

Vietnam's relations with America are in fact a strategic connection

Thursday, 15 July 2010

"I wonder if there's a difference between a strong and vibrant relationship and one that's called a 'strategic partnership' American Ambassador Michael Michalak asked rhetorically in a conversation with VietNamNet publisher Nguyen Anh Tuan.

"We have a relationship between our armed forces that's already very strong, a fine relationship between our foreign ministries, similarly good relations between our political leaders, and a relationship between our peoples that's also good. So our relationship really is a strategic partnership."

This interview was originally published in Vietnamese in VietNamNet's Tuan Viet Nam on July 6, 2010.

VietNamNet Publisher Nguyen Anh Tuan: Well, first of all, greetings to Ambassador Michael W. Michalak, and congratulations on the 15th anniversary of the establishment of Vietnam's diplomatic relations with the USA. And congratulations on your 234th Independence Day!

American Ambassador Michael Michalak: Thank you. Tonight we'll be celebrating the 4th of July. I'm very happy to be here now to talk with you about 15 years of diplomatic relations.

Nguyen Anh Tuan: A lot of Vietnamese and foreign scholars think that, if only the US President had responded positively to President Ho Chi Minh's letter to him in 1945, we'd be celebrating our 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations, and surely even greater achievements.

Ambassador Michalak: I think that's true. However, we could go back even further to the 1800's, when a trading relationship was first established between the US and Vietnam. I think if we go back that far, then yes, we've had a large number of achievements over a hundred and some years.

However, the last 15 years has been very significant in our relationship. If you look at it, we've done so many things in terms of economics and trade and in terms of broadening the relationship. I think it's something that both our countries can be really proud of.

Tuan: That's certainly true! But we have to look back for a bit at the lessons of the past. Did that experience help us develop a better relationship now?

Michalak: Many historians are paying a lot of attention to the past, but I'm not a historian. I'm just a diplomat who's here trying to improve the relationship between our two countries and I'm very happy with the achievements that we've made.

Tuan: And now a couple of questions from reader Nguyen Van Hung. He asks if you think that in the near future, the US-Vietnam relationship can increase Vietnam's potential in the region and the world?

Michalak: Yes, I think that the US-Vietnam relationship has definitely strengthened Vietnam. When we established relations in 1995, our two-way trade was only \$450 million. Now it is over \$15 billion. So we're already working on strengthening the economic side of Vietnam.

I think also that certainly we have made a lot of progress in terms of education. In 1995, there were fewer than 800 students from Vietnam in the United States. Today we have over 13,000. So those are 13,000 Vietnamese students who are getting a great education in the United States and will come back and will be able to contribute to Vietnam's socioeconomic development. Thus I think we've helped strengthen the human capacity of Vietnam.

Military to military, we're working on military medicine, we're working on peacekeeping opportunities, we're working on disaster relief, so we're helping Vietnam to strengthen the ability of the military to serve the people and to make good contributions to the development of Vietnam.

There are many different ways that our relationship has up to now helped to make Vietnam become stronger and continue to develop steadily.

Tuan: The US and Japan also fought a war and were enemies; after that the US and Japan became very important strategic allies. What lessons for the US-Vietnam relationship can we extract from the US-Japan relationship? Can Vietnam also become a partner and ally of the US?

Michalak: I see no reason why that can't happen. Vietnam and Japan and the United States have all had different histories, and as a result of that the two relationships have different characteristics. But certainly it is true that we fought a war and we were enemies in the past and now we're becoming better and better friends. I see that particular process continuing into the future, and it is certainly possible that Vietnam and the US will become partners.

The East Sea should be discussed in a multilateral framework

Tuan: Continuing with the questions posed by our reader, Nguyen Van Hung: Why hasn't the US cooperated with Vietnam to exploit the economic resources in the sea area that's under Vietnam's sovereign jurisdiction. Is the US wary of China?

Michalak: Well, I wonder what Mr. Hung means by cooperation. Regarding the East Sea issue, we don't take a position on the ownership. Many different countries are insisting on their various claims in that area.

We do believe that freedom of navigation in the high seas must be maintained, those sea lanes of communication must remain open. All countries should be able to conduct activities out on the high seas that are consistent with international law. And actually, we do have a great deal of military cooperation with Vietnam. Our two militaries are working together in many areas, and one of those areas is search and rescue.

