

Symbolic Visit Foretells Positive Future

By Linda D. Kozaryn
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, April 26, 2000 -- William S. Cohen traveled to Vietnam in March to become the first U.S. defense secretary to visit that country since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Cohen's visit to Hanoi was the first ever by a U.S. defense secretary, he noted.

Cohen's goal was simple: to put aside the past and move into the future. Both nations were scarred by the Vietnam War and both need to move forward, he said. Melvin Laird had been the last defense secretary to see Vietnam, in 1971.

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

"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."

Speaking to about 28 staff and faculty members at the Vietnamese defense academy in Hanoi, Cohen expressed U.S. intentions to restore military ties, including ship visits and military exchanges.

"The United States has resolved to move forward with Vietnam in a manner that serves our mutual interests in regional stability, security and prosperity," he said. "In cautious, but certain steps, our two nations can work together where common purpose allows to create a better future for both of our peoples."

"The United States believes that the security of both our nations can be enhanced by working together," he concluded. "Together, and in partnership with other nations of this region, we can write a new history of peace and prosperity."

Cohen said three principles would guide U.S. policy in developing its security relationship with Vietnam:

- Security ties will develop along with overall diplomatic and trade relations.
- Military relations will remain open so neither nation misunderstands the other's intentions.
- Accounting for Americans still missing in action will remain the highest priority.

Vietnamese officials told Cohen they also are looking to the future. They want to solve issues through peaceful means with respect to international law and practice, according to Maj. Gen. Nguyen The Tri, superintendent of the academy.

"The security of every nation nowadays is inseparable from the security of the region," he said through an interpreter. "Therefore, Vietnam has been actively contributing to preserving peace and stability in Southeast Asia."

Cohen noted that the United States is pleased to see Vietnam participate in the Asia Pacific Center in Hawaii and in the regional forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "Our mutual prosperity depends on a Pacific region in which regional issues are resolved, not by confrontation, but by cooperation," he said.

In Hanoi, Cohen met with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, Defense Minister Phan 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. 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."

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 Cmdr. 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.

Throughout his visit, the secretary stressed that accounting for America's missing service members involves a sacred trust. 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 recognizes the importance we place upon this."

Just as the United States is searching for its more than 2,000 missing, the Vietnamese are also investigating their own 300,000 cases. Cohen said both sides agreed to continue their cooperation in this quest for closure.

Joint recovery efforts have already enhanced cooperation and led to broader contacts between U.S. and Vietnamese armed forces, Cohen said. "By helping the families of the missing, we have helped to establish our working ties."

In Ho Chi Minh City, Cohen called on Lt. Gen. Phan Trung Kien, commander, 7th Military Region, and Vo Viet Thanh, Ho Chi Minh Municipal People's Committee chairman. The two told Cohen that, since the war, people have concentrated on reconstruction and improving living standards.

The city, on the shores of the Mekong River in southern Vietnam, is made up of the pre-1975 Saigon and Cholon. Saigon is still referred to as "Saigon City." The city population is 6 million now, up from 2.5 million in 1975. By working together, Cohen told the Vietnamese, the United States and Vietnam can build a better future. The secretary said he hoped relations with Vietnam would "unfold in a very positive way so that Vietnam can enjoy the prosperity of the entire region."

Vietnam's greatest asset, Cohen said, is its people. "The light emanating from the eyes of the Vietnamese children, the people, is one of incredible energy, intelligence, exuberance, love of life," he said. "That is going to be a great natural resource for them as they move into this century."

Cohen told reporters the reception he received from the Vietnamese was "warm, open and cordial." Overall, he said, the visit was "very productive" and "extremely positive."

He acknowledged that his visit was largely symbolic. "But I think that it will be very helpful in leading to greater contact in the future and a more positive relationship. It was well worth the effort," he said.

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