Ways and Means, [http://www.house.gov/ways\\_means/trade/106cong/6-17-99](http://www.house.gov/ways_means/trade/106cong/6-17-99)

Economic interests are important forces driving the process of normalization and relations between the two countries. Vietnam is a potentially significant market for American goods and services. With a population of almost 80 million, Vietnam is the twelfth most populous country in the world and the second most populous country in Southeast Asia. The last few years have witnessed Vietnam's economy growing at 8% average. In her testimony on American trade negotiations with Vietnam before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittees on International Economic Policy and Asia Pacific Affairs, US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky noted: "Vietnam in particular, as ASEAN's second largest country, has the potential to develop into a rapidly growing economy with significant demand for our products"<sup>12</sup>. Vietnam has also been seen as the last frontier for investment in Southeast Asia. And Vietnam's integration into ASEAN has also raised the stake of the US in seeing Vietnam's successful economic reforms. As a member of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Vietnam also forms a part of a larger free trade area presenting significant trade and investment opportunities to the US. In 1999, ASEAN countries' exports to the US amounted to \$US 78 billion and imports from the US was US \$ 40 billion<sup>13</sup>. ASEAN has been second only to Japan and well ahead of China, Hong Kong and Korea in terms of US merchandise exports to the Pacific Rim<sup>14</sup>. ASEAN is also a major destination for American investment. From 1990 to 1997, US FDI in the region increased from \$11.8 billion to \$ 37.5 billion, surpassing US investment in both Japan and Brazil of \$ 35.6 billion and \$ 35.7 billion respectively. The US direct investment in ASEAN was seven times greater than that in China and almost double that in Hong Kong<sup>15</sup>. With the AFTA scheme in place, ASEAN will become even a more important trading and investment partner for the US and so will Vietnam.

Having normal relations with the world only superpower is no doubt very important for Vietnam to achieve its most important national objective, that is to modernize the economy and to make Vietnam into a strong country, prosperous people and civilized society. Vietnam is conscious of the US's significance in terms of market, source of investment, capital and technology. The US's dominant role in the international economic and financial institutions such the WTO, IMF, WB etc. makes the US loom even larger. The experience of the East Asian economies has also evidenced the utmost importance of the US market, capital and technology for these countries' economic successes. And Vietnam is well cognizant of this fact.

Vietnam has come to see cooperative relations with the US as essential component of its comprehensive renewal policy, which deeply rooted in the fundamentally changed

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<sup>12</sup> "American trade negotiations with Vietnam", Testimony of Ambassador Charlene Barshefsky, US Trade Representative before Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittees on International Economic Policy and Asia Pacific Affairs, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999

<sup>13</sup> U.S Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Foreign Trade Division, at [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/index.html](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/index.html)

<sup>14</sup> Richard Sokolsky, Angel Rabasa, C.R.Neu "The role of Southeast Asia in US strategy toward China", RAND, 2000, p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Statistical Abstract, 1998, No. 1312; *Survey of Current Business*, July 1998, p. 43

perception of security. In essence, Vietnam's conception<sup>16</sup> of "national comprehensive security" consists of three elements: *Firstly*, the basis of Vietnam's national security is political stability and economic development. Political stability is necessary for the country to build a strong economy, which in turn is a prerequisite for the country's national security. *Secondly*, an appropriate defense capability is also an important factor enhancing Vietnam's national security. *Thirdly*, Vietnam views her security as an integral part of regional and international security. Therefore, expanding bilateral and multilateral relations with countries in the world including relations with developed countries. Thus, if one put Vietnam's relations with the US in the context of Vietnam's changed perception of security, one can easily gauge the importance Vietnam attaches to relations with the US especially in economic terms.

Both Vietnam and the US have strong stakes in regional stability and growth in Southeast Asia<sup>17</sup>. It is not surprising that Vietnam accords the highest priority in cultivating friendly and cooperative relations with neighboring countries including Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam's joining ASEAN in 1995 was a clear manifestation of Vietnam's foreign policy priorities. The US has come to recognize the importance of Vietnam in Southeast Asian regional security since Vietnam is not only an integral part of this sub-region but also an important one. Vietnam's strategic location in Southeast Asia has rendered Vietnam a significant partner for the US. The US has important interests in seeing the vital sea-lane in Southeast Asia free for navigation. The increasing salience of the South China Sea dispute has also raised the strategic importance of Vietnam in the years to come. Vietnam's membership in ASEAN, its active role in this regional grouping makes Vietnam even a more important player in regional affairs. Vietnam has also increasingly been a significant player in the wider Asia Pacific region of which the US forms a part. Vietnam's membership of the ARF and participation in APEC provide an additional channel for Vietnam-US cooperation and thereby, raising the US stake in seeing Vietnam become a stable and prosperous country. The changing and complex strategic configuration in Asia undoubtedly underscores the importance of Vietnam as an independent actor in the US strategic calculations.

