

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Looming U.S. Return to Cam Ranh Bay

[Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

June 18, 2012

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta was practically salivating during [his recent visit to Vietnam](#) at the prospect that the U.S. Navy might gain long-term access to the former U.S. base at Cam Ranh Bay. A security partnership with Vietnam seems to be a prominent aspect of the much-touted U.S. strategic “pivot” to East Asia. In particular, such a partnership is one component of the Obama administration’s [clumsy containment policy](#) directed against China.

For members of the Vietnam War generation, the fawning rapprochement with Hanoi is a bitter irony. A succession of U.S. administrations meddled in Vietnam’s civil war, supporting an assortment of corrupt dictatorial regimes in Saigon and ultimately intervening militarily in a decade-long war that consumed more than 58,000 American lives. Now, Washington consorts with the same one-party, communist state that U.S. leaders excoriated a few decades ago, and American businesses eagerly line-up to sign lucrative economic agreements with the Hanoi regime that has lost none of its repressive features. The survivors of America’s military crusade in Vietnam—and the families of those who did not survive—could be excused if they wondered what all the fuss and furor had been about.

The embryonic U.S. strategic partnership with Vietnam underscores how the earlier policy was such an unnecessary tragedy. Washington’s rationale for its Vietnam policy in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s reflected extraordinarily sloppy thinking. If Hanoi was the principal adversary, then the United States was interfering in a civil war--a parochial conflict that had little relevance to America’s security. Even if one accepted the Orwellian interpretation that the 1954 Geneva Accords intended that there be two Vietnamese states rather than one, it was difficult to expand that dispute into one that menaced the well-being of the United States.

If, on the other hand, one regarded Hanoi as merely a cat’s paw of a major power, U.S. policymakers were still erratic about which major power that was, the Soviet Union or China. It was impossible to regard both as the puppeteer, unless one accepted the premise that Moscow and Beijing were two parts of a monolithic threat. But even by the early 1960s, that notion had become implausible. The Sino-Soviet split had already emerged and should have been apparent to all except the most diehard conspiracy theorists.

The thesis that Hanoi was a willing servant of Moscow's was far-fetched, and ignored strong signs of Vietnamese nationalism, if not chauvinism, in statements put out by the North Vietnamese government. But the notion of North Vietnam as a Soviet puppet was plausible compared to the argument that Hanoi was doing China's bidding. That belief suggested a shocking historical illiteracy within the American policy making elite. Tensions between China and Vietnam went back centuries. Indeed, worries about an undue dependence on China was likely the underlying reason Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh put out feelers to Washington during Harry Truman's administration about the possibility of cooperation with the United States. Even Vietnamese communists preferred to preserve as many options as possible rather than have no choice but to rely on their allies in Moscow and Beijing.

China was literally the last country in the world that Vietnamese, of any political persuasion, would want to have as a patron, much less a master. That point was confirmed with a vengeance barely five years after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam and three years after the collapse of the South Vietnamese state, when Chinese and Vietnamese forces fought a short but nasty war.

Ironically, U.S. leaders now seem to belatedly recognize that Vietnam resents and distrusts China. But that tardy acquisition of wisdom will be little consolation if Washington now tries to turn Vietnam into a cog in an anti-China containment policy. Such an approach will not only poison relations between Hanoi and Beijing, it may well poison relations between Washington and Beijing. Instead of careening from regarding Vietnam as an implacable enemy to viewing it as a crucial, anti-China ally, the United States should simply treat Vietnam as a normal country and endeavor to maintain a normal relationship with its government. Washington has already done enough damage in that part of the world without another round of gratuitous geopolitical meddling.