

## Vietnam President's Significant Visit to United States Analysed



Dr Subhash Kapila, SAAG 31-Jul-2013

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### Introductory Observations

Vietnam President Truong Tan Song's visit to the United States on an invitation from President Obama, from July 23-26, 2013 was a significant visit more in strategic terms than in political or economic terms.

United States and Vietnam stand engaged in political and economic terms from July 11, 1995 when the United States normalised relations with Vietnam and steady progress in these two fields has taken place.

Vietnam's renewed significance in United States strategic calculus needs to be viewed contextually in relation to the United States strategic pivot to the Asia Pacific and recasting United States security architecture in the Western Pacific

In the 21st Century there are no "ideological crusades" which divide United States and Vietnam as in the past. In the troubled geostrategic turbulence generated by China in the Asia Pacific, the prospects of good US-Vietnam relations are bright with strategic convergences and realpolitik emerging as predominant driving forces.

Vietnam's geostrategic significance has always remained a constant because of its geographical location which uniquely imparts to it a 'Pivot Position' in the Asia Pacific. However Vietnam's strategic significance in United States strategic calculus has waxed and waned, relative to the prevailing status of United States-China relations.

The second decade of the 21st Century portends that United States forced by the contextual strategic and security environment in the Asia Pacific would as a strategic imperative be prompted to eventually at some stage upgrade the existing bilateral relationship to one of a "Strategic Partnership".

Vietnam -United States relationship stands at strategic cross-roads today contextually in relation to the China Threat burgeoning in the Asia Pacific. Vietnam has faced multiple threats from China in the past and currently too without any significant United States support. It is the United States which could not face the Soviet Threat during the Cold War without Allies in the Asia Pacific. It is the United States once again that would require Allies and Strategic Partners in the Asia Pacific to face The China Threat. Vietnam has the potential to play a more pivotal role in the US Strategic Pivot to Asia Pacific.

United States President Obama's invitation for a presidential visit by Vietnam President Song to Washington in July 2013 needs to be analysed through the above prism.

President Truong Tan Song's visit to USA from July 24-27 2013 was rich both historically and in symbolism. Historically, it was only the second visit by a Vietnamese President to Washington after the Vietnam War. Symbolically, it was rich in political and strategic overtones in that it marked the first Presidential Summit between Vietnam and the United States at a strategically crucial stage in Asia Pacific affairs.

### Vietnam President's Visit to Washington July 3013: Notable Events/developments Preceding the Visit

The most notable event preceding the visit to Washington by the Vietnam President was his visit to China in June 2013, that

is nearly a month earlier. Media reports suggest that China did not yield on any issues pertaining to its territorial and sovereignty claims on the South China Sea disputes with Vietnam.



This sort of reporting led to a Yale Global Report by a former US diplomat David Brown (Yale Global Report June 18 2013 entitled 'Vietnam Between Rock and a Hard Place') with a by-line entitled 'Disappointment with China behind Vietnam President's hurried visit to Washington'. Alluded implicitly between the lines in the text was that Vietnam President's hurried visit to Washington was spurred by a quest to seek US security guarantees and that this should not be forthcoming until Vietnam improves its human rights record. One cannot agree with such a summation because Vietnam has had a long history of dealing with China's military adventurism without any strategic assurances from the United States so far.

The second notable event preceding Vietnam President's visit to Washington was the visit of Vietnamese Chief of General Staff, Senior Lieutenant General Do Ba Ty to Washington and US Army installations from June 17-22 2013 at the invitation of US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey. Analytically it can be construed as the first tentative step by the United States to add more noticeable strategic contours to the Vietnam-United States relationship.

The Vietnamese Chief of General Staff emphasised during the visit that "Vietnam attaches importance to developing its comprehensive relationship with the United States, including defence to defence cooperation." One can expect that US-Vietnam defence ties would be enhanced and closer military-to-military relationship may develop.

The US General repeated by now the familiar US line that all parties must solve disputes by peaceful means and according to international laws/ conventions including UNCLOS.

Significantly, the Vietnamese Chief of General Staff was accompanied by the Chief of Air Force, Deputy Chief of the Navy and Deputy Chief of Intelligence and other high ranking military Officers.

Significant was also the fact that this was the first visit ever of a Vietnamese Chief of General Staff and other Generals to the Pentagon. Noticeable also was the fact that the Vietnamese High Level Military Delegation also visited the Headquarters of US Army 1 Corps which is earmarked for military operations in the Asia Pacific as part of the US Pacific Command. The US Commanding General of 1 Corps openly asserted that he hoped to add Vietnam to the list of six regional countries with which 1 Corps holds annual joint military exercises.

To ensure that a meaningful groundwork was laid in Washington for President Truong Tan Song's visit and that maximum mileage is drawn in making Vietnam understood to the influential US strategic community, the Vietnamese Ambassador in Washington in preparatory moves hosted Round Table Conferences for virtually all the prominent think tanks of Washington.

All in all, it can be stated that Vietnam had made meticulous and painstaking efforts to lay a positive foundation and ambience for the historic visit of their President to the United States.

Against such an ambience, there was the usual clutter of noises by human rights and Church groups seconded by a few Senators and Congressmen clamouring that President Obama should insist that Vietnam-US relations cannot move forward unless Vietnam improves its record. Surprisingly such groups do not make similar noises when dignitaries from China, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain and other such countries come visiting. Nor do such groups' raise their voices when atrocities occur in these countries.

### **Vietnam President's Visit to Washington July 2013: Highlights & Analysis**

President Truong Tan Song was accompanied by a large delegation whose composition spanned the entire spectrum ranging from economics, trade and defence. It also included senior religious clergy for interaction with US groups raising contentious issues of Vietnam's human rights records.

