

CUBA, VIETNAM, AND “NORMALIZATION”

FREDERICK Z. BROWN*

Scant attention has been paid to the coincidence currently unfolding in American foreign affairs. On December 17, 2014, Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro agreed to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba. On January 1, 2015, Vietnam began to celebrate the twentieth anniversary (1995-2015) of normalized political relations with the United States. Viewed comparatively, these coincidental occurrences are of unusual significance in the continuum of American foreign affairs since World War II.

Mistrust and hostility between former enemies often persist, and we can assume that these new relationships will take decades if not generations to blossom. But the essential first step for Cuba, which seemed unimaginable not long ago, has been taken. Meanwhile, Vietnam and the United States are constructing their own rapprochement prudently.

“Normalization” is not a fixed destination, it is a process—tedious, repetitive, frustrating, years-consuming, stage-by-stage, and often ending in failure. “Normalization” is not the absence of conflict, it is the management of conflict, or of policy differences which can be severe and even lead to war. The United States enjoys “normal” relations with the great majority of the nations in the world, many of whom are actually quite hostile. Even relations with close allies like Canada often involve disagreement on all sorts of issues. In short, there are a variety of “normal” relationships.

Vietnam and Cuba are avowedly communist single-party regimes. They are long-time friends, and Hanoi's leaders have no doubt spent many an evening briefing their Havana brethren on the snares, delusions, yet ultimately desirable advantages of negotiating better relations with Washington. The Cubans can learn a lot from Vietnam, although U.S. conduct in affairs regarding Vietnam has fluctuated significantly over the years. *The situation regarding Cuba in 2015 is markedly unlike Vietnam during the three years after 1975, when the first attempt at normalization was underway—and Cuba seems to be off to a far better start.*

This essay focuses on the United States-Vietnam normalization process. It offers a brief sketch of the differences—and a few similarities—in normalizing with Vietnam compared to Cuba. How long will the diplomats take to untangle the web of economic and trade restrictions against Cuba, not to mention the political issues? Farther down the road, to what extent might Cuba, which for decades has been active and influential in the developing world, become a bigger player on the international stage, especially in the Western Hemisphere?

The Cuba Problem

For fifty-five years, Cuba has been a conundrum of American politics, but only once—during the nuclear missile crisis of 1962—have bilateral relations produced an “existential” level of crisis for the United States. Even the ill-advised Bay of Pigs misadventure of 1961, conceived under President Eisenhower and hatched by President Kennedy, was a serious threat to Cuba for a relatively brief time. Cuba over the years settled back to headline-gathering disputes having to do with refugees or mistreatment of dissenters. Since Kennedy, Cuba has become a problem to be kicked down a dead-end road. Democrats and Republicans alike have refused to tackle the

issue of normalizing bilateral relations forthrightly, largely because of feared domestic political consequences in Florida.

Cuba has remained peripheral. According to the polls, Americans generally supported President Obama's announcement, but Cuba is not seen as a burning issue. Vietnam, in contrast, was central and profoundly destabilizing to American politics from 1954 until after 1975, and to most Americans it has been a bitter national tragedy ever since. In 2015, Vietnam has become of front-rank importance in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia.

This does not mean that Cuba is unimportant to the United States or that we can ignore the advantages of bilateral relations in terms of trade and family reconciliation. Cuba's strategic location in the heart of the Caribbean could be uniquely significant, if Havana cooperates and Washington acts wisely. In 1995, both the United States and Vietnam wanted to button down political normalization as soon as possible (in part because of China), but it was not a life-or-death issue for the United States. For Vietnam it was clearly critical. In 2015, normalization is also important for Cuba, indeed economically urgent. But the two situations are similar only in a broad geopolitical sense.

