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The most pro-American Asian nation? Vietnam

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Quick. Which Asian nation is most pro-American?

Answer: Vietnam. At least if you judge from the peoples' viewpoint.

Vietnam? You ask. Isn't that where some 2 million Vietnamese perished in conflict with Americans? Isn't that where 58,000 U.S. soldiers died? Didn't U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay, referring to Vietnam, say we should "bomb them back to the stone age," by taking out their factories, harbors, and bridges "until we have destroyed every work of man in North Vietnam"?

I spent five years in Vietnam from 1966 through 1972, first as a volunteer working with refugees, later as a journalist. I learned the language, married a Vietnamese, and have returned there a dozen times in recent years. I keep a pulse on Vietnam as few other do. I visited Vietnam recently, spending seven weeks traveling from north to south. I believe Vietnam and the Vietnamese have a lot to teach us.

For now, let me share some thoughts germane to the way we look, as a nation, at other peoples and countries.

Most Americans stopped thinking much about Vietnam when the last Americans left Vietnam in 1975. That's when the war officially ended and the Communist north took over the south.

Fast forward nearly 40 years.

One of the most interesting things a visitor to Vietnam learns is how friendly the Vietnamese are to Americans. Here are some reasons - some cultural, some historic, some geo-political, and some that defy understanding - why this is so. My hope is Washington policy planners might listen.

1. The Vietnamese won the war. Vietnamese pride remains intact. The people, including government officials, can be magnanimous. Throughout history Vietnamese have viewed themselves as having successfully defeated foreign aggressors, including the Chinese, French and Americans. They have a good image of themselves. The Vietnam war only confirmed that image.
2. Vietnam is a relatively small country, bordering China, which is its historical enemy. Vietnamese troops fought Chinese troops on the Vietnam/China border as late as 1979. With China claiming Vietnamese islands in the South China Sea (which the Vietnamese call the East Asia Sea) bitterness between China and Vietnam grows by the day. Many Vietnamese boycott Chinese goods. The Vietnamese (if not fully the Hanoi government) sees the U.S. as the only super power capable of holding back China.
3. Top Communist government leaders know where higher education is strong, where children can be exposed to the latest thinking, the new technologies, new business models. They send their children to the U.S. - not China, not Russia - for education.

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4. Consider the Vietnamese post-war diaspora. It's difficult to find a Vietnamese family, especially in the south, that does not claim a relative living in the U.S. In 1975 and the years that followed more than 1 million Vietnamese fled overseas, many in boats, and most of those ended up in the United States. The Vietnamese economy, especially the south, depends on the overseas Vietnamese community for hundreds of millions of dollars sent annually to families in Vietnam. People to people bonds eclipsed national policies.
5. Today only a small fraction of the Vietnamese population has a living memory of the war. In the 1960s North and South Vietnam each had a population of just over 15 million. Today the Vietnam is three times larger, with a population over 90 million. It's a young nation. Given that one would have to be at least 55 years or older to have a reasonable memory of the war that segment of the population is relatively small. Perhaps only about 15 percent of the total population can claim a vivid memory.
6. The Vietnamese Communist party claims socialism, but its policies favor capital investments from abroad. In 2013 alone, Vietnamese companies signed contracts totaling \$2.6 billion to buy American-made airplane engines and wind turbines, helping to support tens of thousands of U.S. manufacturing jobs.
7. Western influence is everywhere in Vietnam. Young urban dwellers, sons and daughters, of the

elite, pack into coffee shops and ice cream parlors carrying iPhones and I wearing jeans and English lettered T-shirts.

8. English is Vietnam's second language. It is being taught in elementary schools on up. Vietnamese enjoy practicing their English with Americans.

And so, after all these years, after all the deaths and bombs, after all the horror, I sometimes ask myself: "What was the war all about?" Yes, it was about Vietnamese nationalism and independence. Yes, our country was afraid of the "spreading Communist menace," the "falling dominos." Vietnam today has its problems. But at least the Vietnamese make their own decisions.

I keep thinking: If only we could have lost the war sooner. How many lives might have been saved?

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