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Why Religious Freedom and Human Rights are Critical to U.S. National Interests

*Representative Christopher H. Smith
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Over the past forty-two years, much has changed in Vietnam. The Vietnamese people are a little richer, but still have few rights.

The Vietnamese Communist Party has opened up a bit to the outside world, but remains closed to democratic reforms and the rule of law.

U.S.-Vietnamese relations have warmed because Vietnam fears China's increasing economic power and its incursions in the South China Sea, but we see few human rights improvements emerge from better relations.

Over the past two years, Human Rights Watch has used the words "dismal" and "abysmal" to describe Vietnam's human rights record. Vietnam scored a 7, the lowest score, on Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" index.

From sex and labor trafficking to the censorship of the press and internet; from restrictions on independent labor unions to severe repression of faith communities, the Vietnamese Government and Communist Party is one of the world's worst abusers of human rights.

For too long Vietnam has gotten a free pass on human rights. Diplomats are so focused on the fact that Vietnam is "not China" that this oppressive police state is granted trade and security benefits without condition. There is a silent human rights crisis going on in Vietnam that must be addressed.

Human rights should be a top talking point when President Trump's meets next week with Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc. Doing so will advance U.S. economic and security interests and it will be warmly welcomed by the Vietnamese people.

The President has a real opportunity to bring about tangible reforms in Vietnam if he links better U.S.-Vietnam relations to tangible human rights improvements.

I have been to Vietnam. I have met with its rights advocates and young activists for decades now, like imprisoned rights activist Nguyen Van Dai. I know there is a younger generation in Vietnam—66% of Vietnam is under the age of 40—that looks to the U.S. as a land of opportunity and freedom. They want the same liberties enjoyed by their relatives in California, Texas, Virginia, Louisiana and so many other places where former Vietnamese refugees have flourished.

The Vietnamese people want the U.S. to be a voice for freedom—because their voice is silenced.

No government that represses its own people or restricts fundamental freedoms can be a trusted ally of the United States. No government that censors the Internet, tortures and jails dissidents and crushes civil society should be given generous trade or security benefits without conditions.

The President will face pressure from his advisors and the business community to look at Vietnam through the lens of trade deals and the containment of China. Hopefully, he will be able to see the situation more clearly than past Administrations.

Failing to press for real and concrete human rights improvements underestimates U.S. leverage and will disappoint the young generation in Vietnam who are that country's dynamic future.

It should be clear by now that Vietnam needs the U.S. markets and security commitments much more than the U.S. needs Vietnam's markets and security cooperation.

If history is any guide, the President's championing of individual rights will meet with some success. If his interest in human rights is sustained, those successes could be tangible and far-reaching.

The Vietnamese government has responded to concerns expressed by the last two Administrations when they linked human rights improvements to better U.S.-Vietnam relations. Whether to gain entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or to address U.S. concerns over religious freedom abuses, the Vietnamese government took steps toward reform when pressed by past American Presidents.

It is when the U.S. loses interest in human rights that conditions regress.

The Communist leaders in Hanoi take our trade benefits and security commitments and continue repressing those seeking political reform and universal freedoms.

The business of the Communist Party is staying in power and repressing those they believe will challenge their power. They will not embrace human rights improvements or the rule of law unless it is a firm condition of better relations with the U.S.

I am circulating a letter for the signatures of other of Members of Congress detailing the strategic opportunities available for the United States and the Vietnamese people if the President pursues a robust human rights agenda.

The letter urges the President to pursue Internet freedom, religious freedom, independent labor unions, and the release of prisoners of conscience - as a condition of U.S. assistance.

These fundamental freedoms are directly related to U.S. interests in a better business climate, less corruption, investor confidence, expansion of economic freedom, and civil society development.

I also wrote today to Secretary Rex Tillerson to urge more robust human rights diplomacy in Vietnam, particularly on the issue of religious freedom.

I urged the Secretary to use the authorities given him by the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act and the Global Magnitsky Act, legislation I introduced, that was passed into law last year to hold individual government officials accountable for human rights abuses and restrictions on religious freedom.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that Vietnam be designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” for severe and egregious religious freedom restrictions. That report provides compelling evidence of egregious and ongoing religious freedom violations in Vietnam.

The President should follow USCIRF’s recommendation and immediately designate Vietnam as a CPC for its religious freedom violations. This designation carries with it potential sanctions and visa denials for Vietnamese government officials complicit in religious freedom abuses.

No Vietnamese government official who tortures political dissidents or restrictions the activities of religious communities should profit from access to the U.S. or our financial system.

Let me say that the violence and intimidation faced by Hmong and Montagard Christians, by Khmer Krom Buddhists, by the independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups is

outrageous. The torture faced by Ms. Tran Thi Hong is shocking. She was on her way to meet religious freedom Ambassador David Saperstein to advocate for the release of her husband Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh.

If there are religious prisoners, if forced renunciations of faith are happening, if pagodas and churches and places of worship are forcibly closed—how does Vietnam not meet the criteria for CPC? We know it does. Politics should not play a part in designations.

I will be working closely with the State Department to make sure international religious freedom is a diplomatic priority. This fundamental freedom is not merely a humanitarian issue with little strategic value—it is critical to our security and prosperity.

Research shows that countries that embrace and protect religious freedom are more economically successful, protect women's rights, and experience less terrorism and political instability. There is not a single country that respects religious freedom that poses a security threat to the U.S. In fact, just the opposite is true—countries who are the worst violators of religious freedom are often those who seek to do Americans the most harm and seek to tear down democratic values and institutions.

These facts alone should give us pause in expanding relations with Vietnam.

President Trump should not prop up Vietnam's Communist old guard because they are not Vietnam's future. That future lies with Nguyen Van Dai and the many bloggers and advocates of political reform and human rights who seek our freedoms more than our trade.

U.S. policy must send the unmistakable message to the Government of Vietnam that human rights improvements are fundamental to better relations, critically linked to our mutual economic and security interests, and will not be ignored or bargained away.