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Mr. Obama, Set Vietnam Free

American soft power can spur democratic change.

By **DUY HOANG** | From today's Wall Street Journal Asia

For anyone watching Barack Obama's inaugural address last week from an unfree country, surely one of the most stirring lines came when he said, "And so, to all the other peoples and governments who are watching today . . . know that America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity. And we are ready to lead once more."

Vietnam would be the perfect place to start.

From a simply strategic standpoint, Vietnam sits smack in the middle of Southeast Asia, next to China and Thailand and alongside important shipping lines through the South China Sea. America can only benefit from having a peaceful, democratic regime in place there. From a broader perspective, one of America's biggest foreign policy missteps in the 20th century was its abandonment of Vietnam to the Communist Party. Times have changed, but Vietnam's potential for anchoring a liberal, economically vibrant Southeast Asia has not. Using soft power, the United States possesses the diplomatic means to help the Vietnamese people, and American interests.

Vietnam is ripe for change. Vietnam is no Malaysia or Indonesia, plagued by sectarian conflict. Nor is it like China, despite the superficial similarities of communist governments in Confucian cultures that have tried to offer their people economic growth in exchange for political obeisance.

Whereas Chinese leaders have aspirations for great power status, Vietnam's communists maintain a tributary relationship with China, relying on Beijing for political support. As a result, while the Chinese Communist Party can manipulate nationalist sentiments to further its control, the Vietnamese Communist Party must tamp down nationalism lest its control be threatened. Hanoi also already faces a much higher cost for bad policies and failures to reform. Multinational companies cannot ignore the huge Chinese market, but they can afford to skip Vietnam if the business environment becomes too challenging or the political system too repressive.

Another decisive factor is the relative homogeneity and attitudes of the Vietnamese diaspora. Numbering 1.5 million in the U.S. and three million worldwide, overseas Vietnamese are mostly boat people who fled as political refugees beginning in 1975. With a common past, many share hopes for a free and democratic Vietnam in the future. Meanwhile, Vietnam has one of the most pro-U.S. populaces in the world. In Vietnam, the regime dislikes the U.S., but "the street" loves America. As long as U.S. policy stays focused on engaging the Vietnamese people, it can draw on a tremendous reservoir of good will.

Which is not to say Washington should work outright for the overthrow of the regime in Hanoi. Political change, when it comes, will have to be the handiwork of the Vietnamese people. But if Mr. Obama wants to encourage Vietnam's political evolution, he does have tools available that could have a big impact. The most important tool is simply the tone Washington sets for its relationship with Hanoi. American officials should be clear that the U.S. will work with the regime only insofar as it is the current government, but that America is first and foremost a partner with the Vietnamese people.

The U.S. could begin by speaking out against the arbitrary arrests, intimidation of democracy activists and restrictions on independent religious and political organizations. For the U.S. to talk with one voice, all departments involved in Vietnam policy including State, Commerce and Defense must have consistent priorities. A stronger human rights policy also necessitates that the administration adhere to the letter and spirit of the International Religious Freedom Act. The Bush administration made a mistake when it removed Vietnam from the list of Countries of Particular Concern for violations of religious freedom to advance other diplomatic goals.

The U.S. should engage with all facets of Vietnamese society. Education is a key area. Programs for Vietnamese youth to study at U.S. colleges should receive increased funding. At the same time, opportunities need to be created for U.S.-based academics and experts to share ideas with audiences in Vietnam, for example through forums organized by the U.S. embassy in Hanoi. U.S. political-military talks with the Vietnamese government and the Pentagon's International Military Education and Training program would encourage the People's Army of Vietnam to modernize not just its operational capability, but also its thinking in terms of the proper balance of civilian-military relations and the fundamental mission of the military -- which is to defend against external threats.

The U.S. also can help the Vietnamese people have a say in their own futures by supporting civil society. Directing health, education, microfinance and other programs through official Vietnamese government channels is not an effective long-term solution. The U.S. can support local capacity by exploring all avenues to cooperate directly with private Vietnamese individuals and community-based organizations. The U.S. should establish dialogues with Vietnamese pro-democracy organizations and reformist elements in the regime. The message of the U.S. should be: "It is up to the Vietnamese people to determine their own government. As a friend of Vietnam, we are willing to listen to all who have constructive views."

Indeed, U.S. policy must match the enthusiasm for change on the ground. Drawing on the experience of Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the U.S. can also help reassure those in power that change need not be destructive nor invite chaos.

Major U.S. policy decisions toward Vietnam since the normalization of relations in 1995 -- such as the bilateral trade agreement and permanent normal trade status -- have often been justified by their long-term effect on promoting greater openness. But the long term can be a very long time away. The policy choice for the Obama administration is not whether a free Vietnam is merely a preferred outcome in the long run, but whether it ought to be an active goal in the closer term. By standing with the Vietnamese people, the U.S. has the opportunity to transform Vietnam and ultimately a large swath of Asia.

Mr. Hoang is a U.S.-based leader of Viet Tan, an unsanctioned pro-democracy political party in Vietnam.