

The Honorable
Michael W. Marine
United States Ambassador
to Vietnam

A Decade of Progress: The U.S.-Vietnamese Partnership

Whenver I am in the United States, I try to reach out not only to Americans at large but also, in particular, to Vietnamese Americans. I think the 1.5 million Vietnamese Americans living in the United States are a special constituency of mine and I try to maintain ties with them. Whenever I make these visits I find that I learn a great deal about our bilateral relationship with Vietnam by comparing my viewpoint with those of others who are interested in Vietnam.

Today, I would like to briefly take stock of our dynamic relationship with Vietnam – what it is today and where it is headed tomorrow. Without question, in the past several years, we have made significant progress, particularly in the past year. President Bush received Prime Minister Phan Van Khai at the White House in June—the first visit to the United States by a sitting Vietnamese prime minister. This year also marked the 30th anniversary of the end of the war, the tenth anniversary of normalized diplomatic relations, and the fifth anniversary of the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement, or BTA. Each of these anniversaries is significant in different ways and each one of them causes us to reflect or think back on how the relationship has evolved. Between the prime minister’s visit and the many other high-level contacts we have had, this year has presented numerous opportunities to strengthen our relationship. And I am confident that this relationship is stronger now than it has been since the war.

On the other hand, our two countries’ deepening relationship has also presented new challenges—economic, commercial, political and global—for the United States and Vietnam to confront. But in this case I think we have managed to find ways to confront these challenges together rather than on opposite sides. It is important to acknowledge that our success this past year in addressing some of these challenges is the result of a continuous commitment from both sides to improve the relationship. We have succeeded in forging strong bonds despite a very tragic history, creating a path of reconciliation and cooperation that, I believe, sets a strong example for others to follow.

Cooperation on the issue of the fullest possible accounting for our missing personnel from the Indochina conflict provided the initial impetus that enabled us to move our relations forward, and this issue remains one of our top priorities. This

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humanitarian task is one we pursue with the Vietnamese people, who are also wrestling with the challenge of finding and identifying sons and daughters lost in battle. Since 1992, the U.S.-Vietnam cooperation on finding as many as possible from the war has resulted in our ability to bring home more than 500 fallen service personnel, and with them answers and closure for their families. I participate in the ceremonies when these remains are leaving Vietnam. It’s done with full military honors, and it’s very moving to be able to participate in them. Some people ask me why we spend the money to do this; is it merely because we can? And my answer is, yes, you are right, the United States can afford this, but it’s also because we should. These joint humanitarian efforts will continue unabated until our mission is completed.

In the ten years since normalization, we have also nurtured productive advances in bilateral ties in the areas of science and health, education and culture, security and law enforcement, as well as in the area of military cooperation. Each of these areas, in its own way, has potential pitfalls, and sensitivities that we have to work through. In fact, I think the kinds of joint sustained efforts we have achieved in these areas would have been unimaginable to most of us ten years ago as we looked forward at the beginning of the bilateral relationship.

More than in any other area our two countries’ economic and business ties form the cornerstone of our relationship. Since the U.S.-Vietnam BTA came into

effect in 2001, bilateral trade has tripled. It exceeded \$6.4 billion last year. The United States is now Vietnam's largest export market, purchasing one-fifth of all Vietnamese exports. U.S. exports to Vietnam have increased by 250 percent in the past three years. Figures for the first half of 2005 indicate that two-way

Nonetheless, while trade and investment between our two nations have grown dramatically in recent years, there is still a great deal of room for further expansion. Our ongoing negotiations over Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization are setting the

foundation for these future increases in trade and investment. We still have a number of issues to resolve in our bilateral negotiations with Vietnam over its accession. But both sides are working hard on these, and I believe that the stage is set for Vietnam to join the WTO very soon, perhaps as early as the first half of next year.

Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's trip to the United States capped the first ten years of U.S.-Vietnam relations and set the stage for our two

In addition, Vietnam must invest in the infrastructure improvements that foreign investors demand, while also protecting its beautiful natural environment. None of that will be particularly easy.

Just a few more words on intellectual property rights (IPR), which I know is an area of particular concern to many working in various fields here in Southern California. Vietnam is just beginning to create the kind of legal and regulatory protections that most companies demand in a potential investment destination. That is good, and we encourage the development of that framework. But what is lacking, clearly, is enforcement. Piracy and counterfeiting are serious concerns, whether the products in question are movies, music, books, software, pharmaceuticals or brand-name goods. With regard to American movies, books and software, the piracy rate is effectively 100 percent in Vietnam. Lack of IPR protection not only deters foreign investment, but also puts Vietnam behind its neighbors in critical areas of competition. Progress on IPR protection will require the combined voices of the U.S. government and American business, and we will continue to emphasize the importance of IPR protection at every possible opportunity.

