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Anti-American Propaganda in Vietnam

Despite growing cooperation with Washington, an anti-U.S. streak runs deep among communist leaders and the general public alike.

By Christelle Nguyen

On January 11, 2020, Hanh, who was living in Long Bien district in Hanoi, was unable to contact her parents all day long, either by phone or on the internet. They were living about 65 kilometers away in Dong Tam, a rural commune in My Duc district. Even though Hanh was on tenterhooks, she decided not to visit them in person.

Indeed, Hanh realized that the unstable connection was far from accidental. A regular reader of Facebook pages on social issues, she was aware that the internet in a certain neighborhoods could be slowed down or even disabled when sensitive political events occurred.

Just a day before, in Dong Tam, Le Dinh Kinh, a village leader, a former commune head, and a senior member of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) who led protests against the local authorities' confiscation of farmland, was shot to death in his bedroom in the dead of the night.

In the mainstream media, a different version of the incident emerged. It was reported that three on-duty policemen died in a violent clash with alleged terrorists, led by the 84-year-old Kinh, who were threatening law enforcement officers with a grenade. In a closely guarded trial, his two sons were charged with murder and sentenced to death. Another 27 villagers faced harsh punishment, ranging from probation to life imprisonment.

A few days later, Hanh, who attended both the neighborhood meeting and local party meetings, to receive updates on national and local policies, heard from different community leaders that Kinh had received money from the United States to resist the government.

"Mr. Kinh has more than 50 years of Communist Party membership. How can he be easily bought off by the U.S.?" questioned Hanh.

Thanh, a 65-year-old resident in Tay Ho district, described a similar experience. Her community leader told her that Kinh exemplified morally degraded officials that embraced self-evolution (*tu chuyen hoa*) within the CPV.

"I am clueless whether Uncle Kinh received the money from the U.S. But I also don't know why there are too many hostile forces," said Thanh.

For frequent followers of Vietnamese media outlets, this narrative is all too common: The United States is behind "reactionary forces" or "hostile forces" that constitute decentralized democratic movements. These groups attempt to deny the revolutionary achievements of the CPV, destroy the Vietnamese state, and disrupt the national solidarity. The capitalistic United States is supposedly motivated in these efforts by its deep-rooted shame over its defeat to Vietnam, as well as Washington's ever-lasting ambition to erase the remaining socialist states from the global map.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and 10th anniversary of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership. Vietnam is now one of the leading regional partners of the U.S., alongside India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, and some of the Pacific island nations. The U.S. is currently Vietnam's second-largest trading partner after China, while Vietnam is among the top 10 trading partners of the U.S. Despite the upward trajectory, the Vietnamese government has made repeated attempts to remind its citizens of its ideological stance, and **Vietnamese leaders have hardly missed an opportunity to peddle anti-American narratives, both online and offline.**

Affinity and Amity

Various recent studies show that Vietnamese people in general perceive the United States [positively](#). Among Southeast Asian elites, Vietnamese experts are the most supportive of U.S. influence in the region. Like China, another nominally communist yet massively capitalistic country, Vietnam calls the United States “My” (literally meaning “beautiful”), and its people hold American products and values in high regard.

Most young people, in particular, look at the United States with affection. In 2022, Vietnam became the fifth-highest source of students going to study in the U.S. According to the report “Open Doors,” released in November 2019 by the Institute of International Education, Vietnamese students’ enrollment in U.S. universities contributes around \$1 billion to the U.S. economy each year. Portraits of successful Vietnamese applicants to top U.S. universities, outstanding scorers on U.S. exams, and winners of U.S. scholarships feature prominently in Vietnam’s mainstream media.

The COVID-19 pandemic in particular saw numerous signals that both sides have been edging toward each other. The United States was one of the biggest donors of vaccines to Vietnam. On April 16, the Vietnamese government gifted 200,000 made-in-Vietnam masks to the U.S. government and people, in addition to another donation of 50,000 medical masks to the White House by then-Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

The bonhomie between Vietnam and its old enemy did not go unnoticed in third countries. A Hanoi-based senior diplomat from a non-Western country that has long established relations with Vietnam, who declined to be identified in this article, said that during the pandemic, the Vietnamese government prioritized gifting masks to Western countries.

“Why didn’t the Vietnamese government give masks to friends that supported them during the anti-American war? They seemed to forget the long-term friends in need,” complained the diplomat.

Trust Deficit

Upgrading the U.S.-Vietnam relationship to a strategic partnership was first put forward by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her visit to Hanoi in 2010 and has since been reiterated by numerous U.S. senior officials, including Vice President Kamala Harris. The Vietnamese-speaking U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Marc Knapper, has also been upbeat about the prospect.

Nevertheless, it does not seem to be high on the agenda of the CPV, **which only calls 14 countries its strategic partners in addition to its three comprehensive strategic partners (China, India, and Russia).** A strategic partnership is often initiated by a dominant actor to create an

informal alliance with like-minded states. However, Vietnamese and U.S. leaders are not of one mind when it comes to their relationship.

