

[vnnews-l] FR-US: Vietnam Communist party chief to make first US trip

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Vietnam Party Chief Balances Ties Between U.S., China Wary of Beijing's buildup, Nguyen Phu Trong says U.S. is force of stability in Asia Pacific [image: Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's top Communist Party official, in Hanoi in February. He is traveling to Washington next week to meet with Barack Obama.]ENLARGE

Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's top Communist Party official, in Hanoi in February. He is traveling to Washington next week to meet with Barack Obama. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By

JAMES HOOKWAY

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HANOI—Vietnam's top Communist Party leader travels to Washington to meet President Obama next week

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with

a prickly question to resolve—how close should his country to get to the U.S.?

The question has troubled Nguyen Phu Trong, the party's general secretary, for years, people who have met him say. Stronger ties with the U.S. would likely anger China, Vietnam's big neighbor to the north. It might also alienate hard-liners in Vietnam's Politburo. But with Beijing growing more aggressive in its territorial claims to the South China Sea

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-proposes-challenge-to-china-sea-claims-1431463920>,

close observers are concluding that Mr. Trong has little choice but to throw the full weight of Vietnam's Communist Party behind a stronger alliance with the U.S. to challenge China's tightening grip on the region.

[image: U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter and Mr. Trong met in early June in Hanoi.]ENLARGE

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter and Mr. Trong met in early June in Hanoi.

PHOTO: ZUMA PRESS

"The fact that it is Mr. Trong, the guardian of party ideology, who is going to the U.S. indicates that Vietnam is undergoing a strategic rebalancing," said Jonathan London, a professor at the City University of Hong Kong.

Mr. Trong's July 7-9 visit is ostensibly to mark the 20th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties with the U.S. in 1995, about two decades after the end of the Vietnam War. That breakthrough and the introduction of a bilateral trade agreement a few years later are regarded as seminal events in Vietnam. In brief remarks to a group of foreign journalists Friday, Mr. Trong said he hoped that his visit to the U.S. will build on the progress so that "we can leave the past behind and move forward."

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The U.S. places a premium on trade, too; former President Bill Clinton <http://topics.wsj.com/person/C/Bill-Clinton/6326> is currently in Vietnam to mark the occasion, while Vietnam is among a cluster of countries working with the U.S. to create a new trade pact, the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Other Vietnamese leaders have also visited the U.S. in recent years, most notably reform-minded Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

But in recent years, 71-year-old Mr. Trong has focused on maintaining fraying ties with China

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/vietnam-official-woos-china-ahead-of-u-s-visit-1427964538>.

It is a difficult balancing act. Vietnam's national identity is largely

ted to the idea that it isn't China. Its independence was hard-won. Vietnamese children are taught from an early age about the exploits of patriots such as the Trung sisters, who, the story goes, led a rebellion against Chinese rule in 40 AD.

At the same time, Vietnam's economy is closely intertwined with China's. Trade between the two countries now accounts for about \$60 billion a year, which provides a significant incentive to make sure the two countries get along.

It is a job that is getting harder, however. Mr. Trong traveled to Beijing in April to apply a fresh band-aid on the relationship after China last year towed an oil rig into waters claimed by both countries. The incident set off a monthslong seaborne standoff and a series of anti-Chinese riots.

Analysts say the face-off also convinced some of the more hesitant apparatchiks in Vietnam's Communist Party to open up to the U.S., much as other countries such as Myanmar and the Philippines have attempted reduce their own economic dependence on China recently.

Beijing's moves to step up construction of artificial islands <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-build-military-facilities-on-south-china-sea-islets-1434436700>> in

disputed parts of the South China Sea have also stoked concerns that China might use military force to advance its territorial claims. The reclamation work has also alarmed officials in the U.S. who worry about the potential impact on shipping routes.

In written remarks to The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Trong said he hoped that the U.S. would continue its pivot to Asia, describing Vietnam's former foe as a force for stability in the region. He also welcomed the U.S.'s moves in recent years to push for the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where China, Vietnam and other countries claim all or part of the waters as their sovereign territory.

"We are all aware of the strategic location of the East Sea," Mr. Trong said, referring to waters by their Vietnamese name, and saying free navigation was a matter of interest to countries beyond the region. He warned against the militarization of the area, and urged Washington to help maintain the status quo.

"China's aggressiveness in the maritime disputes was certainly a wake-up call for the most conservative elements of Vietnam's political establishment," Mr. London said. "No one wants to be seen as being willing to put Vietnam in a relationship with China that is not based on real, mutual respect."