We hope that someday Vietnam and the US will organize a joint search and rescue exercise at sea. That's usually where a search and rescue situation occurs.

That sort of cooperation will continue, and something we'd like to see is all sides resolving the issues in the East Sea in accordance with international law, in accordance with the Declaration of Conduct that ASEAN has put forward. I think all parties should discuss this matter in a multilateral framework.

Tuan: This is from reader Nguyen Viet Dung and a number of others. The Paracel Islands are Vietnam's because in 1974, forces of the Saigon regime, a government allied with the US, were expelled from there by the Chinese. The US knows this, but up to now the US hasn't confirmed that the Paracels are Vietnamese territory. America keeps saying it doesn't take sides in this dispute. Is it that the US is wary of China?

Michalak: Well, Mr. Dung's question is very similar to the earlier one from Mr. Hung. I can repeat our position on the East Sea, but I think you already know it -- I just talked about it.

Raise relations to new heights

Tuan: Here's a question from reader Ham Dinh Quang. The American Secretary of State is about to visit Vietnam. Do you foresee that as has been the case in the past, this visit will elevate relations to a new level?

Michalak: Yes! We're very much looking forward to the visit of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to Vietnam. Of course that's an opportunity to further the relationship between the two countries.

I believe that the visit of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to Washington in 2008 actually did take our relationship up to a new level.

As you know, before 1995 we were able to restart our relationship through our cooperation on finding Americans who were missing in action. We had good cooperation from Vietnam then and we continue to have good cooperation in that endeavor now.

Then we took our relationship to a new level when we negotiated and signed our Bilateral Trade Agreement and helped Vietnam to become a member of the WTO. That moved our relationship more into the economic sphere where the development of trade and economics became the centerpiece of the relationship.

But I think when the Prime Minister visited Washington in 2008, we expanded our relationship greatly. We agreed to organize political/military talks; their full name is "Dialogue on Policy, Defense and Security." We agreed to have a dialogue on policy, planning and regional issues. We set up our Vietnam-US Task Force on Education to carry forward work on educational cooperation. We set up a working group on climate change. In these ways, the Prime Minister's visit can be seen as a signal that Vietnam was coming out onto the world stage, and clearly it took our bilateral relationship into what I think is a new stage.

I hope Mrs. Clinton's visit will accomplish something similar.

VietNamNet chief editor Nguyen Anh Tuan.

Tuan: Reader Le Van Minh asks "Where does Vietnam stand, what's its place in America's global

foreign policy?

Michalak: We don't actually rank countries numerically, so I can't say Vietnam is number one this or number two that. But as you know, the Obama administration has focused on Asia and Secretary of State Clinton's first overseas trip was to Asia, including a stop in Jakarta, in the ASEAN area.

America considers Vietnam to be one of the most rapidly growing countries of Southeast Asia and has the potential to be a real leader in the region. Its economy is booming. Two-way trade between the US and Vietnam has grown extremely rapidly. Vietnam, particularly in the past three to five years, has really come out onto the world stage and had a lot of success integrating into the global community.

We believe that Vietnam has great potential. We think that Vietnam and the United States can be good partners. As long as we continue to develop our relationship based on equality and mutual respect and understanding and goodwill, I think that Vietnam can become a leader within Southeast Asia.

Tuan: You say a lot of nice things about Vietnam's future, from raising the bilateral relationship to new heights to Vietnam's becoming a leader in ASEAN. That's the future. In your opinion, what does Vietnam need to do to turn that potential into reality?

Michalak: I think first of all, Vietnam has to decide for itself what it wants to do, what it needs to do. Becoming a nation that plays a leading role in the global community not only brings benefits to Vietnam but it also brings responsibilities. Vietnam must decide if it wants to take the benefits and bear the responsibilities that go along with them.

There has been a great deal of development on the economic side, but I think there could also be more progress in the political sphere as well. We and Vietnam there are different viewpoints regarding human rights and politics. You and I have discussed these things; we need to keep having such discussions between our two countries too.

Obstacles and Problems

Tuan: Yes, I see there's an obstacle, a problem in the relations between the two countries. Democracy is an internal requirement for Vietnam. We need democracy to develop, to achieve a better society. The Communist party of Vietnam keeps pushing in that direction. Still, somehow, people get the impression that the US is pressing Vietnam, forcing democracy on it. Why have we let this mistaken impression grow up in the public mind?