The United States is doubtless the most outspoken critic of Vietnam's human rights record. Numerous Vietnamese human rights activists, whom the Vietnamese government labels as "bad elements," have been prevented from meeting with U.S. leaders during trips to Vietnam. In addition, Vietnamese winners of human rights awards bestowed by the U.S. government are not only uncelebrated but also tarnished in Vietnam as "bad mouthing the Communist regime."

When Pham Doan Trang, a high-profile Vietnamese activist who has been jailed for nine years for her "anti-state" activities, was announced as a winner of the International Women of Courage prize, many Vietnamese media outlets were mobilized to blemish the award. Spokesperson of the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry Le Thu Hang was quoted as saying: "Vietnam holds that the U.S. Department of State's presentation of the award to Pham Thi Doan Trang, a person who has violated Vietnamese law and has been brought to trial and is serving her prison sentence, is a subjective act that is neither appropriate for nor conducive to the development of the Vietnam-U.S. relations."

According to a retired U.S. diplomat, "The Marxist-Leninist view I see often in Nhan Dan and other official organs holds that the United States is fundamentally hostile to proletarian socialist regimes, as evidenced by its support 30-some years ago of 'color revolutions.' "

To the CPV, the fact that Vietnam was elected for a 2023-2025 tenure at the United Nations Human Rights Council in late 2022 justified its criticism of the United States and U.S.-based Vietnamese organizations. "Those who distort and reject human rights achievements in Vietnam today are mostly the far-right forces in Western countries, mainly in the U.S., the overseas Vietnamese far-right forces, and local Vietnamese bribed and used by foreign far-right forces to undermine the ideological foundation and socio-political regime in Vietnam," asserted an article titled "Countering the allegation that 'Vietnam's human rights record remains dire' " in the online journal "Political Theory," an "academic" mouthpiece of the CPV.

Since the 1980s, the United States – where many Vietnamese top leaders sent their children to study – has often been described in the national discourses as typifying "capitalism in death throes."

Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Vietnam has been facing threats of U.S. sanctions over its military ties with Moscow, given that around 80 percent of Hanoi's arms are imported from Russia. Vietnam is reliant on Russia for arms imports and oil and gas operations in the South China Sea. Hanoi is also heavily dependent on its giant neighbor-cum-communist brother China for imports. As a result, Hanoi has been unwilling to upset Russia despite Western pressures. At the same time, it is also trying to maintain regular high-level exchanges with Beijing amid China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The pro-Western faction within the CPV has been in decline since the 12th National Congress, and further outpowered by the pro-China ruling faction, as evidenced by the dismissal of the Western-educated Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh, who previously earned his Master's degree at the Fletcher School, Tufts University and served as a diplomat between 1999 and 2003 in New York.

Nguyen Phu Trong, the first general secretary of the CPV to visit the White House in 2015, when the two countries celebrated the 25th anniversary of normalized diplomatic ties, was also

the first foreign leader to pay a visit to China in 2022, after Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term as the head of the Chinese Communist Party. In a joint declaration issued during the visit, both committed to wrestle with external challenges, including “color revolutions” and “criticism of their human rights records.”

“The party/state can only rely on the United States to act in U.S. interest, which may or may not coincide with Vietnam’s interest,” the U.S. diplomat said. “Apparently, [the concern] is whether the U.S. can be trusted to do ‘the right thing’ in case of an existential crisis for the party/state. What kind of crisis? What comes to mind isn’t global warming. It’s aggression by China, perhaps even an Asian replay of the Russia/Ukraine scenario,” the diplomat added.

Even Americans with no government affiliation are subject to suspicion. Quang, whose NGO derives funding largely from U.S. donors, is in charge of dealing with documents for foreign visitors, including reporting to the CPV Central Committee’s Commission for External Relations regarding what they do each given day, where they stay, and what they say. He said that American experts who come to Vietnam on business visas are subject to more scrutiny than other Western visitors.

“Usually it takes us more time to get approval for American guests,” said Quang.

A number of U.S.-funded youth-focused programs have been blackened on domestic media. As part of its soft power policy, the U.S. government has been lavishing free educational programs for young people in Southeast Asia. Founded by former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2013 and funded by the U.S. Department of State, the Young Southeast Asian Leaders’ Initiatives (YSEALI) has become a popular platform for young people in Southeast Asian countries to engage on a wide array of issues, including governance, environmental protection, economic development, civic education, etc.

YSEALI projects, which entail both free-of-charge domestic programs and international exchanges that take place in one of the Southeast Asian countries or the United States, have been looked at with suspicion in Vietnam.

In an article called “The trap of leaders” on an online outlet under the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in March 2022, YSEALI is described as a form of “peaceful evolution” accidentally or intentionally planted in the educational field. According to the article, at least three Vietnamese participants in YSEALI programs were charged with “propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” and “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State... with a view to overthrowing the people’s administration.”

