

U.S. will have to work hard to win over Vietnam's conservatives

Anti-American sentiments remain entrenched among certain groups

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As Southeast Asian leaders, including Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, prepare to gather in Washington for a summit on May 12 hosted by U.S. President Joe Biden, much is being made of U.S. efforts to build stronger ties with Hanoi.

But despite a burgeoning bilateral relationship and rosy public opinion polls indicating high favorability among Vietnamese toward the U.S., anti-American sentiments are likely to remain entrenched in certain pockets of the population.

As the Ukraine war drags on, pro-Russia narratives online provide the latest glimpse into this dynamic. A content analysis of social media discussions by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute shows that pro-Russia narratives in Vietnamese cyberspace are driven chiefly by, among several other factors, underlying anti-U.S. worldviews.

Such sentiments are intertwined with criticism of the U.S.-led imperialist agenda among Vietnamese, who have still not forgiven America for the Vietnam War. While the Vietnamese public has generally shown a tendency to appear receptive to the U.S.'s online messaging, there have been some not-so-nice surprises for Uncle Sam.

Last March, the U.S. State Department named Pham Doan Trang, a high-profile Vietnamese dissident who was jailed for nine years for her "anti-state" activities, as a winner of the International Women of Courage prize.

In response to a Facebook post by the U.S. embassy in Hanoi to announce the award, scores of Vietnamese netizens lamented that it was misleading and condescending for the U.S. to foist its perceptions, as well as its democratic and human rights values, on Vietnamese society.

Also in March, another Facebook post by the U.S. embassy in Hanoi claimed that Washington has never deployed chemical weapons. The move was part of the U.S. administration's coordinated efforts to counter what it labeled Russian disinformation in the Ukraine conflict.

But the post needled Vietnamese netizens who pointed their fingers at what they called American lies and hypocrisy after it sprayed 80 million liters of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange over large swaths of southern Vietnam during the war.

In a country where the national government has constantly sought to exert increased control over social media, it is hard to pinpoint exactly who was behind those anti-American narratives. It could have been Vietnam's state-sponsored cyber troops, or zealous internet users disparaging the U.S. worldviews, or a combination of both.

What is less debatable is that such narratives dovetail with the default position of the Vietnam Communist Party, and its conservative faction, in particular, on sticking points that continue to color U.S.-Vietnam ties: ideology, human rights and the baggage of the Vietnam War itself.

Those anti-America narratives seen online likely attest to a convenient niche of public opinion that represents the conservative segments of both the Vietnamese party-state and the wider Vietnamese society.

All this should serve as a reminder for advocates of the growing U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement that the specter of Vietnamese conservatives cannot be underestimated or trifled with.

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, although it is somewhat simplistic and binary to cast every debate on Vietnam's foreign policy as a bargain between two opposing camps within the Communist Party, which are conservatives and reformists, such labels may still be appropriate when it comes to characterizing certain bigwig factions and the foreign policy trajectories they endorse.

Reformists tend to prioritize closer ties with the U.S. and the West, as well as economic liberalization. Conservatives, who are mostly from the defense-security-ideology wings of the party, prize regime security above all else.

The conservative faction has harped on about the threat of a "peaceful evolution," which alludes to perceived U.S.-led backing of pro-democracy dissidents and the promotion of human rights values in order to undermine or even topple the Vietnam Communist Party, to sow suspicions of closer ties with Washington.

Such distrust so percolated the thinking of Vietnamese hard-liners that they were able to hobble negotiations and frustrate progress on a bilateral U.S.-Vietnam trade agreement until 2000.

By the early 2010s, Vietnam's top propaganda organ identified several U.S.-funded cultural and educational initiatives as part of the peaceful evolution scheme. Such suspicions grew to the point that in 2013 when the two countries forged a comprehensive partnership, Vietnamese leaders needed assurance from the U.S. that Washington would not seek regime change in Hanoi.

But in the face of China's muscles-flexing, growing U.S.-Vietnam rapport, coupled with the dwindling sway of the conservative faction, have seen that level of distrust ebb away.

Still, an element of distrust of the U.S. intent is here to stay and will always serve as a ready issue that can be exploited at any time. This scenario could become all the more potent after the Communist Party's conservative wing regained its clout in the Politburo, the highest decision-making body in the country, at last year's national congress.

As public sentiments in Vietnam on the Ukraine crisis suggest, America's much-touted role as a global security guarantor has yet again been thrown into question. At least, that is how the conservatives are portraying it. Still, suspicions of the U.S. agenda by Vietnamese hard-liners are not utterly groundless.

Against this backdrop, the million-dollar question for champions of U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement is how to advance bilateral ties forward without ruffling conservative feathers, a treacherous line to straddle.

One approach to winning over conservatives to closer U.S.-Vietnam ties would be a relationship characterized by a more discreet and sensitive approach to differences in human rights, a serious treatment of America's war legacy and where the regime's security is guaranteed.

An obvious caveat, however, is that all this is easier said than done.