

PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP VISITS VIETNAM SETTING THE STANDARD FOR SEA-BASED HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION

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As the Marine and naval attaché in Hanoi, Vietnam, for the last two years, I have been privileged to serve on the forward edge of U.S. efforts to forge a strengthened bilateral defense relationship with a strategically important partner. These efforts have taken many forms, but none has been as potentially far reaching as the recent visit to Danang City from 15 to 25 July 2007 by PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP, a four-month humanitarian-assistance mission conducted in several Southeast Asian ports by the USS *Peleliu* (LHA 5) and embarked teams of medical, dental, and engineering personnel. While not the first humanitarian mission conducted by the U.S. military in Vietnam since the normalization of postwar relations in 1995, this one was sufficiently remarkable to be characterized as a watershed in the development of the bilateral military relationship.

During the ten days that *Peleliu* anchored in Danang Harbor, uniformed service personnel from the United States and seven other Asia-Pacific nations partnered with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and medical professionals of the host nation to care for 3,667 patients, providing medical and dental treatment as well as pharmacy and optometry services. The PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP mission also included a biomedical repair team, which evaluated nearly a hundred different pieces of equipment needing repair from twelve different clinics and hospitals and restored a third of them to operating condition. Additionally, the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP medical staff hosted “subject-matter-expert exchanges” for hundreds of city health officials, addressing basic life support, first

aid, treatment of burns and fractures, wound care, nursing care, infection control, immunization safety, and disaster response. Forty-two P2 medical and surgical specialists also met with their Vietnamese counterparts to participate in informal discussions and collaborative clinical care at Danang General Hospital, the Danang Ophthalmologic Hospital, and the Center for Preventive Medicine.

In addition to medical and dental outreach activities, a combination of U.S. Navy “Seabee” (construction battalion) and community relations projects led to the renovation and upgrade of six medical clinics,

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an orphanage, a school for disabled children, and a vocational training center for disadvantaged youth. Finally, Project Handclasp donations valued in excess of \$100,000 (U.S.) were handed over to two local NGOs, and tens of thousands of dollars' worth of medicines were donated to local health agencies. The statistics, however, represent only a part of the overall PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP success story of this visit.

Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations the U.S. Navy has been permitted to call upon Vietnamese ports only four times. However, during a January 2007 visit by Admiral Gary Roughead, then commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet (now of U.S. Fleet Forces Command), Vietnam's Ministry of Defense informally broached the possibility of a visit to Vietnam under the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP rubric, as a special case, a humanitarian-assistance activity to be hosted by the Ministry of Health, rather than a defense-related port call. Admiral Roughead immediately grasped the import of this subtle overture, and the wheels were soon set in motion to turn it into reality.

During subsequent discussions with the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Health, it was stressed that the lessons of the U.S.-led disaster relief operations in the wake of the 2004 tsunami and the 2006 Leyte landslide might have profound relevance for Vietnam, a country that is itself prone to typhoons, floods, and mudslides. A visiting U.S. Navy warship could enable a multinational humanitarian mission that could in turn help Vietnam's national and local authorities work through the planning and coordination that would inevitably be required to facilitate response to an actual crisis. The government apparently concurred with this line of reasoning, and soon after, the Ministry of Health was assigned as the official host of the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP visit.

It then fell to an advance team of PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP planners and U.S. Defense Attaché Office staff in Hanoi to find a suitable location for the visit. A preliminary survey was made of three potential sites in central Vietnam (Danang City, Quy Nhon City, and Nha Trang City), but Danang offered the best chance for success, largely because of the local government's extensive experience in hosting visits by foreign warships, but also because of its long history of welcoming foreign medical missions and NGOs. Moreover, as the former base of numerous U.S. Marine and Navy units from 1962 until 1973, Danang was the sentimental favorite of the planners. It was not lost on us that one of the names originally considered for the USS *Peleliu* had been the USS *Da Nang*.

The USS *Constitution* was the first U.S. Navy ship to visit Danang, in May 1845. Unfortunately, that visit ended in firing upon the harbor and the deaths of dozens of Vietnamese—not an auspicious start to military relations. Nearly 120 years later, on 8 March 1965, Marines of Battalion Landing Team 3/9 came ashore at Red Beach 2, just north of modern Danang City. Eventually, this area

became home to the largest American military presence in the Republic of Vietnam's I Corps zone. U.S. Navy Seabees upgraded Danang's Tien Sa Port in the late 1960s to accommodate oceangoing freighters. Also, Danang City's Ngu Hanh Son District had been the primary beneficiary of III Marine Amphibious Force's civic action program, which included extensive medical and dental outreach. Since the end of the war, a number of nongovernmental organizations founded by former American veterans have remained active in this area, and a handful of the clinics involved in P2 outreach had actually been constructed by these groups. It seemed that a return of active-duty American medical providers to this area in partnership with local Vietnamese doctors might help close a painful chapter of a shared history.

