Why Washington is Courting Hanoi in Vain

More than half a century ago, at the height of Vietnam war US intelligence agencies were demanded to put an end to the partisan movement supporting the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. This resulted in the so-called Phoenix Program being launched which, according to historians, allowed CIA and a number of military bodies assisting it to locate and murder in cold blood more than 80 thousand people. That may have been the first time when American intelligence agencies were given a free hand in their approach to their work, which resulted in mass-executions and sadistic torture techniques getting rampant. Thus, long before the world learned about the extensive use of torture in the American prison of Abu Ghraib, American intelligence agencies were busy acquiring "peculiar anti-guerrilla skills." And this "legacy" is hardly forgotten both in the United States, and especially in Vietnam, since the latter lost well over one million people to the unprovoked American aggression.

On January 27, 1973, after four years of negotiations in Paris, a peaceful agreement was finally signed. According to various estimates Washington lost some 58 thousand souls in Vietnam, with 300 thousand more receiving serious injuries. To sign those peace accords, the Pentagon had to recognized the victory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and was forced to leave this country in disgrace, with the White House closing American embassy in Saigon and imposing a trade embargo against the now united Vietnam that remained in place until 1994.

For Washington this military conflict had disastrous consequences as it was the first public defeat of the United States on the international stage in history.

However, American think tanks are keen to adhere unquestioningly to their favorite mantra that was put forward by Henry Kissinger: 'America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests'. This notion is illustrated in Washington’s attempts to restore diplomatic relations with Hanoi and make every attempt to befriend its former enemy, by indicating that it has manged to leave its humiliating defeat in the past.

However, this behavoir has nothing it common with Washington growing aware of the inhuman slaughter it brought on the heads of Vietnamese people. However, the rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape of today has pitted Vietnam against China as tensions between these two states are flaring up in the South China Sea . In its turn, the United States is getting increasingly frustrated with the fact that Beijing is successfully pushing it out of the region that used to be dominated by the United States Pacific Fleet for decades. Therefore, everything that happens in Southeast Asia these days is being rightfully perceived through the prism of the growing confrontation between the US and China. That is precisely why Washington decided to attempt rapprochement with Vietnam to use this country as a counterweight to Beijing's interests in the region.

Formally, an official restoration of diplomatic ties between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam occurred in mid-90s. It is noteworthy that John McCain, who fought in Vietnam in 1967-1973, would play an active role in the mending of the broken relations. This means that even those people that advocate wars over anything else, and mind you that McCain was held captive in North Vietnam for a long time after his plane was shot down over Hanoi, are still willing to do what Kissinger told them.

However, American efforts didn’t stop there, as Hanoi was visited by Bill Clinton back in 2000, who became the first American president to visit Vietnam since 1969. The example he set was followed by Barack Obama and even Donald Trump.

In an attempt to get China trapped in a corner, the United States has been persistently seeking ways of
strengthening its defense cooperation with Vietnam, as there was none to speak of for the longest time. To achieve this, Washington lifted its restrictions on the supply of arms to Vietnam, while allowing the Vietnamese military to take part in Western joint military exercises. Thus, Washington sought to show Vietnam that, as its own confrontation with China gets more and more intense, Hanoi was welcome to become a principal ally of the United States in the long term. Those steps were well calculated, as today Vietnam possesses the strongest military in the whole region, while being the most anti-Chinese player out of all the states that do have a considerable military force at their disposal. By selling more and more American weapons to Hanoi and pedaling anti-Chinese sentiments within Vietnam, the White House hoped it could use its former sworn enemy in its own games.

But Vietnam happens to be a communist country and local activists are not too fond of the United States, but they don't feel compelled to criticize America at every turn, as there's a lot of geopolitical reasons for them not to.

As for Hanoi and its political elites, they are not too fond of the idea to seek rapprochement with the United States too, since countries with different socio-political systems are bound to sooner or later find limits to such a friendship.

According to local experts, there are other obstacle that are also standing in the way of Washington's designs. First of all, there's Hanoi's desire to pursue a multi-vector policy. It wants to be on good grounds with New Delhi, and Tokyo, and Moscow. That is why Washington has little hope of becoming a principal and exclusive ally of Vietnam. Secondly, there are serious ideological differences between socialist Vietnam and the capitalist United States. It should also not be forgotten that the US serves as a home to a two million people strong Vietnamese diaspora formed from former citizens of South Vietnam, and they hate communists like nobody else does.

As for the anti-Chinese sentiment, Vietnamese politicians like to point out that they fought Americans only once, while they fought with Chinese many times over thousands of years. That is, both Beijing and Hanoi expect the other to pull some sort of a trick. However, today, especially against the background of the US desire to become a world gendarme, Vietnam is reluctant to seek a conflict with China and is cooperating with the US in order to get concessions from Beijing. If he gets a lot of them, then the pace of Hanoi's cooperation with Washington will slow down. In the field of arms supplies, Vietnam has a much more reliable ally, that ships cheaper and better weapons than the United States with no strings attached — and it's Russia. On top of it, Hanoi also buys weapons from Israel and European countries in order not to buy them from the United States as it doesn't want to become too dependent on it. This allows Vietnam to escape the fate of a mere pawn in Washington's designs.

Yes, certain territorial disputes remain unresolved. In particular, Vietnam has been contesting with China a number of islands in the South China Sea. But in recent years, both the Chinese and the Vietnamese sides have been trying to focus on what they have in common, instead of centering on disputes. It is no coincidence that Xi Jinping, after he was re-elected Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017, made his first visit to Vietnam, thus demonstrating Beijing’s desire to improve relations with Hanoi, while preventing Vietnam from getting too close to the United States.

Yes, it's true that Vietnam has some sort of a grudge against China, but it will still work in close cooperation with Beijing in a number of areas, and its people want things to go on that way. And it suits China as well, since its primary concern is to prevent Hanoi from getting too dependent on Washington.

**Martin Berger is a freelance journalist and geopolitical analyst, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”**