

## Trump remains popular in Vietnam

Written by Peter Kauffner

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Americans tend to think of Vietnam as a war that split the US rather than as a country in today's world.

Vietnamese are of course way past that. The country does not have any US Electoral College votes, but if it did, they would be cast enthusiastically for US President Donald Trump.

When I told a group of university students at a park in Ho Chi Minh City that I was from the US, they asked: "Do you know why we love Trump?"

"Uhhh, is it because he hates China?" I asked back.

"Yeah," the group responded in unison.

With a 1,000-year history of Chinese occupation, hating China is pretty important in Vietnam. If you look at the street names, you will find a lot of people whose claim to fame is fighting China.

Aside from Vietnam, Trump is well-liked in India, Israel, Kenya and the Philippines, surveys by the Pew Research Center showed.

Trump's popularity in Vietnam is second only to his popularity in the Philippines, where 69 percent of those surveyed expressed confidence in Trump. That compares with 58 percent of Vietnamese.

For Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), 53 percent of Filipinos expressed confidence compared with 18 percent of Vietnamese.

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While a Filipino can have positive views of both China and the US, Vietnamese approval of Trump is a function of how much they dislike China.

The Sino-Vietnamese dispute that has received the most attention involves islands claimed by both countries in the South China Sea, or “East Sea” as it is called in Vietnam.

The US does not recognize either set of claims, but asserts that the sea is international waters. Washington periodically sends warships through the sea to challenge Chinese claims.

Despite the public’s enthusiasm for Trump and the US, the People’s Army of Vietnam looks to Russia as its main backer.

In the Xi era of Chinese aggression, the country’s once sleepy military has stepped up the pace. The Vietnam People’s Air Force has purchased 36 Su-30 “next generation” fighters from Russia.

Hanoi has sold drilling rights in the South China Sea to Russian energy companies Rosneft and Gazprom in the hope of getting Russia to side with Vietnam in the territorial dispute.

What Vietnamese want most from China is not so much islands as respect. In terms understandable to Americans, Vietnam is in the “1812” phase of its relationship with China.

Brimming with more patriotic fervor than military calculation, the US in 1812 rushed into war with the UK, its former colonial master, to demand “free trade and sailors’ rights.”

“My mother loves Trump, both his policies and, even more, the way he talks,” one middle-school teacher told me.

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Whenever US president-elect Joe Biden or another international figure makes an obsequious comment about China, Vietnam gags.

Even so, the Vietnamese I asked about China hasten to add that it is not personal and that “we are friends” with the individual Chinese they have met.

The Democrats in the US are anxious to prosecute Trump. However, Vietnam might be his safest bolt hole. More than 300 fugitives with Interpol red notices have escaped their pasts to Vietnam, as the country lacks a regular procedure for extradition.

Buying US\$56 billion in Vietnamese exports last year, the US is Vietnam’s biggest foreign market. Vietnam also stands to gain in any US-China trade dispute, as US importers seek alternatives to China. Vietnam has already made gains at China’s expense in terms of furniture, mattresses, footwear and other exports.

Biden has for many years been a China booster, and his son’s business dealings in China were controversial in his presidential campaign.

However, Trump’s policies have bipartisan support in the US, and a policy paper in September issued by the Biden campaign suggested that policies toward China would remain in place.

Regardless of what policies he might adopt, it is hard to see Biden speaking to Vietnam’s identity the way Trump does. One Vietnamese businesswoman told me that she likes Trump because she wants to “destroy China.”

*Peter Kauffner is an American living in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and used to teach English in Miaoli County.*

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