Vietnam has begun opening up its economy further, too, partly to help it grow faster but also to attract support from major investor nations such as Japan and South Korea. Samsung Electronics <http://quotes.wsj.com/SSNHZ>> Co. <http://quotes.wsj.com/SSNHZ>>, for instance, accounts for a fifth of all of Vietnam's exports. And last week, Vietnam announced plans to remove a cap on foreign ownership of many companies listed on the country's stock market. Mr. Trong said the Vietnam aims to increase the pace of change by introducing more market-based reforms and improving its infrastructure.

Adam McCarty, chief economist at Mekong Economics in Hanoi, says Vietnam is attempting to make itself an important cog in the global manufacturing production chain. And while this might increase volatility as the country becomes more vulnerable to changes in demand and production cycles, "the upside is much faster development," he said.

The U.S., meanwhile, appears to recognize that Mr. Trong's visit is an opportunity to extend its own influence and deepen the Obama administration's pivot to the Asia Pacific region.

The meeting with Mr. Obama is especially significant; normally such encounters are reserved for heads of state or government. It also follows U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter's visit to Vietnam in June <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-says-vietnam-weighing-ending-island-expansion-in-disputed-waters-1433162877>>, where, from the Vietnamese perspective, he said many of the right things regarding free navigation of the South China Sea.

A Vietnamese military band reciprocated with a rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

—Vu Trong Khanh contributed to this article

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[image: U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter (L) and Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong talk at the party's headquarters in Hanoi June 1, 2015. Carter discussed his call for an end to island-building in the South China Sea in talks on Monday with his Vietnamese counterpart, who said Vietnam had not expanded its islands but had done work to prevent wave erosion. REUTERS/Hoang Dinh Nam/Pool - RTR4YCMV]

U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter (L) and Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong talk at the party's headquarters in Hanoi June 1, 2015. Carter discussed his call for an end to island-building in the South China Sea in talks on Monday with his...
 REUTERS/HOANG DINH NAM/POOL - RTR4YCMV

Vietnam's Communist Party chief will visit the United States next week in a landmark trip that could prove pivotal in Washington's bid to bolster its Asian alliances in the back yard of an increasingly assertive China
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Nguyen Phu Trong will meet U.S. President Barack Obama at the White House as the former war enemies mark two decades of calibrated engagement since the normalization of ties that have expanded rapidly in the past year.

That meeting would skirt protocol because party boss Trong is not part of a government, but a senior state department official said Obama saw the visit as crucial and was expecting a "very big picture conversation".
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"He is the top guy... It's a pretty big event," the official told reporters.

"There was a broad agreement that it made sense to treat him and treat the visit as the visit of the top leader of the country.

"We don't view the meeting as a reward for the Vietnamese. We view it much more as continuing engagement."

The July 6-10 trip follows a year-long charm offensive by the United States launched as a fierce row over sovereignty erupted in May 2014 between communist neighbors Vietnam and China, which saw relations sink to their worst in three decades.

Washington capitalized, shifting gear in its diplomacy after China parked an oil rig unannounced in what Vietnam considers its domain.
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"The relationship with Vietnam has moved to a very different place and part of that has been actually energized by China's actions," Deputy Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said last week.

"We now have more countries in Southeast Asia looking to the United States and striking stronger relationships with us than we've ever had, less because of what we've done than because of what China has done."

LINGERING SUSPICION

A lot is riding on a visit that the United States hopes will build more trust. Experts say progressives in Vietnam favor closer U.S. ties, but suspicion lingers among conservatives about Washington's end-game.

The United States has been courting the communist leadership with visits to

Vietnam by some of the biggest names in Washington: top General Martin Dempsey, Secretary of State John Kerry, Defense Secretary Ash Carter, Senator John McCain, Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and several legislators.

Former President Bill Clinton met Trong, 71, on Thursday and was guest at an Independence Day celebration in Hanoi, where he described the 1995 normalization of ties as "one of the most important achievements of my presidency."

A lot has changed since.

Vietnam is Southeast Asia's biggest exporter to the United States, with which it shares annual trade of \$35 billion. Both countries are among 12 negotiating a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) accord covering combined GDP of \$28 trillion.

A lethal arms embargo on Vietnam was eased in October, allowing joint military exercises and \$18 million in loans for U.S. patrol boats. It also allowed consultations on defense procurement, as Hanoi seeks to build up a deterrent to counter Beijing's expansionism in the South China Sea.

Vietnam has been speaking to Western defense companies, including U.S. firms Lockheed Martin Corp
<<http://www.reuters.com/finance/stocks/overview?symbol=LMT>> and Boeing, according to informed sources.

But scope for deals could be limited until the embargo is fully lifted. Washington says that requires greater improvements in Vietnam's human rights record.

Ernest Bower, a Southeast Asia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Trong's visit was "historic and timely" and aimed to break down trust barriers.

"The two countries ... are about to enter a new era of deeper cooperation in areas such as security, political and diplomatic alignment," he said.