The Vietnamese President on the side-lines of his high level political interactions in Washington interacted with virtually every US Secretary from Foreign Affairs, Defence and to Trade and Agriculture and also with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. More significantly, discussions took place with leading US Senators and Congressmen in the forefront of espousing enhanced Vietnam-US relationship.

However, the three most important political events of the President of Vietnam were sequentially, Working Lunch at US State Department with Secretary Kerry; White House Discussions with President Obama and an Address at the US Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The speeches at the US State Department by dignitaries from both sides stressed that both sides had put in a sustained effort to usher in a new era of 'a very productive and important partnership'. The theme of "renewal" underscoring the evolving Vietnam-US relationship was highlighted. Secretary Kerry stressed that Vietnam was now playing an increasingly significant role on regional and global issues.

The Vietnamese President emphasised at the State Department function that Vietnam attaches great importance to its relations with the United States and today a great opportunity exists to take Vietnam-US bilateral relations to a new phase of development.

President Truong Tan Song's discussions with President Obama on July 25 need to be viewed from two different planes. The first being the contents of the official White House press release and second the content of the Joint Statement made after the discussions by the two Presidents.

The White House press release reflected that President Obama had stressed the desire to establish a Comprehensive Partnership with Vietnam that will allow even greater cooperation on a whole range of issues and more pointedly military-to-military cooperation. Also reflected was that the South China Sea dispute was discussed and the US President stressed the need for continued efforts to resolve maritime issues peacefully.

The Joint US-Vietnam Statement indicated that both nations had decided to forge a Comprehensive Partnership. The overall aim of such a Comprehensive Partnership was to usher in a new phase of bilateral relations and to proceed to build a "forward looking relationship".

Significantly, President Obama laid great stress on the fact that both nations stood committed to completion of the Trans Pacific Partnership and that Vietnam had a great role to play towards that end. It needs to be stated in the words of a Financial Times columnist that the United States perceives the Trans Pacific Partnership as a free trade grouping of "anyone but-China." It can therefore be construed as an initiative for economic containment of China.

The most significant event in terms of elucidating Vietnam's vision of its relationship with the United States merged at an Address to the US Center for Strategic and International Studies on July 25 2013. The Vietnamese President had entitled his Address as "Vietnam and United States Relationship in a Dynamic and Prosperous Asia Pacific."

Vietnam's President after tracing briefly the political, strategic and economic dynamism of the Asia Pacific and the centrality of ASEAN in peace and security architecture of South East Asia stressed the following salient points in relation to Vietnam-United States relations;

- "Within this regional dynamism and prosperity, relations between Vietnam and the United States have broadened and taken off in many areas in depth and breadth and in the quality of cooperation".
- "For Vietnam, strengthened relationship with the United States is within the context of our foreign policy in which we seek to ensure independence, self-reliance, diversification and multilateralisation of relations within the overall international integration and the deepening of relations with important parties".
- "United States voiced support for peace, stability, security and maritime security and safety in East Sea (South China Sea)."
- "Looking back on our history of Vietnam-United States relations, the establishment of Comprehensive Partnership is the culmination of a forward looking cooperation process pursued by both sides"

### **Vietnam-United States Relationship: The Historical Context**

At the White House meeting, on its conclusion, the Vietnamese President produced a copy of a letter written by the legendary Vietnamese great leader Ho Chi Minh to US President Truman indicating Vietnam's desire to establish good relations with the United States and the inspiration of the US Founding Fathers.

In fact, the United States interest in Vietnam is more than 200years old. In one of my Papers written seven years back I had quoted from a Vietnam Foreign Ministry Seminar of 2005 and which now merits reproduction once again: "...the relations between Vietnam and the United States of America did not begin from a War, but from a period earlier than that. In the early years of the 19th Century and under the terms of President Jefferson and President Jackson, delegations from the United States of America were sent to Vietnam to establish friendly ties and trade exchanges. Meanwhile, King Tu Duc also had sent an envoy to the United States."

So as Vietnam and the United States attempt to usher an era of renewal in their ties, the historical context needed to be flagged.

### **Overall Concluding Analysis by the Author**

In the overall analysis, Vietnam President Truong Tan Song's visit to Washington in July 2013 needs to be viewed as a successful one. With the meticulous groundwork preceding the visit, Vietnam stands better embedded in US strategic consciousness in Washington.

While the United States may not have come out with more forceful and unambiguous assertions in favour of Vietnam in its South China Sea disputes with China, its references to its peaceful resolution by all parties, which more pointedly includes China, is a political signal which in view of US compulsions should presently suffice.

However the strategic and military signalling to China that the United States is desirous of enhancing its defence cooperation and military-to military contacts with Vietnam and thereby virtually co-opting Vietnam as a 'Strategic Partner' should put China on an ominous notice.

Vietnam-United States relationship after President Truong Tan Song's visit having graduated from a bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Partnership promises ushering in a new era of a more substantial all-encompassing Vietnam-United States partnership.

This with more passage of time and United States according greater strategic sensitivity to Vietnam's legal rights on South China Sea sovereignty and related issues, overriding Chinese military adventurism on this dispute, may set the stage for a full-fledged Vietnam-United States Strategic Partnership.

However if and when a Vietnam –United States Strategic Partnership emerges the United States would be well advised to restrict its expectations to a strategic partnership as opposed to a "military alliance"

Vietnam during the President's visit has amply made it clear that Vietnam intends to follow an independent and self-reliant foreign policy in statements at various fora in Washington. This was also emphasised by the Vietnamese Foreign Minister on the eve of the visit of Vietnam's President to Washington.

(Dr Subhash Kapila is the Consultant, International Relations & Strategic Affairs, South Asia Analysis Group. He can be reached at [drsubhashkapila.007@gmail.com](mailto:drsubhashkapila.007@gmail.com))

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