

US Military Returns to Vietnam

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President Barack Obama's announcement in Hanoi on Monday that Washington is lifting its four-decade-old arms embargo on Vietnam is described by the media, and Obama himself, as a decisive step in the "normalization" of relations between the US and Vietnam.

That process has been ongoing since the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1995. On the military front, the US agreed to sell Vietnam non-lethal military hardware in 2007, and last year it agreed to provide the Vietnamese coastguard with five unarmed patrol boats.

While there are no immediate prospects for massive arms deals between Washington and Hanoi, the US gesture is aimed at drawing Vietnam more closely into the orbit of US imperialism and the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." It seeks in Vietnam, as in Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Australia and elsewhere in Asia, the creation of a string of military alliances and bases to contain and ultimately wage war against China. The Pentagon wants the right to utilize the same bases it built up during the Vietnam War and to pre-position military hardware in preparation for such a conflict.

What has stood in the way of "normalization" until now is the bloody history of US imperialism's encounter with Vietnam. Between 1964 and 1975, the US military unleashed violence of near-genocidal proportions against the Vietnamese people.

The war, which cost the lives of at least 3 million Vietnamese, saw the deployment of a US military force that at its height numbered more than 536,000 troops, 58,000 of whom died in Vietnam. By the time the war was over, US warplanes had dropped more than three times as much explosives on Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia as were dropped all across Europe and Asia during the Second World War. In addition, some 20 million gallons of toxic chemicals were dumped on the Vietnamese countryside, turning at least 10 percent of it into wasteland and leaving behind a health crisis that still inflicts cruel deformities upon Vietnamese newborns.

The politicians, both Democratic and Republican, and the senior military commanders who planned and prosecuted this devastating war of aggression were responsible for the worst war crimes committed since Hitler's Third Reich, though, of course, none of them have faced the equivalent of a Nuremberg Tribunal.

Despite US imperialism's massive military power, it suffered a humiliating defeat, caused in the first instance by the immense heroism and sacrifice of the Vietnamese people. This was combined with the overwhelming hostility to the war and the growth of militancy within the American working class that made it impossible to continue the imperialist intervention.

The image of the last American personnel scrambling onto helicopters on the US Embassy

rooftop in Saigon in April 1975 remains an indelible expression of the historic crisis and decline of US imperialism.

That 41 years later Vietnam is being drawn into the preparations for an even more bloody and catastrophic US war against China is an expression of the tragic fate of the Vietnamese Revolution.

Vietnam's evolution in the aftermath of the US war provides an historical vindication—in the negative—of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. The liberation of this oppressed country from imperialist domination could, in the end, be accomplished only through a revolution of the working class, leading the oppressed masses behind it. Moreover, none of the immense economic problems confronting a war-shattered Vietnam could be resolved on the basis of nationalist policies such as those advanced by the Stalinist leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). In the epoch of the domination of the world capitalist economy over all national economies, socialist transformation, while beginning on the national soil, could be completed only on the international arena.

The isolation of the Vietnamese Revolution was a function not only of the VCP's Stalinist perspective of "socialism in one country," but even more decisively of the betrayals of a series of revolutionary upheavals internationally at the hands of Stalinist, social democratic and trade union leaderships during the same period. From the May-June events in France in 1968 through to the collapse of Franco's fascist regime in Spain in 1975, these leaderships all worked to prevent the revolutionary mobilization of the working class and to re-stabilize capitalist rule.

In the end, the Vietnamese Stalinist bureaucracy took the same road as its Chinese counterpart, adopting its *Doi Moi* (renovation) policy in 1986 and declaring the creation of a "socialist-oriented market economy" as its goal.

Vietnam has been transformed into a cheap labor platform for transnational capital, with its working class subjected to grinding exploitation and wage levels that are half those prevailing in China. Corruption pervades the ruling party, which represents the interests of foreign capital and the emerging financial elite within Vietnam itself, while using police state measures to ensure labor discipline.

The Obama administration is attempting to draw Vietnam more tightly into its economic orbit through its participation in the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), whose principal aim is to counter China's economic influence in the region. The agreement's intended effects are to remove the remaining fetters on US capitalist investment and trade, while tearing down what remains of Vietnam's state-owned enterprises.

China remains Vietnam's number one trading partner, even as the US is its top export market. The ruling bureaucracy, while tilting toward Washington, still attempts to maintain a delicate balancing between the two.

The increasingly aggressive provocations being organized by the US military in the South China Sea and Washington's drive to stoke tensions between China and neighboring states over control of islands, reefs and territorial waters will inevitably upset this balancing act, dragging Vietnam once again into the horrors of war.

Only the working class can prevent such a catastrophe. With its promotion of the

penetration of Vietnam by foreign direct investment and the correspondingly rapid growth of capitalist production, Vietnam's ruling bureaucracy and the wealthy layers it represents are creating their own grave diggers, in the form of a young and concentrated working class that will inevitably be drawn onto the road of class struggle.

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