

Transcript of Media Roundtable with Deputy Secretary Antony Blinken

American Center, Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City

May 19, 2015

Thank you all very much for being here today.

It's good to meet all of you and it's very, very good to be here. This is my first visit to Southeast Asia in the capacity of Deputy Secretary of State, and my second trip to Asia in that capacity. I've been on the job at the State Department for a little over three months, coming from six and half years at the White House. The fact that I've spent a lot of my time in these early months in Asia, first in Northeast Asia and now in Southeast Asia, is a reflection of the commitment of the United States to our rebalance policy – a priority that the President has set, that Secretary Kerry has set, and that all of us continue to carry out every day.

I'm especially pleased to have start this first trip to Southeast Asia here in Vietnam and to help advance the Comprehensive Partnership that President Obama and President Sang agreed to in 2013. This, of course, is a particularly significant time to be in Vietnam as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the normalization of relations. It's a time to reflect on how far we've come over those 20 years, but also how much more we can accomplish together, as partners to the benefit of both our countries and citizens in both our countries.

I've been fortunate now to spend two days here - first in Hanoi yesterday and then today in Ho Chi Minh City. I have to tell you that I've been deeply impressed with the energy, the talent, the dynamism of Vietnam's young people, especially as I've the opportunity to engage with a number of them, as well as the focus and commitment of Vietnam's leaders. In Hanoi, I met with senior government officials and we talked about the very good work that we're doing together in building this partnership and we discussed the need and the desire that both of us share for a strong, independent, and prosperous Vietnam that respects the rule of law and human rights. And we spoke about deepening and broadening our ties in so many different areas; things that we weren't even talking about, much less doing together just a few years ago. Whether it's working together on regional security, military cooperation, the trade and business relationship, human rights, dealing with climate change, combatting disease, in so many areas, this partnership is growing deeper and stronger every day.

I also visited the Hoa Lo Prison, a very stark reminder of our complex history. And I met with representatives of civil society in Hanoi. Their stories demonstrated that the space for freedom of expression, a value that we share deeply, is growing and opening. And while real challenges remain we open to see greater access in the future, and it's very encouraging to know that, today, already, 22 million Vietnamese use Facebook, and even more, well over 30 million, are connected to the Internet.

I had a chance to walk around a little bit in Hanoi yesterday, and I found a city that is extraordinarily vibrant and youthful, with commerce thriving late into the night; well beyond what you might call regular business hours back in the United States. Here, of course, in Ho Chi Minh City, you can feel the

vibrancy and energy just by walking down the street. It's palpable. I was very pleased to meet with educators who are working to bring a new, independent university to Vietnam. While we have 17,000 Vietnamese studying in the United States now, Fulbright University will also bring America-style education to thousands more in this country.

I also had a chance to meet with some participants in our young leaders program, the so-called YSEALI program here at the American Center. And I saw the Innovation Lab which we have where they were hosting a competition to design videos highlighting environmental challenges facing Vietnam, and indeed people around the world. And I have to tell you, I was extraordinarily impressed with the creativity and talent of these young people. The video presentations that they put together in just a couple of days are as good as anything I've seen anywhere. It was powerful evidence that this young generation of Vietnamese has all the talent and creativity that you could want and find anywhere in the world.

We just met with a number of U.S. business leaders, who've been working here in Vietnam, some of them for more than a couple of decades. It was a great opportunity to hear about ways to grow our already significant economic and trade relationship. Of course we discussed the Trans-Pacific Partnership and how the high standards it will set will benefit businesses and workers in Vietnam, in the United States, and in all the other countries. Vietnam has a tremendous amount to gain from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. By many calculations, Vietnam would benefit more than any other member of the original group of Trans-Pacific Partnership countries. By one calculation, TPP would add as much as 30% to Vietnam's gross domestic product over the next decade and it will attract even more American investment. It is what we call a state-of-the-art agreement. And collectively, with all the original 11, it will bring together 40% of the global economy in a rules-based trade architecture that is built on transparency and competition. We hope very much that we're able to conclude that agreement in the weeks and months ahead.

