

## Commentary on the March 2018 visit of the *USS Carl Vinson* to Danang, Vietnam

Jonathan T. Chow<sup>1</sup>

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**The first port call to Vietnam by an American aircraft carrier in more than four decades certainly has symbolic importance, but it is only the latest indication of a broader trend in warming U.S.-Vietnam defense ties.** Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995, the United States and Vietnam have pursued improved diplomatic, economic, and defense ties. Under the Obama administration's "Rebalance toward Asia" policy, the United States and Vietnam signed a comprehensive partnership agreement in 2013. In May 2016, the Obama administration lifted the United States' embargo on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam. Until the Trump administration pulled out of the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) last year, the United States and Vietnam were both committed to the TPP as a means of linking their economies more closely together. Since 2010, the United States Navy and the Vietnam People's Navy have also conducted annual Naval Engagement Activities that focus on noncombat skills such as maritime search and rescue, maritime security, and practicing the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea. US naval vessels have also been making port calls to Vietnam ever since the guided missile frigate *USS Vandegrift* visited Ho Chi Minh City in

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan T. Chow is Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Department of Government and Public Administration at the University of Macau. The views and opinions expressed in these comments are solely his own.

November 2003 – the first visit by a US naval vessel to Vietnam since the conclusion of the Vietnam War.

**This is not only about conveying a message about American military strength, but perhaps more importantly, reassuring Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries that the United States remains engaged in the region.** President Donald Trump has sent mixed signals to Asian countries regarding the United States' commitment to regional security and economic cooperation. On his first day in office, he signed an executive order to withdraw the United States from the TPP. While this was a trade agreement, the Obama administration had also viewed it as a way for the United States to signal its long-term commitment to trade and security cooperation with countries along the Pacific Rim. Vietnam was very disappointed by the United States' withdrawal, especially since the United States is its most important export destination. The *USS Carl Vinson's* visit indicates that despite these policy changes, the security relationship between the United States and Vietnam continues to mature.

Of course, the *Carl Vinson's* visit also has symbolic significance for the ongoing territorial dispute between China and Vietnam over the South China Sea. The other chief Southeast Asian claimant to the South China Sea, the Philippines, was quite assertive in pursuing legal action against China under the administration of President Benigno Aquino III. In 2016, Vietnam received an important boost for its claims in the South China Sea when the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines against China's "Nine-Dashed Line". However, since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in the Philippines in June 2016, he has sought to court Chinese investment and trade, establishing bilateral consultations with China over the South China Sea and speculating

about the possibility of joint exploration rather than pursuing enforcement of the ruling. In fact, on March 1, the Philippines announced that it was in talks with an unnamed Chinese state firm to engage in joint energy resource exploration and extraction in the South China Sea. President Duterte has even referred to the proposed deal as akin to “co-ownership” of contested territory. While it is not yet clear whether a deal will materialize, the Philippines’ more conciliatory tone toward China has reduced much of the momentum that Vietnam had been building against China’s claims. Thus, a port call to Vietnam by a US aircraft carrier will likely be welcomed by Hanoi as a reassuring sign that the United States is committed to ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

**Finally, I would caution against reading this port visit purely through the lens of China-US or China-Vietnam competition.** While Vietnam and China have their continuing territorial disputes, Vietnam imports more goods from China than from any other country and they maintain cooperation across a range of issues. What Vietnam is trying to do is diversify its relations so that it is not overly dependent on any single country. Thus, we have seen Vietnam play an important role in ASEAN, turning in an impressive performance as chair of the Association last year. Vietnam’s President Trần Đại Quang is visiting India now, following up on Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Vietnam in 2016 and seeking to deepen economic and defense ties.

We have also seen Vietnam use its Cam Ranh International Port as a way of welcoming and servicing naval vessels from multiple countries, including the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and France. It is worth noting that despite the significance of the *USS Carl Vinson*’s visit, Vietnam only permits foreign naval vessels to visit Vietnam once per year. The sole exception is Russia, whose vessels are permitted under a 2014

agreement to make multiple visits to Cam Ranh Bay given prior notice. This actually caused some concern in Washington when in 2015 it was revealed that Russian bombers that flew near Guam were refueled by tankers based at Cam Ranh Bay. Though the United States has sought greater access to Cam Ranh Bay for its naval vessels, Vietnam has demurred. Granting US naval vessels the same privileges in Cam Ranh Bay as their Russian counterparts would be an important signal of maturing Vietnam-US relations.