The Vietnam Syndrome

One difference between the two normalization processes, simply put, is the history of the Cold War.¹ U.S.-Vietnam normalization from the beginning was strewn with emotional, psychological, and political obstacles. In 1975, the collapse of the Vietnamese government in the South—which the United States had supported since 1955—left Americans humiliated, with a sense of national sorrow and shame. The war deflated the idealism of the Kennedy era and weakened the bipartisan consensus that had been the foundation of foreign policy under Truman and

Eisenhower. The Department of Defense and the CIA became whipping boys for the ills of the war. The Army in particular, so idealized during World War II, exited Vietnam dispirited and dishonored. The Pentagon Papers, My Lai, Kent State, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on alleged CIA depredations all contributed to what President Carter called the country's "malaise." The effects of Vietnam echoed throughout society—in the drug culture, the ruptured post-World War II premise about America as a City on the Hill, and the altered relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government in making and managing foreign policy. The concept of American exceptionalism, an underlying and rarely challenged belief among decision makers in the United States, had long been a legitimizing myth in the American polity. In Indochina from 1950 onward, it had imposed blinders on rational consideration of American national objectives and capabilities in the region. The Vietnam conflict severely undermined faith in exceptionalism, though not before contributing to immense damage to north and south Vietnam and the United States itself.

There is little similarity with Cuba here. Events since 9-11 and international terrorism preoccupy the United States and most of the world. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, our negotiating adversary of the 1970s and 1980s, has become a positive force in the U.S. regional security posture and is not a threat, as it was believed to be in 1975 when international communism was alive.

Normalization with Cuba does not carry the emotional baggage of Vietnam after 1975. Although the United States has a strong hand and can play the normalization game at its own pace, many analysts believe that the U.S. should get on with it while the circumstances are favorable—that is, during the remaining 18 months of the present administration. The nature of

the today's domestic political climate is a major difference between U.S.-Vietnam in 1975 and U.S.-Cuba in 2015.

Ripeness and the End of the Cold War

A distinguished political scientist specializing in conflict resolution defines “ripeness” as when two opponents reach a “mutually hurting stalemate” and have no other option but to negotiate.ⁱⁱ Ripeness, however, can also happen when one side assembles enough advantage over the other to make further debate moot. A full settlement can still take decades to put together, as was the case for Vietnam and the United States. In their first try at normalization (1977-1978), negotiations foundered when Vietnam held onto for too long its initial demand for economic assistance “to heal the wounds of war” and then signed economic and security agreements with the Soviet Union. Provoked by the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, and was in turn dealt a destructive incursion on its northern border by China. The United States and China took their first steps toward normalization, and the Vietnamese locked down a closer relationship with the Soviets. Vietnam’s invasion and occupation of Cambodia through the 1980s precluded any serious normalization efforts.

The six years between 1989 and 1995 saw momentous changes in the global power structure, and by April 1991 the United States held a large strategic advantage. Vietnam had begun an ambitious economic reform program (“market-based socialist economy”) in 1986, but there had been few significant improvements. The U.S. had two main issues: the unresolved Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) problem and Vietnam’s presence in Cambodia. Getting Vietnam out of Cambodia was important to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which honored the American trade and economic restrictions in effect since 1975.

Continued blunt pressure from China was the most important factor in causing Vietnam to remove its military forces from Cambodia.

In effect, some form of accommodation had to occur between China and Vietnam, and between the Khmer parties themselves, before normalization between Vietnam and the United States could move forward.

There is an eerie similarity here regarding Cuba. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and its principal supporter gone, Vietnam in 1991 had little choice but to negotiate on terms vastly different than in 1977. In 2015, Russia's economic weakness, Venezuela's economic/political mess, and the United States' economic resources all work to Cuba's disadvantage. At the same time, the U.S. would do well to remember a critical mistake made in its first try at normalization with Vietnam in 1977-1978, when key issues like POW/MIAs were left in the realm of imprecise Vietnamese intentions and unclear American expectations. Normalization with Cuba will require patience and keen attention to detail.