By the time a second advance team had visited Danang City in late May 2007, a fair amount of progress had been made toward defining the scope of the visit. Officials from Danang City's Department of Health had provided a list of desired activities, and those recommendations formed the core of the plan. Additionally, a locally based NGO, the East Meets West Foundation, had done much groundwork on several key projects. This round of meetings, however, ended with the realization that limitations imposed by Vietnam would seriously constrain the extent of PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP activities. Health officials were adamant that P2 personnel not perform surgery, nor would they allow any medical or dental work involving Vietnamese citizens to be done aboard ship. Vietnamese law, they claimed, prohibited foreign doctors from performing surgeries in Vietnam. But NGOs like Operation Smile had been doing just that since at least 1996; clearly, there was something else afoot. These restrictions would limit what the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP could ultimately achieve in Vietnam. Still, there was much that could be accomplished.

It was also determined during this advance-team visit that Danang's Tien Sa Port could not accommodate *Peleliu*. The ship would need to remain at anchor; personnel and equipment would need to be transported between ship and shore every day. Because helicopters had been ruled out by Vietnam early on, and since there were no U.S. Coast Guard-certified water taxis, we would have to request authority to operate the ship's utility landing craft (LCUs). This permission was not a foregone conclusion, as LCUs had significant historical "baggage" for the Vietnamese. Craft like these had last plied the waters of Danang Harbor before 1973, when the situation had been markedly different. During the concluding lunch for the second round of advance-team meetings in Danang, a senior member of the city's Foreign Affairs Department leaned across the table and told me quite bluntly that he had been a member of the Viet Cong for six years and that he had spent much of that time living in tunnels. The remark was not meant as a rebuff or a warning, yet it did serve as a reminder that despite

reassurances that the Vietnamese have put the past behind them, the war's legacy remains deeply engraved in the individual and collective psyches of the nation's leadership. We could take nothing for granted.

Back in Hanoi, the International Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Health was briefed on a preliminary plan that had been refined over the preceding weeks. Generally speaking, officials appeared supportive of the broad outline, but they also reaffirmed restrictions on medical procedures and insisted that *Peleliu* be referred to as a "hospital ship" in all discussions with the press. They also seemed preoccupied with the question of which uniforms would be worn by American and foreign military personnel working ashore. Finally, Ministry of Health officials declared that they would need the prime minister's approval of the overall plan, and we offered to provide a detailed concept of operations to assist them in developing their briefing to him. In retrospect, it is clear that this PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP mission had enormous political risk for its advocates within Vietnam's government and that they were attempting to remove any risk that was avoidable so as not to jeopardize the broader benefits of the visit. It became increasingly apparent over the next few months that elements in Vietnam's government were very dubious about this mission, but it also seemed that our adaptability and responsiveness to concerns could inoculate our supporters against any unwarranted criticism.

Developing the promised concept of operations was a serious challenge, for a variety of reasons. Although bilateral military relations between the United States and Vietnam had improved steadily in recent years, progress had been constrained by a number of factors, not least of them the memory of American involvement in Vietnam's long history of conflict. That nation's proximity to the People's Republic of China possibly also played a role in its efforts to downplay the military aspect of the planned visit while stressing the humanitarian. This "spin" not only made the visit more palatable to Vietnamese hard-liners but helped to mitigate the government's concerns about any appearance of prematurely accelerating a naval relationship with the United States.

Drafting a comprehensive plan for the Ministry of Health was also complicated by the nonstandard planning documents used by the P2 staff, a hodgepodge of papers and spreadsheets assembled with great care and much detail but little consistency across functional areas. Each area had a solid plan, but there was no grand structure that drew them all together. Still, by mid-June, sufficient data had been collected to craft a comprehensive concept of operations for submission to the Ministry of Health. This document covered in detail not only all the planned outreach activities but also uniforms, customs, immigration, medical-provider credentialing, liberty (shore leave) for the crew, LCU operations, force protection, and protocol.

By late June, a team of P2 planners “embedded” in U.S. Defense Attaché Office Hanoi had been cleared by the ministry to begin working exclusively with the Danang City Foreign Affairs Department and Department of Health. A third advance visit was conducted to finalize the concept and work out unresolved problems, but because final approval by the prime minister had not yet been received, many key city offices, such as customs, police, and border defense, were unwilling to discuss matters of substance. Vietnam’s often Byzantine bureaucracy prevents subordinates from acting without explicit guidance from higher echelons, and for a visit of this profile local officials were reluctant to make support commitments without “top cover.” The advance team was forced to return to Hanoi with many important issues still pending.