Michalak: Yes, both sides talk about democracy, but each side has its own definition and interpretation. People say America is putting pressure on Vietnam!

I do think that some of Vietnam's laws are still vague; they need to be better defined. The matter of freedom of speech, of expressing opinions, for example, that people ought to have more freedom, and other matters are being discussed between our nations. If we look at human rights in its totality then certainly there are differences between the two countries, but if we talk about these matters as good friends we can talk about our differences.

But we also must see that we have an excellent bilateral relationship, with lots of good cooperation in education, in our

economic and trade relationship, our military to military cooperation. We have to look at the entire relationship.

When I first came to Vietnam three years ago I said I had three priorities -- human rights, economics and trade, and education. We've made fantastic progress in education and in our economic and trade relationship, and I believe that we've also made some progress in the sphere of human rights. However, the progress regarding human rights hasn't been as great as in the other two areas. So we'll just continue to talk in the spirit of goodwill and mutual respect, and we'll see if progress will continue in all three areas.

Tuan: Let's go back to economic development. Equitizing state enterprises and developing the private corporate sector is an essential requirement so that economy can develop and gain in competitiveness. Many people misunderstand these things; they think they are happening because the US puts pressure on Vietnam to privatize the economy. So why there is that misunderstanding? Who creates that misunderstanding?

Michalak: [Laughing] I have no idea. It is true that equitization is an important need for Vietnam. Vietnam talks about it. The World Bank talks about it. The entire donor community talks about it. So no, it's not the United States putting pressure on Vietnam to equitize. I think Vietnam is putting pressure on itself and the rest of the world is saying yes, that's the right thing to do.

“‘Peaceful evolution agenda’ is a lot of nonsense”

Tuan: It's the same in the education sector. Reforming the education system in Vietnam and changing the way people think about how to teach, how to study, is an objective need here. But somehow the impression is created that the US is putting pressure on Vietnam to reform its education system, and that's part of your “peaceful evolution” agenda.

Michalak: [Laughter]. Well, I think that is just total nonsense. It's just completely not true.

We now have more than 200 memoranda of understanding between American universities and Vietnamese universities, and the object of these memoranda of understanding is that the two nations want to increase the two-way flow of students. These memoranda are the result of talks between Vietnamese and American universities. I don't see any reason to say American universities are putting pressure on Vietnamese universities in this regard.

In just three years, the number of students going from Vietnam to the United States has tripled, and nearly all of these students are using their own money. I don't see anybody putting pressure on those students to spend their own money to go to the United States. I think they're doing it, they're voting with their dollars, because they think they're going to get a good education.

Vietnam's leaders at the highest levels have told me how highly they rate American education, they value our education exchanges, so I don't go along with this ‘peaceful evolution’ business.

Vietnam is a very independent country and the people in Vietnam have good brains; they're smart. You will make your own decisions. No one's going to make your decisions for you.

Tuan: We have a query from the Hoang Sa (Paracels) Documentation Center. They want to know what you think the Government and people of Vietnam, or perhaps the US Government, ought to do about people who still hate our Government and oppose Vietnam. Is the American Government behaving properly with respect to these people or not? What's being done to prevent these people from [negatively] affecting relations between Vietnam and the USA?

Michalak: Probably there's no relationship where 100 percent of the people will always be satisfied.

In America we often quote President Lincoln's observation that you can please some of the people all the time, and you can please all the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time.

I think that the process of reconciliation in Vietnam is still going on, has been going on since the end of the war. There are people with very strong feelings on both sides. I think it's going to take time before these quiet down.

The United States government recognizes the government of Vietnam and respects its territorial integrity, and we are building our relationship on that basis. We oppose any person, any organization that aims to use force to overthrow the Government.

In the United States, people are allowed to express their opinions, but they're not allowed to commit acts of terrorism. Between the US Government and the Vietnamese Government, when we have differences, we'll sit down, we'll try to talk through those differences and try to reach a common understanding.

That same process is just going to have to go on between people who still have strongly antagonistic feelings, and of course we can't say how long that may take.

Tuan: Reader Nguyen Viet Hung observes that in the US there are different interest groups that carry out lobbying activities. Do you think that Vietnam-US relations have been damaged by certain interest groups who do not want relations between our two countries to grow better, that raise different issues that impact our relations negatively.