To Political Normalization, 1991-1995

In retrospect, eventual normalization between the United States and Vietnam became probable on March 11, 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union a few years later and weakening the link to Vietnam. At the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986, circumstances began to ripen. Gorbachev began to withdraw major Soviet support for Vietnam's presence in Cambodia. ASEAN, Vietnam, and the Khmer parties began to talk about a way out of stalemate. In 1991, Washington presented Hanoi a plan (the "road map") for a four-stage process of mutual confidence-building measures that, first, would give the

Vietnamese political and economic benefits in return for cooperation on the UN-sponsored Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict and, second, would give the United States broader and more active assistance on POW/MIAs. On both counts, Vietnam cooperated adequately, as reflected in the 1992 U.S. Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs, which paved the way for public acceptance of normalization. In 1994, President Clinton lifted key embargo restrictions, thereby allowing U.S. businesses to enter Vietnam's evolving economic environment. Another six years of negotiating the fine print would go by, however, before Vietnam and the United States signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement in 2001, granting Vietnam *conditional* normal trade relations.

From Political to Economic Normalization, 2007

Had large U.S. corporations like Boeing, General Electric, Caterpillar, Microsoft, and others not lobbied the U.S. Congress, the next steps in normalization would have been delayed even further, while ASEAN countries, Japan, and European business enterprises moved in quickly to make deals. The U.S.-ASEAN Business Council and others in the business constituency effectively counterbalanced POW/MIA groups and interests, resisting concessions to the Vietnamese government on ideological grounds. Accentuating enlightened self-interest, the U.S. State and Commerce departments encouraged business interests to press Congress. This tactic was based on the assumption that the economic reforms undertaken by the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986 would eventually take root. Slowly, in the 1990s, they began to do so, but the hard part was yet to come—Vietnam was not accepted by the World Trade Organization (WTO) until 2006. Despite U.S. concerns about Vietnam's human rights

record, the two countries engaged in a lengthy series of negotiations on trade and investment procedures.

On December 29, 2006, the U.S. Congress voted to grant Vietnam *permanent* normal trade relations (PNTR), thereby giving Vietnam the green light for entrance to the WTO. Since then, U.S.-Vietnam trade has more than tripled; Vietnam has emerged as the United States' second largest source of imported clothing, following China. Intel has established a multi-billion dollar manufacturing plant in Ho Chi Minh City. During the George W. Bush administration, the United States and Vietnam dramatically upgraded diplomatic and strategic relations, an upward trend that has continued under Barack Obama.

The United States and Vietnam are more than a quarter century ahead of Cuba in terms of normalization. In July 2013, after their meeting at the White House, Presidents Obama and Truong Tan Sang announced a bilateral “comprehensive partnership” on nine areas of cooperation: political and diplomatic relations; trade and economic ties; science and technology; education and training; environment and health; war legacy issues, defense and security; protection and promotion of human rights; and culture, sports, and tourism. The year 2015 will see celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of political normalization and probably include a state visit to Vietnam by President Obama.

Cuba and Vietnam—Differences and Similarities

Size counts, and so does geography. Vietnam's population is 90.7 million; Cuba's is 11.2 million. Cuba is 90 miles off the coast of Florida while Vietnam shares a 1,000 mile long border with China. In 2014, Vietnam's two-way trade with the United States was \$37 billion; Cuba's was \$299 million. Both countries are governed by authoritarian political systems controlled by

the communist party. Within these systems, it is understood that Marxism is bankrupt and that their economic future lies in profound market-oriented changes leading to profitable membership in the global commercial system. How to do it without losing political control is the dilemma.

Vietnam and the United States have reached a level of mutual accommodation that seems extraordinary to those of us who lived through the Cold War. Younger Americans are caught up in fresh memories of 9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, and what is happening in the Middle East. Forty years after the so-called “fall of Saigon,” the United States has become a key element of Vietnam’s omnidirectional foreign policy. Rapprochement adds a measure of regional stability and reassures Vietnam’s ASEAN partners regarding the U.S. commitments in Southeast Asia, particularly the South China Sea. China, of course, perceives encirclement. Vietnam is not an American ally—yet it is no secret that Vietnam is increasingly aligned with many aspects of U.S. strategic objectives in Asia. Both Vietnam and the United States governments understand the inherent limitations on future bilateral relations as well as the absolute need to deal carefully with China. Normalization in this strategic triangle will always be a delicate balancing act.