#### Remaining obstacles

On the other hand, one should not overlook other factors, which may hinder the future of the bilateral relationship. There have been divergent interests and differences affecting bilateral relations and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Different political systems are often referred to as one of the biggest obstacles. In fact it is not this difference per se that impedes the relationship and represent a potential source of tension between the two countries. It is the US inclination to impose its values on other nations of different political systems. The US has never hidden its goal of spreading democracy,

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<sup>16</sup> See also Ogasawara Takauki, "Vietnam's security policy in the post-Cambodia period: diplomatic dimension" in Dao Huy Ngoc and Nobuo Matsunaga (eds) *Asia Pacific and Vietnam-Japan Relations*, Hanoi, Institute for International Relations, 1994, pp. 107-108

<sup>17</sup> "American trade negotiations with Vietnam", Testimony of Ambassador Charlene Barshefsky, US Trade Representative before Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittees on International Economic Policy and Asia Pacific Affairs, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999.

human rights and American values to countries of different political systems including Vietnam. President Clinton made it clear when stated” “...normalization and increased contact between Americans and Vietnamese will advance the cause of freedom in Vietnam, just as it did in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union”<sup>18</sup>. This goal will continue to drive the US agenda towards Vietnam and it will affect bilateral relations to a significant extent.

Another factor that may adversely impact bilateral co-operation at times is the huge discrepancy between the US as the largest economy in the world and Vietnam, as a developing country at still low level of economic development. Greatly different levels of economic development may impede effective economic cooperation. There is also the question of different priorities. In relations with Vietnam, the US put priority on the issue of accounting the still unaccounted for American servicemen of the Vietnam War. Strategic calculations also weight heavy in US relations with Vietnam. On the other hand, Vietnam places most emphasis on economic cooperation as it serves Vietnam’s most important goal of industrializing and modernizing the country. At another level, like the US relationships with other smaller countries, Vietnam may run the risk of neglect at times because of the US global and regional priorities. In global terms, even though Asia has increasingly been important in the US agenda, it still ranks behind Europe in priority ranking. Furthermore, within regional context, relations with Vietnam also rank far below US relations with countries in Northeast Asia such as China, Japan and the two Koreas. With the US Asia policy is still driven mostly by outstanding issues and periodic crisis, Vietnam may well suffer from lack of priority and attention. With the major security hot spots such as Taiwan, Korean Peninsula, Indonesia etc. absorbing most of the US attention, in the absence of a US coherent Asia and Southeast Asia policy, US-Vietnam relations may well be victim of benign neglect at best.

Vietnam-US relations have long been shadowed by the legacy of one of the bloodiest wars in the 20th century. While it is undeniable that cooperation to solve the problems of the past notably the MIA/POW issues and the US's cooperation with Vietnam to clear the remaining unexploded ordinances, has been a positive factor for bilateral relations, the burden of the past still informs the US's policy making towards Vietnam in the period to come and this may somewhat affect US relations with Vietnam. The effect of this burden may even be reinforced by the US domestic politics. The American war in Vietnam remains not only emotional, but also a divisive one and at times it becomes vulnerable to domestic political exploitation as during the 1992 presidential elections. In Congress, with the annual review of the extension of the Jackson-Vanik waiver, one can still hear voices against normalizing relations with Vietnam. Though this opposition group is not homogenous in nature, parts of these opposing voices have to do with the burden of the past.

These obstacles are, nonetheless, not unique for a growing relationship and especially for a relationship that had to undergo the hardest test of all. It may take more time and more efforts on the part of the two countries to move the bilateral relationship ahead.

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Clinton, “US Normalizes relations with Vietnam”, speech delivered in Washington, D.C, 11 July 115.

**Looking ahead: lessons and prospects**

For the Vietnam-US relations to move ahead, several lessons have to be born in mind. The first and the biggest lesson for the two countries is to create mutual understanding in a broad sense of the word. One of the principal causes of the American war in Vietnam was the lack of understanding among the US policy makers about Vietnam. The US misperception about Vietnam as a surrogate of China or the Soviet Union made the US underestimate the strong spirit of independence -- one of the principal sources of victories in subsequent resistance wars. This lesson is still very much applicable under present circumstances. Vietnam needs to understand the political system of the US, the different actors in the US political system as well as in US foreign policy making process. At the same time, the US has to comprehend the Vietnamese history, culture, and tradition and to be sensitive and attentive to the Vietnamese needs and priorities. Learning this seemingly simple, but in fact most difficult lesson, will be instrumental in improving Vietnam-US relations and in preventing potential sources of discord from straining bilateral relations. One of the principal lessons of the war drawn by former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in his controversial book "In retrospect: the tragedy and lessons of Vietnam" also referred to the problem of misperception. The US underestimated the power of nationalism as a motivating force for the people of Vietnam in the North as well as in the South, to fight for independence and reunification. He also acknowledged the US profound ignorance of history, culture, politics of the people in the region, which was one of the causes of the war.