Defense Attaché Office and PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP planners traveled once again from Hanoi to Danang City the week prior to the arrival of *Peleliu*, scheduled for 15 July, to complete preparations. In the following days the team made last-minute site surveys and met with local authorities, NGOs, and other important players. A final countdown meeting with the Danang City authorities was held on the 13th to reach consensus on the few remaining unresolved problems and review the proposed daily schedule. As the meeting began, however, it became clear that a number of important previously agreed-upon items were now stumbling blocks. Specifically, it was made known not only that the Department of Customs had received none of the necessary documents for the importation of P2 equipment and pharmaceuticals but that an entirely new uniform policy would be necessary. The government of Vietnam had recently decided that military uniforms would not be permitted for any P2 activities, with the single exception of liberty. Worse yet, the plan to operate LCUs had not yet been approved.

It fell to the Defense Attaché Office representatives to reiterate forcefully the centrality of the landing-craft arrangement, without which the entire mission would have to be scrubbed. The U.S. naval attaché stepped briefly out of the room for some “damage control” with individuals from the ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs; within ten minutes the matter had been resolved. Even without authorization from the national government, local authorities would permit us to proceed in accordance with the proposed concept of operations—unless we received guidance to the contrary, we would simply proceed as planned. The ship’s gig (a boat for the use of the commanding officer), however, could not be used, and no latitude was given with respect to the new uniform policy. Furthermore, a request to employ the Marine Forces Pacific Band ashore was denied outright. While these seemingly disconnected pronouncements were met with not a little dismay and frustration among the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP embarked staff, they were consistent with Vietnam’s decision-making process and reflective of certain latent sensitivities toward the mission.

Decision making in Vietnam is not only very centralized but can quickly bog down in collaboration and consensus seeking. Decisions, especially sensitive ones, must be discussed and coordinated far in advance, and the interim between request and decision is often lengthy. The diplomatic note requesting authorization for the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP visit had been submitted by the American embassy on 15 May, but a formal response was not received until 10 July, nearly two months later—though there was never any real doubt that the mission would be approved. Delays in critical information from the P2 planners put Vietnam's officials farther behind in their decision-making cycle for several important and contentious issues. For example, it took several weeks to lay out precisely how landing craft would be used between ship and shore. Consequently, a formal employment plan could not be submitted to the government until 3 July; certain vital elements were still pending on the eve of the ship's arrival.

Danang authorities admitted at the 13 July meeting that their own red tape had prevented them from receiving many key planning documents until two days before, though they had been submitted to the Ministry of Health weeks prior. Still, as in the case of the LCUs, local authorities without guidance from above bravely permitted us to move forward in the best interest of success. It is not at all surprising that some requests were denied. It was because the captain's gig was a matter of convenience and not central to the mission, as the LCUs were, that officials drew a line and stood firm. Moreover, bands, especially military bands, are used in Vietnam for powerfully emotive propaganda purposes; granting permission for their use was a more politically sensitive decision than local officials were willing to make. Also, Vietnam made important concessions on pilotage fees and visa requirements. The revelation about nonreceipt of paperwork with less than forty-eight hours to go was less than welcome, but experience of working with government officials gave the Defense Attaché Office a certain, qualified confidence that everything would somehow come together at the very last moment. Sure enough, by late in the afternoon of 14 July assurances had been received that most of the issues of concern were resolved.

Negotiation with Vietnamese officials can be a plodding and frustrating experience and often requires deep reserves of patience, but in no way did discussions—even over uniform policies, LCU employment, or band performances—ever suggest an obstinacy born of antipathy or, worse, a blatant effort to hold the U.S. Navy at arm's length. Yet a tendency to read such attitudes into Vietnamese behavior was often prevalent among Americans, many of whom had no experience of Vietnam beyond history books or films. On the day of *Peleliu's* arrival, for instance, a busload of sailors on liberty stopped in Danang's Hon Market. Reports indicate that the bus was quickly mobbed by locals and that some of the

passengers believed they were being warned not to get off. Fearful for their safety, the sailors quickly moved on. But earlier U.S. port calls to Danang suggest that it is most unlikely that these young sailors were ever threatened. It is far more probable that local vendors were expressing their high hopes for these cash-laden customers a bit too enthusiastically. Expectations can shape perceptions, however, and these sailors likely expected a negative reception from a hostile people still seething with wartime memories. Consequently, that is how they perceived the event. The reality is that most Vietnamese were born after the war and that few still bear malice toward Americans. Fewer still would ever indulge in that sort of public display. Likewise, there was often a knee-jerk tendency on the American side to attribute a bit more connivance to Vietnam's legendary bureaucracy than was warranted by the facts. If there are ghosts in Vietnam's bureaucratic machine, there clearly are in ours as well.