Michalak: I don't know of anyone in the United States that really wants to see a bad relationship between the US and Vietnam. I do see groups in the United States that have objections to some of the policies of the government of Vietnam and those people can be very vocal. And we have to listen to everyone's views and everyone's opinions and compare that with our own knowledge of what we know is going on in Vietnam. Then we take our decisions and make our policies accordingly.

We see value in everyone's opinions and in their expression of them. The US Government itself is often criticized, by our own citizens or by others. Sometimes their viewpoints are right, sometimes they are wrong, but we respect them all. We think that having the dialogue itself is very important.

Tuan: Reader Viet Anh in Hanoi asks why, since defense relations between Vietnam and the US have grown strongly, the arms embargo is still in effect.

Michalak: That is one of the areas where human rights questions do have an effect. We would very much like to expand our military to military relationship to include the sales of arms, but until we are more comfortable with the human rights

situation in Vietnam, that's just not going to be possible.

Tuan: One of our readers asks who was the person that initiated the normalization between our two countries?

Michalak: Well, in the United States, there are several people in our Senate. Senator John McCain and Senator John Kerry were two very strong proponents. President Clinton was behind it. There were a number of people. And back here in Vietnam, I don't know clearly.

In the next five years, will relations grow twice as fast?

Tuan: A reader named Hung asks if you think that in the next five years the relations can grow at double speed?

Michalak: That's a great question. I'm glad Mr. Hung asked that question. Yes, I believe that's possible, but we do have an obstacle. We can't grow our relationship without increasing the staff at the US Embassy. In some cases, it has taken us almost two years to get approval from the Government of Vietnam to add staff. So while we would love to increase our education programs, we'd love to increase the number of consular officers issuing visas, we would love to be able to send people traveling around the country to find out what is the real situation in Vietnam, but if I don't have the people, I can't do it.

So I would love to have more people at the embassy, and I would love to expand our relationship much faster, but until the government gives us its approval, we can't do it.

Tuan: Hoang Hoai Dan in Ho Chi Minh City observes that as Vietnam-US relations become better, certain countries are unhappy and want to obstruct this process. How can we Vietnamese grow our relations but at the same time avoid offending anybody else?

Michalak: Vietnam should do what Vietnam thinks is best. Certainly for our part, we believe that we have a very robust partnership with Vietnam and we want to continue to see that partnership grow. Vietnam has told us that it has a foreign policy of wanting to be friends with all nations. We believe Vietnam's foreign policy is up to Vietnam, whatever Vietnam wants to do is up to Vietnam. I don't know about certain countries or whatever, but I know that from the point of view of the United States we're going to continue to try to develop our relationship with Vietnam on the basis of the principles we've upheld in the past and will continue to uphold in the future.

Tuan: In the history of Vietnam and of the world, small countries on the world chessboard always face disadvantages and difficulties and random challenges. Do you have some advice for Vietnam so that it can maneuver better, and assure its own security?

Michalak: That's a tough question because for different countries, different strategies seem to work. As I said earlier, in the United States we value diversity. We don't care whether you're a big country or a small country. We intend to deal with you as equals and on a basis of mutual respect. That's a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy.

We support every kind of international organization and believe all countries should have an equal opportunity to make

their voice heard. That's a reason why a strong, prosperous and well educated Vietnam is in the American interest. We believe that Vietnam should have the tools it needs to make up its own mind and make its decisions One of the objectives of our relationship is to help Vietnam acquire those tools.

Tuan: In the global economy giant corporations can influence the foreign policy of a country. Is it possible that some giant corporations in a certain country could negatively impact relations between Vietnam and the US?

Michalak: No, I certainly don't believe so. We have a lot of giant corporations in the United States and we certainly don't make our foreign policy based on what corporations say. Those corporations don't make commercial decisions based on what we say as a government, either.

I think when Vietnam became a member of ASEAN, it became part of a larger market, of a larger entity that gave it even more ability to maneuver freely.

Now Vietnam is trying to decide whether or not it wants to become a full member of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. That is a free trade agreement among eight countries. If Vietnam were also to become a member, it would give Vietnam the benefit of access to much larger markets.