The second lesson is the two countries must build the bilateral relations on the basis of the two countries national interests. The US must define and enunciate clearly its national interests in dealing with Vietnam vice versa. History has shown that letting ideology determine interstate relationship could yield unfortunate consequences and the American war in Vietnam was one of the clearest examples. An American scholar has also observed: "Vietnam proved the culmination not only of the American Cold War in Asia, but of an old impulse to impose on the world the patterns of an ideological foreign policy"<sup>19</sup> This lesson is particularly important given the difference in political systems of the two countries and their respective political and cultural values and ideologies. While the two countries can still hold constructive dialogues to gain better understanding of each other's perspectives on issues such as human rights, democracy etc., trying to impose American-style values and institutions on Vietnam or making them the precondition for further improvement in Vietnam-US bilateral relations would make more harm than good.

The third lesson has to do with the inherent disparity in power between the two countries. As a superpower with a global strategy, the US tends to view smaller countries through the lens of big powers relations. As discussed earlier, this has been partly accounted for the American war in Vietnam. It was also the big power game that played a role in prolonging the animosity between the US and Vietnam in the period after the end of the American War in Vietnam. Not viewing the interests of smaller countries on their own

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<sup>19</sup> Michael H. Hunt, *"Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy"*, Yale University Press, 1987, p.170

terms would virtually make the state of relationship dependant upon big powers relations and translate the inherently complex and fluid nature of big power relations into unpredictability and volatility in big powers' relations with other smaller countries. Therefore, the US-Vietnam relations to be stable over the long-term, one should learn the lesson of the relations between a big power and a smaller one.

The forth lesson is the two countries have to hold on to the time tested principles of relationship among nations. Principles of mutual respect and equality, principle of independence and non-interference in each other's internal affairs must be the guiding principles for conducting bilateral relations between the US and Vietnam. In keeping up these principles, the two countries can avoid letting the remaining irritants in the bilateral relationship to afflict cooperative partnership. This lesson is well reflected in the Vietnamese leadership's view: "In our joint efforts to gradually build a new cooperative relationship, we are all aware of the big difference between our two countries in geographical location, social system, history, culture and economic development. It is therefore understandable that the two sides may have differences regarding certain specific and policies. However, we believe that it is important for us to respect each other and not to interfere into each other's internal affairs and not let differences stand in the way of our mutually beneficial and equal co-operation"<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of a new pattern of interaction between Vietnam and the US, replacing confrontation as the dominant pattern of relations. This fundamental shift is well in accordance with the main trend in the world since the end of the Cold war, that is trend of peace and cooperation among nations. A new and cooperative relationship between Vietnam and the US is not only in the interests of the two nations but also contributes to regional peace, security and development.

Given the bipartisan support for normalizing relations with Vietnam, it is expected that there will not be any major changes in the US new administration's policy towards Vietnam. The fundamentals of the relationship will undoubtedly stay the same under a Republican administration. However, with the Republican primarily realist thinking and unilateral approach, some policy adjustments of the new administration will certainly affect US relations with Vietnam. The Republicans' famous distrust of multilateral institutions is likely to have repercussions on the US's role in regional economic and security forums namely APEC and ARF. This also means that the US will rely more on the existing bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines at the expense of the multilateral forums. The Bush 1 administration was indeed against the formation of a multilateral security forum in the Asia Pacific. This realist approach will somewhat constrain Vietnam's foreign policy choices as it is not fully compatible with Vietnam new strategic thinking based on the cooperative concept of security and economic interdependence. There is also the risk of a US hardened stance on China which would then reduce Vietnam's room for maneuver as the latter has been

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<sup>20</sup> Speech by Vietnam's President Tran Duc Luong at the State Dinner in honor of the President of the United States of America W.J.Clinton, 17 November 2000.

seeking to have good relations with both China and the US. And of course, tensions in big powers' relations will certainly affect the external environment of Vietnam. As for Vietnam, maintaining a peaceful and stable external environment is the most important condition for national security, industrialization and modernization, worsening of relation among big powers will adversely affect the realization of Vietnam's goals. The new emphasis of the US military to form "security communities" in the Asia Pacific has already concerned countries in the region as it may be seen as targeting and containing the rise of China. This kind of move coupled with the US's strengthening of the security alliance with Japan, US's relations with Taiwan and the US's plan to develop NMD and TMD may strain US relations with China which will virtually mean a deteriorated security environment in the Asia Pacific. Therefore, it will be in the Vietnamese interests to see a stable and cooperative relationship between the US and China as this will allow Vietnam to pursue a policy of cooperation and dialogue with both China and the US.

Relations between Vietnam and the US are still colored by the shadow of the past. It will take more time and especially more strenuous efforts by the two countries to move beyond the past and to start a wholly new era in the bilateral relationship: an era of cooperative partnership. Ambassador Pete Peterson has said, "We cannot change the past. What we can change is the future". If this is accompanied by consistently positive actions from the US side, because in the end, it is actions that matter, prospects for future relations between the two countries seem bright. Convergent interests will provide the solid foundation for bilateral cooperation to forge ahead despite the remaining sources of tension. By focusing on areas that have the most potential for successful cooperation and avoiding issues that may afflict the bilateral relations, the two countries will eventually enhance mutual interdependence and understanding which in turn will improve the overall political climate conducive to cultivating cooperative and mutually beneficial relations for the two nations.