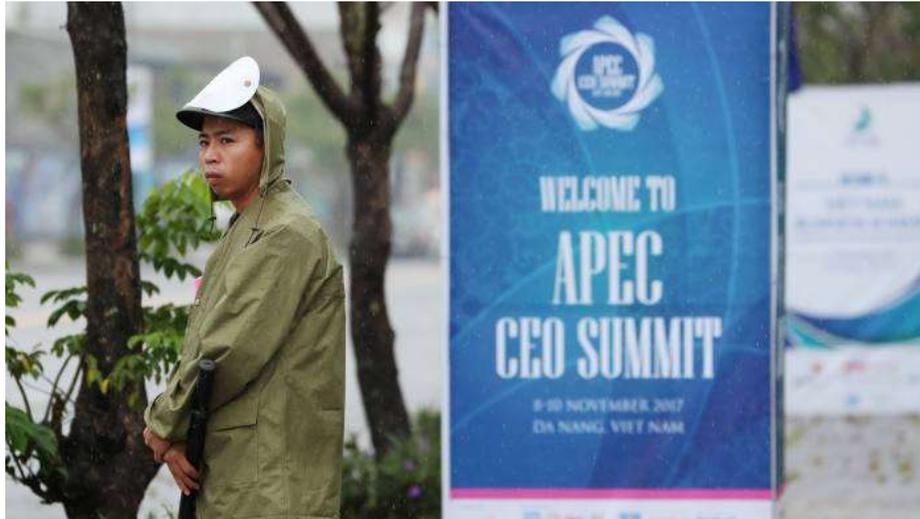


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Danang: from Agent Orange to Apec

Vietnam's summit city awaits Trump, Xi and Putin for trade and security talks

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Focus on Vietnam: trade, political and security issues are likely to top the agenda at this week's Apec summit in Danang © Bloomberg

From the top of Danang's 34-storey administrative building, local official Nguyen Cong points to sites of foreign landings — French colonists in 1858 on the banks of the River Han, then US marines at Xuan Thieu beach in 1965.

This week the central Vietnamese port city is preparing for another kind of invasion as it prepares to hold the annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, which groups 21 countries from Chile to Papua New Guinea.

With trade, political and security issues topping the agenda, US president Donald Trump, China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin are among the foreign leaders due to attend.

This is the biggest diplomatic event of Vietnam in 2017, and it's the biggest international event ever organised in Danang," says Nguyen Ngoc Tuan, vice-chairman of the city's governing people's committee. "It's a very precious opportunity . . . to advance the image of our young city to the outside world."

After the Apec meeting Mr Trump will fly to Hanoi for bilateral meetings with Vietnamese president Tran Dai Quang and other government officials, before heading to the Philippines as part of an extended Asian tour.

The meeting will be a global showcase both for Vietnam, whose economy is on track to expand nearly 7 per cent this year, and Danang, which is often overshadowed by the northern and southern metropolises of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.



Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang, right, meets Justin Trudeau, Canadian prime minister, in Hanoi ahead of the Apec meeting © AFP

The atmospherics ahead of the meeting, however, have been inauspicious. Typhoon Damrey in recent days battered southern and central Vietnam, causing heavy rains and flooding in Danang and the rest of the region and leaving at least 27 people dead.

The meeting will be overshadowed by regional anxieties over trade, and scepticism or anger over the changing role of the US — traditionally seen in Vietnam and the rest of the region as a counterweight to China — under Mr Trump.

At the previous Apec meeting, held in Lima in November 2016, Mr Xi championed China as a guardian of the pro-free trade liberal order at a time when Mr Trump was preparing to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact.



Notwithstanding the tensions, officials in Danang are eager to make a positive impression. “There will not be so many opportunities again for Danang to host delegations again for national leaders like Trump and Putin, and leaders of big corporations,” says Nguyen Tien Quang, director of the Danang branch of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry. “This is a golden opportunity for Danang.”

To prepare, Danang in May inaugurated a new international airport terminal, and has invested millions of dollars in roads and tunnels meant to ease the traffic for the more than 10,000 people officials say will attend.

Some 400 black limousines and white minibuses are lined along the city’s riverfront to transport delegates and businesspeople from Alibaba, Pfizer, Facebook and Airbnb, who are expected in town for the meeting and a chief executive summit that Mr Trump is due to address. There will not be so many opportunities again for Danang to host delegations again for national leaders like Trump and Putin, and leaders of big corporations. Nguyen Tien Quang, director of the Danang branch of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry

If this event is successful, we expect that there will be more international events like this in Danang,” says Bui Thi Lan Phuong, a sales director for the car rental company Avis. “Our roads, hotels, organisations — everything is all ready for big and important international conferences.”

Outside Vietnam, Danang’s name is associated with some of the darkest chapters of America’s war in Indochina, when the US used its air base there to store Agent Orange, the defoliant chemical blamed for causing cancer, birth defects and other health problems among large numbers of Vietnamese civilians. A joint Vietnamese-US programme to clean contaminated soil is still under way.

Now the city is hoping to make its name as an efficient and orderly regional hub with tidy infrastructure and clean streets, which city officials strive to keep clear of beggars, homeless people and drug users under a programme that ruling Communist party officials call the “five yeses and three nos”.

Danang has some way to go to catch up with Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in attracting business. According to the Danang branch of the VCCI, the city has attracted some \$3bn of foreign investment in about 400 projects to date. However, apart from a Coca-Cola bottling operation and a Hyatt resort, the city has thus far failed to attract many top-drawer investors.



A child helps sweeps away rain from Typhoon Damrey in Hoi An. Nearby Danang is hoping to make its name as an efficient and orderly regional hub with tidy infrastructure and clean streets © AFP

Local officials say the city receives 6m visitors a year, 1.5m of whom are foreigners, including backpacking tourists heading to the nearby historic capital of Hue and bijou heritage city of Hoi An.

Nguyen Minh Tu, general director of a private real estate company, says that if Ho Chi Minh City is the New York of Vietnam, Danang is like Boston. “It’s cultural, it has people chilling out on the beach,” he says. “It’s more historical.”

What’s more, he says, “the people are nicer here”.