Tuan: Phan Minh Quang, a student at the National University of Economics sends this question. Looking back over 15 years of Vietnamese-American relations, can you cite any matters left undone, or opportunities that have been lost?

Michalak: There is no really large missed opportunity that comes to my mind. There are probably many things that we could have done better and many things we're trying to do better.

I think it would have been good if we had reached agreement on the Bilateral Trade Agreement faster or if Vietnam had gotten into the WTO faster, but we all worked as hard as we could, and what has happened has happened.

A strategic partnership and an alliance relationship

Tuan: Reader Truong Khac Luong in Hai Duong asks when our two countries will elevate their relations to the level of a strategic partnership. . . .

Michalak: Every now and again I get asked that question. I'm not sure what is the difference between having the strong, robust partnership as we do now and having something called a strategic partnership? Would we have a stronger military to military relationship? I don't think so. Would we have a stronger foreign ministry to foreign ministry relationship? I don't think so. Would we have a stronger people to people relationship? I don't think so. We've already got strong military to military relationships, we've already got a strong relationship between foreign ministries and between our two governments, and we already have a strong people to people relationship that's getting even stronger.

So I think we already have a strategic partnership. We may not call it that, but the way we work together on the issues that we agree on, the way in which we deal with the issues we don't agree upon, show that we have a very strong and firm relationship that is going to expand, get bigger and get deeper as time goes on.

The first 15 years is only the beginning. I think we have a very bright future ahead. I don't care what we call it, a strategic partnership, a super partnership or whatever, it's going to be a partnership that's good for the people of both countries, and I think it's going to be good for peace and stability in this region and in the world.

Tuan: So what is the difference between a strategic partnership and an alliance?

Michalak: Probably it would be the legal commitments on both sides.

Tuan: Could you be more specific on that point?

Michalak: Well, in many of the alliance agreements that I'm aware of, we have an obligation to come to the defense of each other. That may be the largest difference.

Tuan: Before 1945, Vietnam established a group called the Independence Alliance, that is to say, the Viet Minh, and this group rescued American pilots. What's your impression of that?

Michalak: I'm aware of that. That was a fine group and I'm quite moved by their efforts.

Tuan: Do you think that with that alliance as a beginning, Vietnam and the US can become allies in the future?

Michalak: I think that's certainly something that we need to think about. Between our countries, there still are a lot of differences regarding politics. Our military to military relationship is expanding but it's still not as broad or as rich as our military relationship with many other countries.

As we continue to develop our relationship, that's something we need to keep in mind.

When people talk about alliances, they talk about the defense partnership, but in addition, we have to think about another important aspect, the degree to which you actually share common values and share the same world view. Vietnam and the US still have differences in the way we look at the world and the way we look at certain areas.

We both want peace in the world, we both want peace in the region, we both want to see a prosperous Vietnam. But regarding democracy and freedom of speech, we have different views. So I think we definitely need to have some more time together. More time together to talk about these things, to see if we can find some common ground in a number of areas.

And don't forget, Vietnam wants to be friends with everyone, and if you are an ally of somebody that means you are not a friend of somebody else, at least not at the same level, so I suppose that might be a problem if Vietnam wants to be an ally of the United States.

Already we have an excellent partnership, I think we have an excellent relationship that is getting better every day. Let's just keep improving it and see where it takes us.

Tuan: If I might continue this thought, let's assume that Vietnam and the US are allies. How could Vietnam benefit from that? What disadvantages would an alliance bring to Vietnam?

Michalak: That is too hypothetical for me to get into. I'm sorry. I don't know what kind of world that would be. We can talk about that another time. [Laughter].

Tuan: Our time is nearly over, Ambassador, so as we celebrate 15 years of normalized relations, relations that are developing well, what message, what thoughts do you want to leave with our audience?

Michalak: Over these 15 years, we have continuously built trust on both sides. We have come to better understand each other.

I would like to see that process of understanding, of building trust, of building friendship continue into the future. That's my mission here. And I hope that we can continue to do that well into the future.

Fifteen years is just a beginning. We have hundreds of years to go and I hope that each will be better than the one before it.

Tuan: Thank you very much. We congratulate the American people on your Independence Day, and wish you continued prosperity. We hope you will continue to contribute responsibly to the world.

Michalak: Thank you very much. I wish the same for Vietnam, and good luck to Vietnam.

(Source: VNN)