As I wrap up my couple of days here in Vietnam, I'm looking forward to moving on to Indonesia, and then to Burma, before finally heading back to Washington. In Jakarta, by the way, I'll have an opportunity to meet with the permanent representatives of ASEAN, as we look for ways to build ever stronger ties among the countries of Southeast Asia, which is one of the most important and dynamic regions of the world. ASEAN itself is an increasingly dynamic and important institution.

So with that, let me turn to you and I'm happy to try to answer any questions. Let me just add that as my new media gurus tell me, that on Twitter, Facebook, and all of our accounts have an opportunity to follow both what the embassy is doing every day and what some of us are doing in our travels. So if you go to @ABlinken, or @USAsiaPacific, you can follow some of the work that we're doing.

And with that, I'm happy to try to take any questions, thank you.

Question: Mr. Blinken, welcome to Saigon, I'd like to start off with two questions. (inaudible) With regards to (inaudible) land reclamations in the Spratleys (inaudible) can you clarify these plans about these patrols and when they will start. And the second. I understand that your trip is to help plan for

General Secretary Trong's visit to the United States. What does the U.S. expect from this trip, and any specific results that Washington expects to achieve?

Let me say first with regards to China more generally. Like Vietnam, we have a very important, but also complex relationship with China. And it has important elements of cooperation, and some elements of competition. Of course we want to avoid any conflict in the relationship. The cooperation, we've seen good examples of what we can do together. Last year, for example, we did important work in combatting Ebola, in setting high standards to deal with climate change, and in a number of other areas deepened our cooperation. At the same time, there are clearly elements of competition that we have to manage wisely and that we have to deal with openly and directly. Our hope is that China's rise will be peaceful and that it will act consistent with international rules, and norms, and laws. What we've seen in some of the actions that China has taken in the maritime domain in particular, whether it's the South China Sea, the East China Sea, in terms of unilaterally making claims, and then using coercion, or intimidation, and sometimes even force, to assert those claims, or to try to change the status quo unilaterally, for example, with these reclamation projects. This runs counter to the evolution that we would like to see. So we take in all of these matters a principled position. We don't take sides or a position on the substance of a particular claim. But we do have a strong position on the way that those claims should be advanced. In particular, we have a strong interest in freedom of navigation. We have a strong interest in preserving peace and stability in the region. And we have a strong interest in upholding the rule of law and international norms. Some of the actions that China has taken run counter to those interests and to those principles. The reclamation projects – the size, the scale, the scope, the potential for militarization – are potentially destabilizing and add tension to the region, which is not what is needed. Our position is to call on all claimants to refrain from provocative actions and to pursue their claims peacefully and through legal mechanisms. There is, as you know, a China-ASEAN declaration that was signed a decade ago that calls in this area for all claimants, in this area, to exercise self-restraint and not to complicate or escalate disputes by their actions. Our concern is that some of the actions that China has taken are doing exactly that.

So, I say all of that because with our partners in the region, including Vietnam, who have expressed strong concerns about China's actions, we, of course, are, and will consult about the appropriate response. Our hope is that together with China, in particular with ASEAN and the development of the Code of Conduct, we can all come together in a way to resolve these different claims, or resolve differences over assertions of territorial sovereignty in a peaceful manner consistent with international law and rules and norms. That is what we are looking at doing.

With regard to the visit of the General Secretary, I would say just a few things. First, we very much welcome it, and President Obama looks very much forward to receiving the General Secretary in Washington. This is a historic visit. It will be the first by a General Secretary to Washington and the United States. I think it will send very powerful message to the world - a message that former adversaries, who fought a very difficult war that caused tremendous suffering, can become friends. That not only have we made peace, but now we're building a real partnership. The cooperation between us is broadening into more and more areas, and it's deepening. I think that the visit can point to all of those

things. And also present a shared vision for the future of our partnership. So that's what I would expect and hope from the visit, but I can tell you that we very much look forward to it.

Question: Thank you for spending time with us. Do you think that human rights issues will prevent U.S. and Vietnam from developing more closer relationships? Second, do you think the human rights issue will affect passage of TPP by the U.S. Congress?

We regularly discuss the topic of human rights with senior officials in the government. Indeed, that was part of the conversations which I had yesterday in Hanoi. We recently had the high-level dialogue on human rights and our senior official, Assistant Secretary Tom Malinowski, was here leading the U.S. delegation.

