

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4305

August 4, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

I write regarding the relationship between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Last year marked the 25th anniversary of the resumption of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, and bilateral cooperation in a number of vital areas has increased and flourished. Vietnam has demonstrated its strategic value in the Indo-Pacific region, and remains a welcome partner in security cooperation. However, the Vietnamese government continues to demonstrate a troubling record in human rights, religious freedom, and respect for private property of its citizens. Reconciling Vietnam's human rights and religious freedom practices is not incompatible with furthering our growing economic and security partnership – on the contrary, this is a vital next step in our growing relationship.

I commend the administration's willingness to "bring to bear all the tools of our diplomacy to defend human rights," because as you have stated, "one of the core principles of human rights is that they are universal." As the State Department's most recent Country Report on Vietnam details, the government has violated this universality, and perpetrated significant human rights abuses. The Vietnamese government restricts free expression, and has furthered its crackdown on the Independent Journalist Association of Vietnam by arresting its members and charging them with anti-state propaganda.

Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion has been abused through broad interpretation of vague provisions that allow restrictions in the interest of national security. These abuses include monitoring, interrogation, arbitrary detention, and discrimination against some individuals, at least in part, because of their religious beliefs or affiliation. For these systemic abuses, I ask that you designate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. It is clear from the State Department's diligent monitoring and annual reporting that the Vietnamese government's conduct meets the IRFA definition of particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Further, I believe it is necessary to consider imposing Global Magnitsky Sanctions against those individuals who have committed these grave human rights violations.

Finally, many Vietnamese Americans originally came to America after fleeing violence and persecution by the Vietnamese government. This same government went on to confiscate and profit from the private property of those forced to flee. In 1995, the Vietnamese government provided \$200 million to settle U.S. property claims prior to January 28, 1995. Unfortunately, despite this many Vietnamese Americans did not receive compensation for their misappropriated lands. I encourage the State Department to raise the issue of negotiating a second property

restitution agreement with the Vietnamese government for those Americans who did not receive rightful compensation from the 1995 agreement.

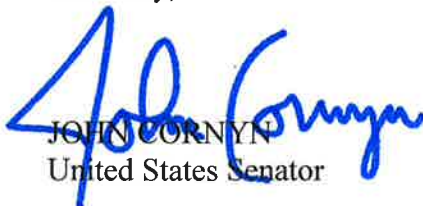
While these significant human rights issues require decisive action, Vietnam also remains an important partner in the Indo-Pacific. I agree with Vietnam's 2019 defense white paper that calls this region "a center for dynamic development" that "occupies an increasingly important geo-economic, geo-politic and geo-strategic" significance. I believe that U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations are vital for peace and stability for each of our nations, and for all nations in the Indo-Pacific. However, I also believe that our growing partnership must be built on values of human rights and civil and religious freedom.

The opportunities for expanded bilateral collaboration include maritime operations such as port visits, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief exercises, and efforts to combat cyber threats, terrorism, and maritime piracy. Engaging in these security activities will contribute to regional stability and improve interoperability between our governments. There are further multilateral defense cooperation opportunities that should be cultivated as well. Participation in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) forums such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus Meetings provides valuable venues to increase our collaborative security aims for the Indo-Pacific. Inviting Vietnam to participate in regional exercises such as Rim of the Pacific, as it did in 2018, also advances our nations' shared efforts to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific, and guarantee our collective prosperity.

However, as we move forward in these areas, it is of paramount importance that we hold the Vietnamese government accountable for its responsibility to guarantee human rights, religious freedom, and property security for its citizens. To that end, I ask that you provide an explanation for what the State Department is doing to engage with Vietnam on these issues. I trust that with your careful attention to the wide range of issues and opportunities with regard to U.S.-Vietnam relations, we will be able to advance human rights for the Vietnamese people, while also strengthening an important security relationship in the Indo-Pacific.

CC: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin

Sincerely,


JOHN CORNYN
United States Senator