"The countries' political leaders must develop a level of trust and mutual respect. That is what this visit is about."

(Additional reporting Idrees Ali in Washington and David Brunnstrom in Washington; Editing by Mike Collett-White
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President Obama to host head of Vietnam's Communist Party at White House
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[image: The US and Vietnam national flag flutter on masts during the welcoming ceremony of US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter at the Ministry of Defence in Hanoi in June, 2015.]

The US and Vietnam national flag flutter on masts during the welcoming ceremony of US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter at the Ministry of Defence in Hanoi in June, 2015.* Photo: AFP*

Washington: The head of Vietnam's Communist Party will meet President Barack Obama next week, the first party chief to visit the US as the two countries seek closer ties 40 years after they fought a war.

Obama will welcome Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong on Tuesday, the White House said in an emailed statement. While Trong holds no government rank, he's deemed to be the state leader under the constitution.

Obama's meeting with Trong is a break with protocol, said Alexander Vuving,

a security analyst at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Hawaii. The visit underscores the converging interests of the two countries at a time of China's assertiveness over a territorial dispute with Vietnam in the South China Sea, and reflects a gradual shift in strategy among Vietnam's Communist elite.

[image: Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (3rd L) shakes hands with former US President Bill Clinton at the Party headquarters in Hanoi July 2, 2015. President Obama will host Trong at the White House on Tuesday.]

Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (3rd L) shakes hands with former US President Bill Clinton at the Party headquarters in Hanoi July 2, 2015. President Obama will host Trong at the White House on Tuesday.* Photo: Reuters*

Trong, 71, said in written answers to questions that Vietnam would prioritise ties with the US "as one of the most important partners in our foreign policy." Economic and security links have grown even as the US continues to press Vietnam to improve its record on human rights. Advertisement

"I do hope this is a chance for our two sides to have an open and frank discussion on issues where differences still exist," Trong said. "This would enhance mutual understanding, narrow the differences and gradually build up trust between us to add more substance and efficiency to long-term relations between our two countries."

'Mutual Respect'

Trong said he will use his US trip to discuss issues including the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact, security cooperation and climate change. Obama will discuss ways to strengthen the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, in addition to talking about the trade accord, human rights and bilateral defense cooperation, the White House said.

Bilateral trade between the countries soared to \$US36 billion (\$47.88 billion) last year from \$US451 million (\$599.89 million) in 1995, according to the US Census Bureau. The countries are cooperating more on the strategic front: The US is providing Vietnam with six patrol boats, part of an \$US18 million (\$23.94 million) military aid package.

Last year the US partially lifted a ban on the sale of weapons to Vietnam, allowing transfers of nonlethal arms. Trong said the fact the US is "working to fully remove the ban in the future is a strong testimony of our mutual trust."

The interests of the US and Vietnam became more aligned when China placed an oil rig in waters near the contested Paracel Islands last year, triggering clashes between boats and anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam. Tensions have also risen over China's reclamation of reefs in the South China Sea, even as its Communist neighbour remains by far Vietnam's largest trading partner.

Tipping Point

"They have to reach out to the US," Vuving said by phone, speaking of Vietnam. "They need to do something to strengthen Vietnam's capability to stand up to China. It has reached a tipping point."

Trong said Vietnam "appreciates" statements from the US supporting a peaceful approach to settling disputes between claimant states to the South China Sea, through which some of the world's busiest shipping lanes run.

"We are all aware of the strategic location of the East Sea," he said, using Vietnam's term for the South China Sea. "I hope that the US will continue to have appropriate voice and actions to contribute to peaceful settlement of disputes in the East Sea in accordance with international law."

Trong is viewed as friendlier toward China than the US, and thus his visit to the US is even more significant, Le Dang Doanh, an economist and former government adviser in Hanoi, said by phone. While Vietnamese leaders have increased their meetings with US officials, they also often visit China.

Human rights

"People can change to suit new situations," Doanh said. "We should see more progress in the cooperation between Vietnam and the US, and that will be good for both sides."

The countries are willing to navigate differences on issues such as human rights for the sake of stronger ties, Vuving said.

Vietnam held about 125 political prisoners at the end of 2014, fewer than in previous years, in part because of a drop in convictions, according to the US State Department.

Trong's visit comes as parties to the US-led Pacific trade pact seek to renew momentum for a deal. Asian governments have welcomed the US Senate's passage of legislation granting Obama fast-track trade-negotiating authority.

Vietnam and other countries are working to conclude talks on the TPP at the earliest possible time, Trong said.

"We are aware that as a developing country with a lower level of development compared to other partner countries in the TPP, Vietnam needs to make greater efforts to improve the legal system, investment policies and procedures in order to create a business environment more conducive to foreign investment," he said.

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