Helping Vietnam maintain its economic growth in the face of transnational challenges is an area where the United States can, and does, assist. Vietnam now faces two significant health issues, either of which, without prudent and timely action, could quickly escalate into a crippling crises. The first of these is avian influenza. Recognizing how serious this disease is, the government of Vietnam has launched a massive effort to vaccinate poultry populations and contain the virus in birds. But given the uncertain science of the H5N1 virus, it is impossible to predict when or whether this virus will mutate in a way that will make it the basis for a possible pandemic.



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trade continues to be strong, up 30 percent through June over last year's figures. Importantly for our own interests, American exports to Vietnam during the first six months of 2005 increased by 76 percent over the previous year. And, of course, California is a leader in this trade. In 2004, California ranked second, behind the state of Washington, which, is a source of aircraft, in terms of sales to Vietnam, with a total value of exports to Vietnam topping \$151 million in products such as computers and electronics, processed foods, machinery, and transportation equipment.

The investment picture is bright as well: American companies increasingly are interested in investing in Vietnam, in part because in some sectors labor costs can be 30 percent less in Vietnam than they are in southern China.

sides to take the relationship to a higher plane. That's exactly what President Bush and Prime Minister Khai agreed would be their objective. Obviously, completing the work required to join the WTO will be another huge milestone on the road to deeper, richer economic ties, but Vietnam can and should do more, much more, to court investment and expand business opportunities for Americans and other foreign firms. And I want to talk about some particular steps that they can take.

Among the tasks before it, Vietnam must create a financial system that allows capital to flow to those who will manage it effectively; it must establish a predictable, transparent and rules-based legal and regulatory system that is free from corruption; and it must protect intellectual property rights through strong laws and effective enforcement.

In response to that global threat, the U.S. government is leading an international, high-level political initiative to address avian and pandemic influenza. Earlier this month, the Department of State hosted the inaugural meeting of the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza. For its part, Vietnam, along with more than 70

as the commercial sex workers. But this epidemic could, if left unchecked, become a generalized epidemic that would threaten and result in enormous human and economic losses in Vietnam. The U.S. government has made a firm commitment and has put money on the table to work with Vietnam to help avert this crisis. In 2004, President Bush named Vietnam one of 15 priority countries to receive assistance from his Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. The president chose Vietnam as the 15th priority country—and the only one in Asia—because there is a very real chance that the epidemic can be controlled there with prompt action. With this objective in mind, this year we will spend \$27 million in Vietnam, working with the ministry of health, as well as with private partners. Next year that total will rise to \$33 million. These sound like very large sums, but when it comes to arranging for anti-viral drugs for those with AIDS, the money doesn't go nearly far enough.

We also have a growing relationship with Vietnam in other previously sensitive areas, such as counterterrorism and law enforcement. The counterterrorism cooperation is quite good, and I will come back to that later. I think that in law enforcement we are at the beginning of a long road. We would like to see more done in terms of concrete steps to combat money laundering. We would also like to reach a point where we can conduct investigations with Vietnamese counterparts on cases where there is a nexus between Vietnam and the U.S. Organized crime in its various forms tends to go where it thinks it can become hidden, and Vietnam wants to avoid—I think it needs to avoid—becoming one of those locations. And we can help them do that.

Inasmuch as military and law enforcement issues are often the most sensitive in any relationship, the deepening ties we have in these areas reflect the greater trust and spirit of cooperation our two countries share. The United States and Vietnam no longer have any circumstances under which it is plausible to imagine our militaries fighting each other. The United States fully respects Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In fact, we share many areas of mutual interest in regional and international security, and these are growing week by week.

For example, both countries desire peace in the Asia-Pacific region and believe that there can be no economic growth and prosperity without a stable security environment. Vietnam also shares the U.S. desire to thwart the development and spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction and has opposed North Korea's attempts to flaunt the will of the international community by developing nuclear weapons. This is of no small significance, considering the traditionally close ties between Hanoi and Pyongyang.

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other countries, has accepted the challenge to be part of this partnership. The basic agreement in this partnership is that—provided that countries agree to be transparent, to share information, to make available samples to allow for tracking of the virus and any possible changes that occur with the virus—we and other countries commit ourselves to assist those countries and improve their surveillance systems and set up rapid response teams to deal with any outbreaks. As a start, the U.S. government has provided \$25 million to the Southeast Asia region for this purpose, with Vietnam as one of the focus countries. Our intent is to fight the avian influenza by helping to combat possible outbreaks through improved surveillance and expanded public education programs, by assisting in the ongoing poultry vaccination program, and by building capacity in research laboratories.