In 2019, 23-year-old Huyen won a small grant of \$1,000 from the U.S. Embassy to organize a student activity. She was hardly aware that she would be accused of involvement with Viet Tan, an exiled Vietnamese political party, due to her engagement with the embassy.

“I was even accused by some neighbors of colluding with Viet Tan, though my activities had nothing to do with politics,” said Huyen, a chemistry major.

She said she had never heard of the political party that is viewed by the CPV as a reactionary force: “I did not know about Viet Tan until my neighbors said so.”

Trang, a member of the YSEALI network and a participant in various programs in Vietnam and the United States, recalled being invited for tea by plainclothes police before and after going on her fully funded trip to “the country of [her] dream.”

“Not just me; my fellows were told not to follow hostile forces,” said Trang.

A Receptive Audience

Though the U.S. is not unpopular in Vietnam, don’t assume there is no audience for anti-American narratives among the Vietnamese public. Older generations lived through the war, and the youth are constantly reminded of American “threats,” despite their detachment from and disinterest in politics.

The CPV derives its legitimacy from its presumed role as the defender of national independence and the unifier of a divided nation. American tourists, who have topped the lists of international visitors to Vietnam for the past decade, can experience stunning natural beauty combined with historical sites that portray war-time hardships and heroism. Like in China, “red tourism” in Vietnam has been actively promoted to recall and reminisce about the revolutionary spirit spearheaded by the CPV leaders.

Party members are among the first audience of the anti-American narratives. Phuong, a 52-year-old civil servant, heard the same thing in her advanced politics class, which she had to take to become a senior teacher of English language at a highly regarded university.

“How can we know [who is a U.S. agent]?” said Phuong, recalling the 1996 **expulsion of senior Politburo member and deputy chairperson of the National Assembly Nguyen Ha Phan, who was tipped to become party chief.** While the mainstream media never officially announced the reason behind his high-profile dismissal, it was rumored that he was a CIA spy.

“If the CIA can place someone in the Politburo, they can buy off anybody,” said Phuong.

The CPV’s narrative of “imperialist-capitalist conspiracy” is relevant and resonant for educated youth. For some beneficiaries of U.S.-funded programs who have been also exposed to anti-American narratives in both media and military training programs, there is a grain of truth in their government’s warnings about the United States. Some elite youths are conscious and critical of the U.S. hegemony and hypocrisy in U.S.-funded exchange programs.

”They [the U.S. organizers] only want to become teachers, instead of equal partners in an exchange,” said Anh, a participant in several U.S.-funded exchange programs.

For 26-year-old Cuong, political motives were very obvious in U.S.-funded programs that he was selected to attend.

“They just wanted to show off power and wealth, generosity and superiority. Not everyone is welcome to the YSEALI program. Only those who know English and dote on American stuff,” said Cuong.

Both Anh and Cuong, who received formal schooling in Hanoi and Can Tho, have witnessed the country’s annual National Unification commemorations. For them, the communist-led anti-American war that their grandparents and parents lived through, known overseas as the Vietnam War, served to repel invaders and to protect their nation. Victory over the powerful Americans has given generations of Vietnamese a sense of identity. The camaraderie of peasants-turned-

soldiers brought about by war-time togetherness was incomparable. Anti-American songs have to be performed regularly on TV to remind people that Vietnam was a victor.

The personal pain of the war is not to be forgotten, either. As Nick Turse explained in his 2013 book “Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam,” the widespread deaths of civilians at the hands of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were by no means the inevitable byproduct of an armed conflict. Among the 65,000 North Vietnamese and 3.8 million South Vietnamese civilian deaths during the war, many were matter-of-factly murdered. Thus, the image of Americans as cruel aggressors has not yet faded in Vietnam.

In addition, four generations of victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam, which many people on both sides have deemed as evidence of chemical warfare, can testify to the questionable goodwill of the United States. While the U.S. dispenses billions of dollars annually to compensate dioxin-affected American veterans, it has not been doing nearly enough for Vietnamese victims. The unsuspecting victims who fail to lead a normal life know that their suffering was brought about by the American presence in their country.

Those who survived Operation Linebacker II, an aerial bombing campaign that took place on December 18-29, 1972, known in Vietnamese as “12 days and nights” or “Operation Dien Bien Phu in the air,” remember that the U.S. airplanes were shooting them instead of routing communism. They might not understand the “peaceful evolution” propagandized today by their government but still remember the horrors of the war and widespread hunger that came in its wake.

It wasn't just an ideological war, but also a people's war that wended its way into every nook and cranny of the S-shaped country and its people's collective memory. Many people, both young and old, still celebrate joyful personal events with the song “As If There Were Uncle Ho on the Great Victory Day.”

The scars of war run deep long after the shooting stops, and for Vietnamese the sincerity of the United States is not to be taken for granted. This lingering distrust is not felt only by the top leaders of the country.

GUEST AUTHOR

Christelle Nguyen

Christelle Nguyen is a development researcher based in Southeast Asia. Her interests include East Asian politics and tech diplomacy