I would say that first, we recognize that there have been some important, positive steps in this area, and it's important to recognize them. The fact of the matter is that if you look at the evolution of Vietnam over the last years, people are more free than they have been before, to speak their minds and to assemble. More and more churches have been registered to allow people to practice freedom of religion. LGBT rights have been expanded. Vietnam has ratified important United Nations conventions against torture and for people with disabilities. Maybe most striking to me, and I alluded to this in my opening remarks, is the fact that so many Vietnamese are using new media like Facebook, more than 20 million, and, of course, the Internet more generally. They are able to express themselves with great freedom. That said, we continue to have real concerns about some of the practices that we see and that continue, including people being detained, arrested, intimidated, beaten for expressing political views. That is a real problem. We have this conversation directly with people in the government to express those concerns.

I think that one of the most important developments that is happening now, and that will address many of these challenges, is the work that is going on to conform Vietnam's laws to its constitution and to its international obligations. Because the constitution has strong protections for human rights. And Vietnam's international obligations also impose important requirements in this area. Once the laws are consistent with the constitution and international obligations, then in practice, I think that these rights can be upheld and expanded even more.

Let me just say two final things on this question. First, when people have an ability to express their criticism and express their differences, and to do so without fear of being put in jail, or being harassed, or being intimidated, that's a very important outlet. It gives them confidence that they can advance their interests and express their views freely in the system. That, in turn, is a great source of stability. Because the alternative, in not allowing people to express their views freely, is to build up more and more frustration. It's a little bit like a boiling pot of water. If you keep the lid on firmly, at one point the water boils over. If you let some of the steam out, it doesn't. I think being able to create the most open possible society is actually the best way to have stability, peace, and prosperity long into the future for Vietnam.

One final thing, and I apologize for going on so long, but these are important questions. When we would think about what makes a country strong and wealthy, in the past, we would talk about how big the

country is, the size of its population, the strength of its military, whether it had many natural resources, and all those things are still important measures. But now, in the 21st century, the true wealth and strength of a nation is its human resources. A country that maximizes their potential will do very, very well. It doesn't matter how big it is or small it is, whether it has any of those other resources, if it allows its people to be free, to create, to innovate, to be entrepreneurs, to exchange ideas, to criticize, to challenge the conventional wisdom, that is the greatest source of strength of a country in the 21st century. I can tell you from my short time in Vietnam, that it is obvious that Vietnam has extraordinary human resources. The great strength of Vietnam going forward will be to maximize their potential. That comes with giving everyone their full freedom to express their ideas.

Question: Thank you, I have two questions about the South China Sea. One, you reiterated the importance of dealing with SCS disputes in accordance with international law. Under the U.N. Law of the Sea, the artificial islands that China has been building are not entitled to territorial waters, and China has objected to the U.S. plan to send vessels and aircraft to the Spratlys. Is it fair to say that the Chinese are trying to reinterpret international law and violating the core meaning of freedom of navigation? If so, what can the U.S. and ASEAN do to change China's position, like creating support for joint ASEAN patrols? My second question is, to be fair, China is not the only country which carries out reclamation work in the Spratlys, but also Vietnam and Philippines. So why has the U.S. only focused attention on China? Is it because of the size, the scale, and the scope of works? Or is it that China is doing it?

What we have said to China, and indeed to all claimants, is that if they have a claim, then they need to be able to justify according to international law, and in particular the Law of the Sea Convention. That applies to everyone. To my knowledge, China has not done that with regard to claims that it has made. So the question is not for me, or anyone else here, to judge whether China is or is not acting consistently with international law. We believe that everyone should justify any claims they make on the basis of international law. And then if there is a dispute, it has to be litigated appropriately and peacefully by the relevant body or institution. So that's what we're looking for.

That is, all together, the best way that we can assure peace and stability in the region. I think one of the best vehicles that could achieve that is the Code of Conduct, that we've been working on in ASEAN for some time now. Getting agreement on that Code of Conduct would then create very clear rules for everyone to follow when there are competing claims of sovereignty or jurisdiction. Then there will be a mechanism to resolve them that everyone has agreed to, to resolve them peacefully. That is the best way forward and I think that given the concerns that are increasingly expressed by the countries in the region about some of the actions that China has taken, there will be more and more energy put into trying to finalize a Code of Conduct.

