

CRS Insights

Vietnam's Communist Party Chief to Make Historic First Visit to Washington
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In July 2015, the General Secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party (VCP), Nguyen Phu Trong, [is expected](#) to travel to Washington, DC. The visit would be the first-ever trip to the United States by a VCP General Secretary, symbolizing and perhaps accelerating the improvement in and expansion of U.S.-Vietnam relations over the past five years (CRS Report R40208, [U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2014: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy](#)). The trip may also be both an indication of and a driver for shifts in the Vietnamese leadership's attitudes toward the United States.

Neither the dates nor the agenda for Trong's trip have formally been announced. However, given Trong's position—he effectively is Vietnam's highest-ranking official—it is unlikely that he would travel to the United States without securing a meeting with President Barack Obama. Trong also is expected to hold meetings with Members of Congress. Issues that may arise during his trip include:

- U.S. and Vietnamese concerns about China's increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea (CRS Report R44072, [Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options](#));
- Vietnam's desire for the United States to fully lift restrictions on sales of lethal weapons to Vietnam;
- the status of the 12-country Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement negotiations, in which both the United States and Vietnam are participating (CRS Report R42694, [The Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\) Negotiations and Issues for Congress](#));
- U.S. concerns about Vietnam's human rights record; and
- President Obama's possible trip to Vietnam, one of the few Southeast Asian countries he has not visited.

Vietnam's Political Structure

Vietnam is a one-party, authoritarian state ruled by the VCP. In practice, the VCP sets the general direction for policy while the day-to-day details of implementation generally are left to the state bureaucracy, the legislature (the National Assembly), and the Vietnamese military. The two top leadership posts are the VCP General Secretary and the Prime Minister, with the President also playing an influential role. The Party's major decision-making bodies are the Central Committee, which has 175 members, and the Politburo, which has 14 members.

Trong, who was born in April 1944, has been General Secretary since 2011. Prior to that post, he served as Chairman of Vietnam's National Assembly for nearly a decade, and has served on the Politburo since 1997. He is expected to bring several members of the Politburo with him on his trip to the United States. Trong's visit would occur not long before a major national political event in Vietnam. In 2016, the VCP is scheduled to convene a National Congress—held every five years—to choose the country's leadership and set the direction for Vietnam's economic, diplomatic, and social policies. Vietnam's relations with China and the United States, as well as the pace of market-oriented economic reforms—some of which may be required if the TPP is completed—[are expected to be major topics for debate in the VCP's Congress](#).

Overview of U.S.-Vietnam Relations

June 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam. Since the embryonic beginnings of the bilateral relationship in the mid-1990s, overlapping strategic and economic interests have led the United States and Vietnam to deepen and expand relations across a wide spectrum of issues. Vietnam has become a partner in the Obama Administration's "rebalancing" of U.S. interests to Asia and the United States has emerged as Vietnam's largest export market (CRS Report R41550, [U.S.-Vietnam Economic and Trade Relations: Issues for the 114th Congress](#)). In response to shared concerns about Chinese activities in the

South China Sea, where Vietnam and China have overlapping claims, the Administration over the past year and a half has provided Vietnam with coast guard vessels and has [loosened U.S. restrictions on the sale of lethal defense items to Vietnam](#).

Disagreements over Vietnam's human rights record remain perhaps the most significant challenge for the bilateral relationship. The VCP appears to have followed a strategy of informally permitting (while not necessarily legalizing) many forms of personal and religious expression while repressing individuals and organizations that it deems a threat to the party's monopoly on power. For a number of years after 2007, there appeared something of a consensus among human rights groups and the State Department that the Vietnamese government's suppression of dissent had intensified and its tolerance for criticism lessened. According to State Department officials, over the past year, conditions may have eased somewhat; for instance, the State Department says that [Vietnam has reduced the number of political prisoners by a third](#). Some human rights groups, however, dispute these numbers and argue there is [little evidence of fundamental change](#). [H.R. 2140](#), introduced in April, would prohibit increases in many forms of U.S. non-humanitarian assistance to Vietnam unless human rights conditions improve. In the 113th Congress, the House passed a similar bill ([H.R. 1897](#)), by a vote of 405-3.

Vietnam's leaders also have demonstrated some wariness about closer U.S. ties. Many Vietnamese officials are suspicious that the United States' long-term goal is to see an end to the VCP's monopoly on power through "peaceful evolution." In addition, many in the VCP generally do not wish to jeopardize relations with China, a close diplomatic and economic partner, by improving U.S. relations. In a typical example of how Hanoi calibrates its relationship between Beijing and Washington, Trong traveled to China in April, where he met with Chinese President (and Chinese Communist Party General Secretary) Xi Jinping. Some Vietnam officials also see what they perceive to be U.S. reluctance to adequately address war legacy issues, such as the environmental and health effects of Agent Orange/dioxin, as a barrier to closer ties (CRS Report RL34761, [Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange and U.S.-Vietnam Relations](#)).

Trong's visit to the United States may be a sign that these concerns either are waning or are being subordinated to other national priorities, particularly to concerns about China's increased influence and perceived assertiveness. Over the past several years, as Sino-Vietnamese tensions over territorial disputes have increased, Hanoi has expanded its diplomatic, economic, and military relationships with other regional powers such as India, Japan, and Australia.