The normalization process faces further tough problems. Human rights issues have been debated vigorously for the past forty years: openly, privately, often bitterly, in international forums, and, since 1995, on a formalized, regular basis. There remains disagreement on freedom of expression, assembly, political participation, and religious practice. This fundamental disagreement, however, has not prevented a significant overall improvement in bilateral relations. The objective of both governments is not to let human rights issues prevent genuine cooperation on the many other important aspects of the relationship—and to keep arguing reasonably.

More than 1.6 million Vietnamese have come to live in the U.S. since 1975, and they display a range of mixed feelings about normalization. The Carter Administration was distinctly aware of hostile attitudes from Vietnamese Americans and proceeded carefully during the first normalization attempt in 1977. This attitude remained a minor domestic political concern for decades in certain congressional districts. Today, few in the Vietnamese American community would express warm feelings toward the Hanoi regime, but even fewer would favor using violence to effect regime change. There is an increasing flow of travel to and from Vietnam by the community for vacations or family Tet celebrations, with relatively infrequent security difficulties. Officially recorded remittances to Vietnam from the community were \$8.68 billion in 2011 and many billion more in direct investment. The community generally welcomes contact with their home country despite strong distaste for its government.

Cuba might seem to be far behind in the normalization process. In fact, this is not the case. A “Vietnam syndrome” ambiance does not infect American society when it comes to Cuba. The 2014 Florida International University Cuban Institute poll of Cubans living in Miami-Dade County showed that almost three-quarters think that the U.S. embargo has not worked well or very well; more than half opposed the continuation of the embargo, and a large majority favored increased economic relations with Cuba. Two-thirds of those polled favored diplomatic relations with Cuba. At the same time, sixty-three percent believe Cuba should remain on the State Department list of countries designated as sponsors of terrorism. Cuba has already cleared several hurdles comparable to what Vietnam faced after 1975. Cuba regained membership in the Organization of American States in 2009 (it took Vietnam 20 years to get into ASEAN). Cuba has been a member of the World Trade Organization since 1995 (Vietnam was blocked by the United States until 2006). The U.S. embargo began under President Eisenhower and was

expanded in stages, reaching full force in 1962. It was weakened by the Clinton administration in 2009 and again under Obama, with more blows expected. Yet it was never directly binding on other countries that chose to trade with Cuba (in contrast, many countries declined to trade with Vietnam until 1995 because of Cambodia). Since 1992, the UN General Assembly has passed resolutions condemning the embargo. Thus, Cuba already has a normalization process up and running with other countries and international institutions.

Settlement of seized property claims on both sides will undoubtedly be a contentious issue. Nearly six thousand claims for U.S. nationalized property—already certified by the U.S. Foreign Claims Settlement Commission and valued at \$1.9 billion dollars originally—now total US\$7 billion with accumulated interest. In comparison, as part of the July 1995 normalization agreement, Vietnam paid US\$209 million for assets seized in 1975, and much of that sum was turned around to fund education for the Vietnamese in the U.S. The “dollar-cost” of the war in Vietnam is incalculable. In all likelihood it is in the trillions—plus two million Vietnamese and more than 58,000 American lives lost. Cuba has no remotely comparable situation, though it has lodged counter-claims of at least \$181 billion for the damage done by the U.S. economic embargo and the CIA's paramilitary attacks in the 1960s and 1970s.

While some evidence points in a positive direction for the U.S.-Cuba normalization process, the essential act—lifting the embargo—will be neither swift nor easy in view of the numerous laws, regulations, and executive actions that must be modified or removed to accomplish this feat. We can assume that Congress will not let Cuba out from under the embargo easily; the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (Helms-Burton Act), signed into law by President Clinton, is an example of one such obstacle. The Cubans plan to create a lively small business sector, but to what extent they can implement meaningful economic

reforms is unclear. Whole new structures of commercial activity, regulation, promotion, and support must be put in place, and in Vietnam this process required two decades.

*Frederick Z. Brown is a retired State Department foreign service officer.

ⁱ This essay draws on the author's December 2010 article "Rapprochement Between Vietnam and the United States," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 32, no. 3.

ⁱⁱ Zartman, I. William. 2003. "Ripeness." In *Beyond Intractability*, edited by Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Boulder, CO: Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado. Available at <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/ripeness>.