

# Vietnam Taking Rightful Place in the World

by Mike Billington

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder visited the tomb of Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh on May 15, placing a wreath in honor of the father of post-colonial Vietnam—once vilified as a terrorist and enemy of the West. The characterization was absurd—Ho Chi Minh was moved by a deep admiration for the principles of the American Revolution. The German Chancellor's wreath symbolized the recognition of that character by the West; but Schröder went further, identifying the historic connection between “communist” Vietnam and “communist” East Germany, as a positive resource in today's crisis confronting civilization. He referred to the “intense exchange between Vietnam and the former G.D.R. (East Germany),” with more than 7,000 Vietnamese scientists and academicians trained at G.D.R. universities.

## **Adding to Asia's Economic Potential**

Today, the issues of the Cold War, and those of the colonial era, are no longer relevant, as both nations look to the future. Schröder pledged Germany's assistance in the reconstruction and modernization of Vietnam's economy, while Dresden Technical University will establish a special department at Hanoi Technical University that will enable young Vietnamese to acquire a full German-standard degree.

This collaboration is as important for Germany, and the rest of Europe, as it is for Vietnam and Asia generally. With the dollar-based financial system falling and the included collapse of the American economy, Europe—itself in depression—is looking to Eurasian development, and the huge potential for growth in Asia, as the market for the industrial potential of its own economies.

Schröder also visited Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore on his tour, and set in motion a major German commitment to industrial investment in the region. Just days after Chancellor Schröder's visit, the French Senate President visited Hanoi to attend one of many French-Vietnamese seminars on cooperation. The French are otherwise deeply involved in the huge power generation development process in the greater Mekong River Valley, covering all of the former Indochina nations (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), as well as Thailand and Myanmar.

Vietnam was divided into three states under French colonial rule, was subjected to Japanese occupation during the Second World War, and then to 30 years of devastating wars of liberation against the French and the Americans. It is only



*During his May visit to Vietnam, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder met with Tran Duc Luong, the President of Vietnam, under a bust of independence hero Ho Chi Minh—at whose tomb Schröder also laid a wreath. A country whose population equals Germany's, Vietnam is rising in economic standing.*

28 years since the end of the Vietnam War, and 17 years since the beginning of “renovation,” the name generally given to the Vietnamese version of “opening up” and reform.

A high point in the extraordinary progress in Vietnam’s development came with the visit of President William Clinton in November 2000, just 25 years after America’s defeat in the Vietnam War. Clinton told the Vietnamese: “I have been deeply moved by my visit here. I came here, in part, because I believe that America and Vietnam are linked not just by a shared and often tragic past that must be honored and remembered, but that we have a bright future that we can build together to liberate our people and their potential.”

### **Problem of ‘Free Trade’ Policy**

Unfortunately, the Clinton Administration did not succeed in moving U.S. foreign policy back to the tradition of nation building which had characterized the policies of Franklin Roosevelt. The dogma of “free trade” has so perverted the historic role of American foreign policy that virtually every foreign service officer today, if asked about American support for infrastructure development in the developing sector, will admit that “we don’t do that anymore.” And yet, what is desperately needed, for both the developing nations and the United States itself, is just such modern infrastructure construction.

Vietnam, for instance, has plans to build 60 more power plants by 2020, with 40 of them needed by 2010. In addition, 15,000 kilometers of new transmission lines will be required, and 50,000 transformer stations. This will require about \$22 billion in capital input, of which Vietnam can now cover about

30% of the total. The state power company EVN has so far brought the national power grid to 492 of the 504 districts in the country, or 97.6%, and reaches 85% of the communes. Electricity consumption is expected to grow by between 13-16% per annum over the period to 2020.

Of the 28 power plants now in the planning stage, 18 will be hydropower and 10 thermal. If the United States had not abandoned the spirit of FDR’s Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which as recently as the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson generated major investments in the development of water control and power generation in the Mekong River region, America would be in the forefront of investment and support for these projects. Unlike the 1960s, when Johnson failed to recognize that the development process he supported was impossible to achieve under the conditions of the U.S. war policy, the region is now totally at peace, and holds tremendous potential for progress.

### **Vietnam and Africa**

Perhaps the most dramatic example of Vietnam’s new role in world affairs was the gathering of representatives of 24 African countries in Hanoi on May 28-30, for the first Forum of Vietnam and Africa, under the theme “Opportunities for Cooperation and Development in the 21st Century.” Welcoming the delegations from Africa was the architect of Vietnam’s revolutionary victory, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who said he was certain that the “comprehensive, traditional, and fraternal friendship will develop forever.”

Although Vietnamese-African ties were first developed between the freedom fighters during the independence wars in Africa and Asia, the new relationship is based on Vietnam’s capacity to give aid and direction to its African allies in the effort to break the bonds of poverty and underdevelopment. Since 1996, as part of the South-South program, hundreds of Vietnamese agricultural experts have gone to work in Senegal, Namibia, Benin, Madagascar, and Congo.

Vietnam’s success in shifting from an undernourished nation to a major exporter of rice and other agricultural products is a valuable experience for many African nations. At the same time, machinery and engineering skills from Africa, and especially South Africa, can be of significant help to Vietnam’s development.

These ties will grow, as will Vietnam’s role in Eurasian development. Perhaps America can finally learn the lesson of the Vietnam War, and participate in these great nation-building endeavors.

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