

It's Time for U.S.-Vietnam Military Ties, Cohen Says

By Linda D. Kozaryn
American Forces Press Service

HANOI, Vietnam, March 13, 2000 -- Defense Secretary William S. Cohen told reporters his visit here March 13 is a significant step forward in the five-year-old effort to build improved U.S.-Vietnamese relations.

Both nations were scarred by the Vietnam War 30 years ago, and both need to move forward, Cohen had told reporters en route. "This marks the fifth year of our normalization," he said. "I think we are making good progress. More needs to be done.

Cohen's arrival at Hanoi's Noibai International Airport marked the first visit to Vietnam by a U.S. defense secretary since Melvin Laird's in 1971. His visit to Hanoi was the first by a U.S. defense secretary, he noted.

The fact that America's defense secretary has been invited and has accepted the invitation to Vietnam is a positive sign, Cohen said. Other U.S. government branches already have progressed in restoring diplomatic and trade ties. Now, he said, it's time to establish military ties.

Vietnam is now a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, so "it's important to have a relationship with Vietnam, just as with other members of ASEAN," Cohen explained. The United States contributes to stability in the region, which leads in turn to prosperity. Prosperity reinforces democratic values and opportunities, he said.

"To the extent that Vietnam wants to interact with outside countries, ... then it would make sense for us to have a military relationship, provided it's in the context of a diplomatic, trade and economic relationship," Cohen said. "That's all part of one package.

"To the extent that we can contribute to peace and stability in the region, then it's in our interest and certainly it's in theirs," he added.

Cohen met in Hanoi with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, Defense Minister Pham Van Tra and other officials. He said he suggested confidence-building measures would be the best way to achieve broad, extensive military-to-military relations and discussed future cooperative efforts in demining, military support for natural disasters, sharing medical knowledge about tropical diseases, and search and rescue operations.




"We'll have to have great transparencies so that no one can misconstrue or miscalculate what this relationship entails," he said, noting both sides want to proceed in "a prudent and responsible fashion and should not overestimate what can be accomplished in a short period of time."

The secretary also stressed the importance the United States places on a full accounting of America's missing in action. Following his meetings, Cohen traveled to an excavation site where U.S. and Vietnamese officials hope to recover the remains of a U.S. pilot, Navy Cdr. Richard Rich of Stamford, Conn. Rich's F-4B Phantom jet was reportedly shot down in May 1967 near Don Phu Village, about 30 kilometers southwest of Hanoi.

Cohen said his visit to the site symbolizes to all that the search for missing Americans will continue. The visit highlighted "the degree of difficulty involved, the kind of painstaking measures we are going through, the level of cooperation on the part of the Vietnamese, and recognize the importance we place upon this," Cohen said.

The secretary said the Vietnamese must understand that the United States places the very highest priority on recovering the remains of the missing in action. "This is something that's important to the families," he said.

Cohen's stop in Vietnam was the second leg of a 10-day trip to Asia Mar. 8 to 18. His itinerary also includes stops in Japan and South Korea.

	U.S. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen and his host, Vietnamese Defense Minister Pham Van Tra, review an honor guard during a welcoming ceremony in Cohen's honor in Hanoi, Vietnam. Cohen's March 13 visit to Hanoi was the first by a U.S. defense secretary. Photo by Navy Lt. Dave Gai.
	Members of a Vietnamese honor guard return to their posts following a welcoming ceremony for U.S. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen in Hanoi, Vietnam. Cohen's March 13 visit to Hanoi was the first by a U.S. defense secretary. Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.
	A Vietnamese honor guard stands at attention during a welcoming ceremony for U.S. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen in Hanoi, Vietnam. Cohen's March 13 visit to Hanoi was the first by a U.S. defense secretary. Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.