Once PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP activities began in earnest in Danang City on 15 July with the ship's arrival, few substantial problems arose. The P2 "embed team" seemed to develop a real appreciation for the nuances of Vietnamese culture and became quite skilled at working within the host-nation negotiating paradigm. Danang City authorities also shifted into high gear and were able to coordinate support requests rapidly. "Pop-up" requirements were dealt with rapidly and with minimal fuss. By the fourth day, the mission had hit its groove as P2 and host-nation counterparts achieved the level of familiarity and trust that is essential for a productive and sustained work relationship in Vietnam.

Looking back, the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP mission to Vietnam achieved many notable successes. For the first time, a U.S. Navy ship visited that nation as a partner of a civilian ministry in support of local civilian authorities. This partnership set a precedent for cooperation in meteorological, medical, and search-and-rescue activities, without accelerating the bilateral defense relationship at a pace beyond that which the People's Army was capable of or willing to accept.

The P2 visit was also the first time in forty years that a foreign navy had been permitted to use landing craft in Vietnam's territorial waters. Despite the impact that LCUs had on an already congested harbor and the local pilotage and coast-guard resources required to support their numerous daily trips, local officials proved very cooperative. Nearly a hundred cross-harbor movements and the transportation of city officials and their families to shipboard tours and receptions likely gave local authorities confidence in the U.S. Navy's ability to employ embarked boats in a safe and low-key manner in Vietnam's waters. Future requests may be viewed more favorably and require less discussion. This greater level of trust may eventually extend to the use of embarked helicopters to reach remote and underserved areas.

Finally, this was the first time that the government of Vietnam had accepted an invitation to send observers to join a military-led humanitarian-assistance mission. When *Peleliu* left on 25 July, three physicians from Danang General Hospital were on board to participate in follow-on P2 activities in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The Ministry of Defense had declined an invitation to send an observer of its own, but participation in an American military mission by any Vietnamese official at all was a positive step toward broader cooperation. The doctors are still aboard *Peleliu* at this writing, but ideally, they will return to Vietnam with positive feelings about and practical, firsthand experience in humanitarian-assistance operations and will urge their government to seize other similar opportunities in the future.

Despite initial concerns that Vietnam's Ministry of Culture and Information would severely restrict domestic reporting about PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP activities, media coverage of the visit and the activities of *Peleliu's* crew turned out to be remarkably extensive and positive. PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP public affairs personnel, acutely sensitive to Vietnam's concern about perceptions, wisely downplayed the ship's primary warfighting mission, emphasizing instead its role as an enabling platform for humanitarian work and drawing attention to its medical capabilities. Over eighty articles appeared online, and dozens of print articles ran in regional papers as well as the state-controlled dailies. In addition, Vietnam Television and the Voice of Vietnam carried reports about P2 activities in prime time. Given the number of Vietnamese who access the Internet (Vietnam Net, the country's largest online news service, receives fifty million page hits per day), the impact of this coverage must have been significant. Stories about ethnic Vietnamese personnel participating in the P2 mission proved especially popular. That this visit received such coverage in a news market that is entirely state controlled suggests that Vietnam desired to trumpet this visit as an example of its receptiveness to international humanitarian assistance. In fact, the large number of domestic journalists who registered to cover PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP activities signaled early on that Vietnam's government would not let this mission fail.

Beyond the palpable excitement of watching medical professionals from the United States, Vietnam, and seven other countries working alongside NGO partners to provide important humanitarian services to underserved urban and rural communities, the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP mission proved groundbreaking in many ways. A senior leader of the Danang City People's Committee was so impressed with his ship tour that he later commented that we should make more use of the ship's facilities during subsequent visits. One senior Department of Health official even suggested that this sort of event be conducted annually in

Vietnam. As an initial, trust-building event, the PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP mission to Vietnam appears to have achieved precisely what was intended of it.

Everyone involved can see how far we have come and how much has been accomplished in terms of building trust and developing a relationship that will bear fruit for years to come. A precedent of cooperation now exists that, should a serious natural disaster once again hit Vietnam, will prove of inestimable value in facilitating a rapid international humanitarian response. Vietnam is feeling its way into the arena of peacekeeping and regional disaster response; participation in PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP, albeit limited, may ultimately be remembered as a tentative and yet bold first step toward a more assertive role in the future.