You rightly said that China is not the only country engaged in these reclamation projects, and you're exactly right. But it is also very clear that the scope and scale of China's reclamation activities far, far, far exceed that of any other country that is undertaking them, including Vietnam. There really is no comparison. That said, it is our position that the best way forward would be for anyone engaged in reclamation activities to stop them, to freeze them, so that no one is taking actions that can be seen as provocative or trying to change the status quo unilaterally. If that happens, that creates a better

environment in which to try to come together to resolve all of these differences in a peaceful manner. Again, I think that the Code of Conduct would be a great way forward. That's what we would like to see, but it's very largely dependent on China, because the scope, because, again, the scale of its actions are far, far greater than anyone else's.

Question: Can you evaluate some of the improvements as well as the challenges facing the relations between Vietnam and the U.S. after 20 years after the normalization of relations?

First, as I suggested earlier, one of the most powerful things is simply the story of the last 20 years, and the strong message that it sends to the world from moving from war and conflict to peace, but even more than that, building a partnership together. And that's a very powerful message. I think we see evidence of that partnership in the extraordinary volume of high level visits between the United States and Vietnam. Including this year, we've had some very senior members of the government, the Politburo visit the United States. We have our Secretary of Defense coming here. In a short time, we'll have the Secretary of State, and then of course, as we discussed, very significantly, we'll have the General Secretary in Washington. If you look at so many of the different measures of the relationship, they show the extraordinary growth of the relationship over the last 20 years. Two-way trade is now more than \$35 billion a year. We have 17,000 Vietnamese students studying in the United States, and based on what I've seen here today, many more who hope to do so.

Even as we are working together on these bilateral issues, increasingly, we are seeing opportunities to work together in the region, and even beyond the region. So, for example, we've been doing very good work together on everything from demining to fighting disease, to dealing with the challenges of climate change, cooperating on building up Vietnam's capacity to engage in peacekeeping, and these are all areas of cooperation and partnership which will not only benefit each of our countries, but have the potential many other countries in the region and beyond as we bring what we're doing together, and what we've learned together, to the benefit of others. So I think what you're seeing is a relationship that's become a partnership bilaterally between us, and that as we look to the future we'll be working together even more in the region, and, in fact, around the world.

One of the things that was really gratifying to me was to look at some of the opinions of Vietnamese people. Based on some of the surveys that have been done, 85% of Vietnamese people under the age of 30 have a positive view of the United States. That's a very powerful statistic. I think it underscores that people in both our countries want this partnership, and they want to see it grow and strengthen and that's exactly what our governments have been working on today.

Question: How will the address the South China Sea issues in the Shangri-La Dialogue? Any proposal to stop China from turning the reefs into military bases? (Inaudible) Could you please share some details on U.S. plans for patrolling in the South China Sea, especially in areas which are being built up by China?

I think the Shangri-La Dialogue will be an important moment and an important meeting to address some of these concerns, and we'll be represented by our Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter. Again, I would anticipate that the concerns that we're hearing from so many of our partners and friends in the region that this will be very much on the agenda.

One of the concerns that we have, and that is shared by others, is the potential militarization of the reclamation projects. And that would only add to the potential for instability and rise tensions in the region. And I come back to the declaration that was signed by China and ASEAN some years ago, that said that all of the countries involved would exercise self-restraint in the maritime domain, and that they would not take actions which would complicate or escalate disputes. Again, it is our concern that some of the actions taken by China do exactly that. They are not demonstrating self-restraint, and they are complicating, and potentially escalating, the existing disputes.

What we are doing, and what we will do, is confer closely with our friends and partners, and particularly within the context of ASEAN, to look at how we can deal with these challenges together. Again, I think that the most important things, would be, with regards to the reclamation projects, for China to stop all of these actions, indeed for all claimants to stop the reclamation activities, and then to work together and to agree together to resolve differences in this area. An effective vehicle would be an agreement on a Code of Conduct. That would be a very good way forward. And I think that there will be increased energy in trying to bring that to conclusion.

Thank you.