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## The Limits to US-Vietnam Ties

Relations have been transformed in recent years. But if they're to get any better, Hanoi will have to start moving on human rights and democracy.

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By **Richard Pearson**

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This summer marks 36 years since the fall of Saigon, 16 since the United States and Vietnam established diplomatic relations, and 14 since the US Embassy in Hanoi opened its doors. Today, the two countries find themselves sharing more positions on a broader range of issues than ever before. Indeed, diplomats have even spoken in terms of a 'strategic partnership' developing between Hanoi and Washington.

Policymakers in both capitals justifiably speak with pride and enthusiasm of their

achievements, and the great potential that exists to develop an even more robust relationship in coming years. Speaking on May 31 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell spoke of Washington's 'desire and intention to improve this relationship going forward.'

Yet while both sides rightly want to grow closer, absent improvements in human rights and political freedoms in Vietnam, the Barack Obama administration has taken engagement with the Vietnamese government as far as it can without alienating the US public and Congress. Although there remains room on both sides for further adaptation and accommodation, the onus now rests squarely on Hanoi to meet the US halfway by pursuing domestic policy reforms, particularly in the areas of political freedom and civil rights. Effectively addressing these Vietnamese domestic issues – what Campbell referred to as a 'limiting factor' in the relationship – would give the Obama administration a greater ability to work with Vietnam and allow the relationship to progress to the next level.

Since taking office, Obama has expended energy and political capital in pursuit of strong ties with Southeast Asia. After eight years that saw Washington disengaged and distracted from Southeast Asia, on coming to power Obama moved quickly to increase US engagement with this important region. Since the beginning of the Obama presidency, US engagement with Vietnam has grown particularly fast – though admittedly from a low base – to a level not seen since the heady days when President Bill Clinton [visited Hanoi](#) in 2000 and delivered the first ever speech by a foreign leader to be broadcast live across Vietnam.

In pursuing stronger ties with Southeast Asia and defending US maritime interests, the United States earned Beijing's ire when, at the ASEAN Regional Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Hanoi last July, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [aligned the US](#) with Southeast Asian countries by raising concerns about China's ambitious maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea and calling for 'a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants.'

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However, such US actions have been met with a warm welcome in a Hanoi eager to promote its own political and economic integration with the world and increasingly wary of China. Moreover, recent US overtures may have finally disabused most of the Vietnamese leadership of the notion that Washington seeks to orchestrate a 'peaceful evolution' away from Vietnamese Communist Party rule.

Vietnam's enthusiastic welcome last August of both the USS George Washington's [cruise down the Vietnamese coast](#), and the guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain's port call in Danang shortly after, demonstrate the importance that Hanoi now places on robust security ties with the United States. Similarly, Vietnam's decision to join the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), which is quietly emerging as Washington's preferred Asia-Pacific forum, highlights Hanoi's desire for greater political and economic integration as well as its growing comfort with a strong United States that's deeply engaged with Southeast Asia.

Still, Vietnam continues to take domestic actions that alienate US observers and make the sort of close relationship that Hanoi desires politically impossible and morally untenable for the Obama administration.

Continuing crackdowns on politically and socially-active religious leaders, increased and more severe prosecution and sentencing of [Vietnamese dissidents](#) as well as continued maintenance of substantial restrictions on Internet, communications and the press make Vietnam hard to fully embrace for an Obama administration that is already facing strong headwinds domestically.

All this means that strong move forward is needed from Hanoi. With [tensions](#) in the South China Sea showing no signs of cooling in the near term, and with China's naval capabilities continuing to grow, a robust US-Vietnam relationship is in both parties' interests (although it is an inescapable reality of global power dynamics and Asian security that the United States matters more to Vietnam than Vietnam does to the US).

The Obama administration's overtures to Vietnam have reached the acceptable limits imposed by America's democratic society and values, and it's now time for Hanoi to make the next move. Only by so doing will both Hanoi and Washington be able to develop the strong relationship that both rightly seek.

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