The second health issue of concern is HIV/AIDS, which is already an epidemic in Vietnam, concentrated in the intravenous drug user population as well

I can certainly assure you that we are working on the serious concerns of these potential health crises and on promoting a better environment for business and trade, but it is important to recognize that our relationship is much broader than that. For example, in the area of defense and military-to-military contacts, our ties have been steadily developing on a positive course. U.S. Navy ships regularly visit Vietnamese ports, fostering cross-cultural understanding each time they do so. The U.S. military also coordinates U.S. assistance for Vietnam's de-mining efforts, which is very, very important. It's a true tragedy when I read about or meet a young person who has lost a limb because he happened to be playing with a cluster bomb that hadn't been cleaned up. Leaders of both militaries now meet regularly not only to exchange views on security issues, but also to develop common ground in actions to promote regional stability for continued growth.

Vietnam and the United States also stand together in opposition to the global scourge of terrorism. Vietnam's leaders have spoken out in no uncertain terms about the need to fight terrorism, and Vietnam has been an active participant in regional counterterrorism efforts, particularly in the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

All of that is on the positive side. Now, I want to address a few things on the negative side. In any bilateral relationship, whether between close allies or newfound partners, there will be friction and areas of disagreement. In fact—and, to some extent, counter-intuitively—the closer two countries become and the broader their relationship is, the greater the number of areas in which contention can arise.

I think this is where the United States and Vietnam are now, but I don't believe it's something that we should worry much about. There will always be areas in which the United States and Vietnam don't see eye-to-eye. This doesn't mean we should whitewash areas of disagreement for the sake of the overall relationship. Nor does it mean we should hold one aspect of bilateral relations hostage to another. Rather, the challenge is how we manage and, hopefully, find a way to overcome our differences, so that they don't overshadow or weaken the overall relationship between both countries.

One area in which we certainly have our differences with Vietnam is human rights, including religious freedom. The Vietnamese government proudly and rightly touts its progress in delivering "collective" human rights such as education and poverty reduction. However, we remain concerned that the government of Vietnam is less tolerant of political dissent and continues to clamp down on moves to even talk about multi-party democracy. Moreover, it is unacceptable that the Vietnamese people

do not enjoy the fundamental freedoms of religion, speech, press, and assembly. Even as we seek to expand our economic ties with Vietnam, we continue to promote these human rights ideals vigorously and to remind the Vietnamese government that these are not privileges, but rather principles that have been universally affirmed and should be universally enjoyed. In fact, Vietnam's poor human rights record remains a barrier to a warmer and more productive bilateral relationship with the United States.

Since the United States designated Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern for serious violations of religious freedom in September 2004, we have continued to urge the Vietnamese government to expand the space for religious believers to practice their faith. In response, Vietnam has enacted new legislation on religion and officially banned forced renunciations of faith. A number of prisoners who were detained, we believe, for the practice of their religion were released over the past year. In May, officials of the United States government and the government of Vietnam exchanged reports summarizing all of the steps Vietnam has publicly stated it intends to take to fully implement its new religious legislation. However, these promises, as important as they are, now need to be carried out. And, in fact, we remain concerned that some local officials fail to understand the letter and/or the spirit of the new legislation, or choose not to, and continue to detain or mistreat some religious believers.

One area where we have seen progress has been in the Central Highlands, where we have noted Vietnam's openness to working with Cambodia and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on the issue of the welfare and well-being of ethnic minorities, particularly those who previously migrated to Cambodia and have now been returned. We remain concerned about the human rights

situation in the Central Highlands, but we are heartened that Vietnam has allowed greater access by international observers, including members of my staff who have met with some of the people who have come back from Cambodia. As far as we can tell, none of the people have suffered in any way because of their decision to leave Vietnam in the first place. Considering the troubled history of the Central Highlands, this is a welcome step, and we will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Another positive sign on the human rights front was the release and amnesty of several prisoners of concern to the United States on September 2. Since I first called on the Government of Vietnam publicly to release its prisoners of conscience in a speech this past March, the Vietnamese have undertaken a historic number of prisoner amnesties as part of their national celebrations, releasing over 26,000 prisoners, including several high-profile individuals. These amnesties were important, and we look forward to more gestures of this type.

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In addition, it's worth noting that the U.S. and Vietnam have agreed to hold a bilateral human rights dialogue in the near future. This will be a return to a dialogue that was last held in 2002, and it will provide us another opportunity in which to raise issues of concern directly

with senior officials of the Government of Vietnam.

