



Vietnam Communist Party Chief's Visit to the United States: Key Issues to Watch

James Bellacqua, CNA China Studies¹

CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's upcoming trip to the United States is a potentially significant development in a bilateral relationship that—for all it has accomplished in the last two decades—still has room to grow.

General Secretary Nguyen's visit is noteworthy for several reasons. It marks the first time that a sitting general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam has visited the United States, and it coincides with the 20th anniversary of the July 1995 normalization of diplomatic ties between Washington and Hanoi. Both governments will be hoping that the substantive achievements of the visit will be as significant as its symbolic importance. To that end, there are several issue areas on which the countries could achieve meaningful progress:

Trade. Last week's passage of trade promotion authority by the U.S. Congress overcomes a major obstacle to the long-stalled negotiations over the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Without trade promotion authority, the prospects for the TPP in the United States were widely viewed as bleak. Hanoi, for its part, has long been one of the strongest proponents of a TPP agreement.

With the Obama administration hoping for the conclusion of TPP negotiations with all 12 prospective partners by the end of the year, there is reason to be optimistic that the United States and Vietnam will announce a successful conclusion to their own bilateral TPP negotiations during General Secretary Nguyen's visit.

Security Affairs. Another issue that General Secretary Nguyen is likely to discuss with President Obama is security affairs, particularly the long-standing U.S. embargo on the sale of lethal armaments to Vietnam. Hanoi views the embargo as an outdated relic that it is incompatible with the two sides' shared vision of a "comprehensive partnership."

Last October, the U.S. State Department announced the partial relaxation of the embargo to permit the sale of equipment to enhance Hanoi's maritime surveillance capabilities, which signified the importance that Washington places on enhancing Vietnamese maritime domain awareness. Several U.S. defense contractors have already traveled to Hanoi to discuss possible orders with the Vietnamese military, and momentum is building on both sides for the embargo to be lifted.

Hanoi, of course, is hopeful that an agreement on lifting the embargo can be reached during Nguyen's visit. Hanoi's abysmal human rights record, however, has historically been the main impediment to lifting the embargo entirely, as Washington has been leery of losing leverage to influence the human rights situation in the country. How the issue will play out during the visit is unclear, but it will certainly come up, and a complete lifting of the embargo is not out of the question.

Reciprocal visit. One area where an announcement does appear likely is that of a reciprocal visit by President Obama to Vietnam in late 2015. High-level visits by senior government and military officials have helped lay the foundation for the development of bilateral ties over the past two decades. Moreover, President Obama's two predecessors both visited Hanoi during their final two years in office.

During U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's trip to Hanoi last month, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang formally extended an invitation to Obama to visit Vietnam. In addition to the timing of the visit—to commemorate the normalization of bilateral ties—a visit by President Obama to Vietnam in 2015 would send a strong message that the United States values Vietnam as an important regional partner as it continues its ongoing effort to rebalance to the Asia-Pacific.

¹ James Bellacqua is a senior research scientist in CNA's China Studies Division. He can be reached at 703-824-2221 or bellacj@cna.org.