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Will Vietnam Embrace China After Trump Got Elected?

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Common wisdom says that after Donald Trump got elected in the United States, Vietnam should be in panic.

True, there could be some ‘objective’ reasons for alarm, if one is truly obsessed with the ‘free’ trade agreements.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership may soon go to the dogs and at least one sizeable part of the Vietnamese leadership was counting on it, hoping that it would boost the economy, particularly its garment and agricultural sectors.

However, Vietnam is and always was tough, and on top of it, there are many signs indicating that the public and many government and Party heads are actually demanding a more ‘hardline’ Communist path, not just more business activities.

Earlier this year, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, was re-elected, while Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was pushed from power. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported:

“Mr Dung was the party’s strongest voice in denouncing Beijing and was credited with Vietnam’s smooth accession to a US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership.”

In brief: he was one of the main local advocates of the pro-Western foreign and economic policy, which was setting Vietnam on a dangerous crash course with China. And he is gone...

After the recent election results in the United States were announced, Vietnam is set to move much closer towards both China and Russia. President-elect Donald Trump's 'exceptionalist' and often anti-Asian rhetoric is already setting off alarm bells all over the region: from Hanoi to Jakarta, and naturally from Manila to Beijing.

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Donald Trump is now getting ready to murder the 'Trans-Pacific Partnership' (the 12-nation trade pact). Vietnam, which during the previous years developed (pragmatically) a very close relationship with the Obama administration, is watching nervously. Before the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party earlier this year (and particularly since a new Constitution was adopted in 2013), Vietnam introduced and passed around 100 new laws, some described rightly or wrongly by Western analysts as 'pro-market economic reforms'.

Undeniably, some in the Vietnamese leadership believed that their country would be one of the main beneficiaries of the TPP.

There was even some muted grumbling about the 'growing strategic relationship' between Vietnam and the United States.

To impress the West, particularly the United States, Hanoi kept 'improving the business climate', 'easing its trade regulations and yielding to various demands from Western and Asian businesses and corporations.

Most alarmingly, Hanoi's confrontational stand towards China was changing from rhetorical to 'tangible', after Vietnam began expanding its runway – and according to Reuters and other Western sources – after it began deploying several rocket launchers in or near the disputed area in the South China Sea.

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To say that 'Vietnam changed its basic positions opportunistically and abruptly' would be wrong. Even before the US elections, Vietnam began 'diversifying' its foreign policy.

Now Hanoi is hoping for the deal that is being proposed by China: a 16-nation agreement called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which would include Vietnam and the rest of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India.

Relations between Hanoi and Beijing have been rapidly improving. It is becoming clear that Vietnam may be following the example of the Philippines, backing off permanently from the confrontational course with the most populous nation on earth. Significantly, the top Vietnamese

leadership recently hosted the outspoken anti-imperialist President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte. To quote Gary Sands from the Foreign Policy Blogs:

“...While the previous administration in Hanoi had angered Beijing by seeking legal advice from Manila in order to potentially file their own claim at The Hague, the new leadership under Quang appears to be backing off confrontation with Beijing, along with Manila. Any jointly-coordinated legal or military effort between Hanoi and Manila appears now to be out of the question for fear of provoking the dragon next door, while we await the outcome of hopefully peaceful bilateral negotiations.”

The ideological stand of the Vietnamese leadership became clear following the death of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro Ruz. The country announced a day of mourning and Vietnam’s government and Party officials delivered powerful emotional revolutionary and internationalist speeches.

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One major problem is that the Western perspective has managed to kidnap almost entirely the narrative on the country – the way all major or minor developments in Vietnam are being perceived and interpreted. This does not necessarily apply to the Vietnamese people, although many of them are actually also consuming Western propaganda at an excessive rate. However, it definitely applies to how the rest of the world understands (or misunderstands) Vietnam.

The slowing down of Doi Moi pro-market reforms is hardly addressed by Western mass media. As they hardly address any social changes in neighboring China. In Europe and the US it is generally perceived that both countries are determinately and happily embracing the market economy concepts.

The reality couldn’t be any farther from that. In China and in Vietnam (although still more in China), the majority of the population has been disappointed, even disgusted, by capitalist practices. People are demanding the re-introduction of essential socialist principles. In China, under the leadership of President Xi, the government is yielding to the people’s demands. It appears that Vietnam is paying close attention to its giant neighbor in the North, and is also willing to reconsider its hard-core pro-market stands.

The people of Vietnam may be hopeful, but they are not necessarily content, in the cities and in the countryside. Life is now better than two decades ago, but expectations are also much higher. ‘Socialism Vietnam-style’ would most likely be welcomed by the majority, and could be coming soon!