Despite these positive steps, I think we still need to point out that in this area Vietnam still has not gone far enough. I will continue to call, as will others in the Bush administration, on the government of Vietnam to release all prisoners-of-conscience. Today I'd like to note five who are still in prison and deserve to be free today: They are: journalist Nguyen Vu Binh, Dr. Pham Hong Son, essayist Nguyen Khac Toan, activist Tran Van Luong and former South Vietnamese police officer Phan Van Ban.

In dealing with the issues that require our attention—and there will without a doubt be other issues we haven't even thought of that will require our attention—I see it as my responsibility, and the responsibility of my staff in the Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City, to help to minimize distrust between our two countries by maximizing communication and fostering understanding. We do this through outreach to Vietnamese ministries, universities and institutes. We also look for ways to interact with the Vietnamese youth, and the media, which remains state-controlled. Despite these controls, there are signs that the media is taking its responsibilities as a watchdog of public interest more seriously, reporting coverage of corruption, environmental problems, and the like. We'd like to see this trend continued and expanded. Just three months ago, I participated in my first live web chat event on Vietnamnet, an Internet service provider in Hanoi. I took questions from readers in Vietnam and the United States on a wide range of topics including religious freedom, human rights and Agent Orange. The transcript of the hour-long discussion was posted on the web, virtually uncensored. It is a small step but a significant one in our efforts to provide

information and share ideas to the public. Within four days, there were 350,000 hits on that website to take a look at what I had to say.

When we consider how far apart the United States and Vietnam once were,

the Vietnamese government decided to donate \$100,000 to the American victims of Hurricane Katrina

how implacably against each other we were—and it wasn't that long ago—I believe it's a testament to efforts in both countries to build bridges, foster communication and create an atmosphere of trust and understanding that we have been able to accomplish what we have over the past decade. There is still work to be done and this work must, and will, continue.

But it's not only the work of embassies and government officials that can build bridges and bring our two countries closer together. Southern California is home to the greatest number of persons of Vietnamese heritage outside of Vietnam and there are some with us today. Americans of Vietnamese descent are in a key position to help to build bridges, eliminate misunderstanding and create trust. In my opinion, all of you in the Vietnamese-American community can play a huge role in building and enriching the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship.

But these efforts should not be done in a vacuum; this is not a one-way street, it's a two-way street. The Vietnamese government seems to recognize the important contributions ethnic Vietnamese around the world can make to Vietnam's continued development and

has taken steps to reach out to them, but not enough. There's more Vietnam can do, such as dealing honorably with the cemeteries of South Vietnam's war dead and giving public recognition to the humanitarian efforts of Vietnamese-Americans to help the less advantaged in Vietnam.

Americans are known for their strong sense of optimism about things to come, and I think throughout our history we have been fortunate that that opinion has been warranted. I also find that this is a character trait we have in common with the Vietnamese. They are equally famous for their resiliency and hopeful outlook on life, which makes them, in my view, good company and good partners. Above all, I believe this shared optimism is a critical part of the bilateral partnership we have now. It leaves me very hopeful about the future.

I'd like to share something with you that you may not be aware of, but I think also captures the way this relationship has evolved. Last month, the Vietnamese government informed us that it decided to donate \$100,000 to the American victims of Hurricane Katrina, and that there was a medical team standing by to fly to the United States to provide medical services. We were not able to accept the offer of medical help, due to liability questions, but we accepted the check with gratitude. The next day, one of my staff members was invited to a lawn ceremony for the Vietnamese Red Cross' campaign to solicit donations for the American victims. He received a check from the Vietnamese Red Cross for \$20,000, and then shook the hands of over a hundred Vietnamese Red Cross representatives from companies and offices throughout Hanoi as they dropped fat envelopes of donations into the collection box. And this same ceremony, minus the participation of my staff, was repeated across Vietnam in all 64 provinces.

Personally I was deeply touched by this incredibly generous outpouring of support for the American victims of Hurricane Katrina coming from a people in a country that does not have a lot of extra resources to spare. The per capita income in Vietnam is less than \$600 a year. None of the special events we have held this year to celebrate the tenth anniversary of diplomatic relations have demonstrated as clearly as this generous response in our time of need the true

depth of the bonds that have developed between our peoples. And that is why I am so optimistic that we are, indeed, on our way to realizing our shared goal of moving this relationship to the next level.

In closing, I would like to say that all of you here, those of you in the academic, business, tourism and development communities, that you all have an important role to play in

increasing the people-to-people exchanges which help to increase mutual understanding between the United States and Vietnam. I hope to see the relationship, not only between our two countries, but between California and Vietnam, continue to thrive and grow. I think we've just begun what can be achieved and I look forward to being a part of those efforts in the coming years.

Thank you.

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