



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# How Lifting the U.S. Arms Embargo on Vietnam Matters

On May 23, 2016, President Barack Obama announced in Hanoi that the United States was completely lifting its 50-year embargo on weapons sales to Vietnam. The move is widely seen as a triumph of geopolitics and economics over ideology. For two decades after the two former enemies restored their diplomatic relations, the arms ban had been used as a leverage to promote human rights in Vietnam. It was now removed without any visible progress in the way Vietnam's Communist regime dealt with dissidents and the freedoms of their citizens. But it allows the United States to arm Vietnam and benefit from weapons sales as both countries are increasingly alarmed by China's expansion in the South China Sea and Vietnam is aggressively modernizing its military.

Against this background, questions arise as to how the lifting of the embargo will affect Vietnam's arms purchases and human rights situations. Will Vietnam soon buy U.S. weapons in a large scale? Does the unconditional termination of the embargo encourage Hanoi to further suppress human rights? Contrary to some expectations, the arms ban's end will not be a windfall for U.S. arms producers, nor will it be a boost for Vietnam's repressive regime. However, it will have long-term impacts on the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship and bolster Obama's application of soft power to the region.

## The Vietnamese Military After the Arms Embargo

Several factors influence Vietnam's decision-making in procurement of foreign arms, but two major factors are suitability to Vietnam's needs and price. As a small country facing a giant neighbor, Vietnam has adopted a strategy of asymmetric deterrence vis-à-vis China. What Hanoi is to buy must fit in this strategy and be well suited to the geography of Vietnam's defense. In this respect, American weapons are not particularly better than Russian or other non-U.S. equipment. When price comes into consideration, U.S. weapons can hardly compete with their Russian counterparts, unless they are from the Pentagon's excess defense articles (EDA) program. *Vietnam is reportedly seeking to buy F-16 fighter aircraft from this program, which in 2011 gave Indonesia 24 refurbished F-16s and associated equipment,* parts, training, and logistic support for an estimated cost of \$750 million. By comparison, Vietnam's contract for 12 Su-MK2 fighter aircraft from Russia in 2013 cost \$450 million.

*These factors suggest Vietnam will buy U.S. weapons on a gradual basis*

Ideological concerns as well as bureaucratic culture and interests also play a significant role in Vietnam's arms purchases. *Conservatives who dominate the Vietnamese military* still do not trust the software that guides U.S. hardware. They also do not want to see U.S. personnel staying for weeks or months inside Vietnamese bases, even if only to provide technical support. As Vietnam's bureaucratic culture is closer to Russia's and farther from America's, it is much easier for Vietnamese officials to negotiate with Russian partners, while interaction between Vietnamese and U.S. military officials is fraught with misunderstanding. This disposition is further reinforced by rent-seeking, which has become pervasive in Vietnam's government. Another bias against American weapons is the difficulty to integrate them into Vietnam's operational and logistic systems, which are geared to support Soviet and Russian weapons.

Nevertheless, Vietnam wants to diversify the sources of its weapons. It does not want to put all its eggs in one basket, especially when Russia is cozying up with China and has recently veered closer to Beijing's position, and farther from Vietnam's, *in the South China Sea dispute*. America's ending of its arms embargo against Vietnam does not only open the U.S. market to Vietnamese procurement; it also allows Vietnam to access other Western sources which were previously out of Vietnam's reach due to Washington's opposition. A case in point is Vietnam's failed attempt to purchase Mirage-2000 combat aircraft from France in the 1990s. Now that the ban has been removed, Japan is emerging as a potential supplier. Vietnam is reportedly asking to buy retired P-3C anti-submarine aircraft from Japan. While the P-3C is a derivative of the American P-3 Orion,

it is more attractive to the Vietnamese because it is far cheaper than the U.S. plane and training with the Japanese is easier ideologically. When these factors are combined, they suggest Vietnam will buy U.S. weapons on a gradual basis. The lifting of the U.S. arms ban has given Vietnam more options in the global market, and the new options include not only American but also other Western suppliers. Arms producers from U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, France, Germany, Britain, and Israel are also potential beneficiaries of the U.S. decision.

### **Strategic Rationale for Lifting Arms Embargo**

At a more strategic level, America's move has redefined the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. As President Obama tweeted after he lifted the embargo, "[Today, Vietnam and the United States are partners.](#)"

## *Removal of arms ban will elevate U.S.-Vietnam relations to a high plateau*

who prefer close ties with America and the West, and wins many moderates, who stand between the modernizers and the conservatives, to the pro-U.S. camp.

In Vietnam's internal debate, the arms ban had served as a clear evidence of Washington's hostility to Hanoi. Even after the two countries declared in 2013 that they were "comprehensive partners," by citing the U.S. sanctions, conservatives continued to be able to convince many in Vietnam's ruling elite that America was still an adversary. As the arms ban was removed without explicit preconditions, Vietnam's conservatives would find difficulty denying it was a gesture of goodwill. In other words, the unconditional termination of the embargo has soft power effects. It strengthens the position of Vietnam's modernizers,

The removal of the arms ban will elevate U.S.-Vietnam relations to a higher plateau and boost bilateral cooperation in all sectors. It makes possible that Vietnam and the United States will become strategic partners. It also paves the way for the two countries to join forces and redress the regional equilibrium, which is a prerequisite for lasting peace and prosperity in the region. More immediately, the arms ban lifting is likely to be followed by the decision to grant the U.S. military wider access to Vietnamese facilities on the South China Sea coast.

The lifting of the arms ban will also help improve human rights situation in Vietnam. This won't work at one stroke but it will work indirectly and in the long term. As Obama was in Vietnam to demonstrate America's friendship, the regime's secret police continued to harass and prevented several Vietnamese from meeting him, despite the fact they were invited by the U.S. president. However, by changing Vietnam's perception of America and Hanoi's political landscape, Obama's decision, in combination

with the hosting of Vietnam's Communist Party boss Nguyen Phu Trong in the White House last year and other costly signals of U.S. friendship, will only make the Hanoi leadership more amenable to liberal ideas.

## **Conclusion**

The effects of the arms ban lifting are more strategic than operational, and they bear fruit in the long term rather than the short term. While its motives may be more geopolitical than ideological, its will have far-reaching consequences not only for geopolitics but also for the ideological nature of Vietnam's ruling regime. Among its long-term effects there will be the improvement of human rights in Vietnam.

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The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. This Policy Brief series is supported by a generous grant from the MacArthur Foundation for a project that explores the linkages between energy security and maritime strategies in the Indo-Pacific.

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