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TRANSCRIPT
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Lunch & Keynote Speech

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FEATURING
Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR)
Member, Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy

CSIS EXPERTS
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Gregory B. Poling:

Welcome back. For those outside the room, if you can finish making up plates and make your way inside, we’re ready to start our lunch keynote. So, for any who tuned in since we started, good to see you again. I’m Greg Poling. I direct the Southeast Asia Program here at CSIS. We’re very happy that everybody stuck around for this all-day conference on the U.S.-Vietnam relationship.

And we’re very honored to have as our lunch keynote Senator Jeff Merkley, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy. Senator Merkley has served as a U.S. senator from Oregon since 2009. He led a bicameral delegation to Vietnam in the spring and has been a champion of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. He has a real job to get to today and some voting to do, so I don’t want to belabor the introduction any more than that. Please join me in welcoming up to the podium Senator Jeff Merkley. (Applause.)

Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR):

Well, it’s a – thank you, Greg, and it’s a pleasure to see you all. We are immersed over on Capitol Hill with the challenges in Ukraine, in the Middle East, the southern border, international humanitarian aid, and so forth. It’s a pleasure to come and talk about an area of the world where there are so many positive developments, and particularly a pleasure to see you, Ambassador.

And you know, this partnership with Vietnam is such an opportunity for both of our nations. And thus, the concentration that CSIS is putting on advancing that partnership is very valued.

The delegation that I led in April came out of my work on international economic development, but specifically out of the relationship I had with Senator Leahy and Tim Rieser, who worked for Senator Leahy, and the importance with his retirement of someone to step forward and really help carry the message about those war legacy programs. So the trip was very much focused on those core pieces of the war legacy initiatives that Senator Leahy had undertaken.

While we were there, one of our visits was to Bien Hoa Base. And this is one of the two bases – the other being Da Nang – where a lot of barrels of Agent Orange had been stored, so-called because the barrels had an orange stripe around them. These were the defoliant that – extremely toxic, cancer-causing. And those – many of those barrels had leaked, creating massive contamination at those two bases.

The Da Nang cleanup has been completed. And if you’re trying to picture what does it mean to clean up – (laughs) – it means taking and building a massive oven and basically cooking the soil that has been contaminated to a
level of degree that it essentially breaks down the Agent Orange and makes that safe again – although it’s a huge, huge undertaking, and it involves a lot of testing to see where and how deep and so on and so forth. So one of those projects is completed, but the second is still underway at Bien Hoa.

But a piece of it has been cleaned up. So there’s an initial peace park within the broader project. And there is a bench at one edge of that – of that peace park that has – it’s the Senator Leahy Bench, and it has a quote from him saying, “We cannot change history, but together we can build a better future.” And I think that phrase is really the foundation of how we’ve been approaching our relationship with Vietnam, that together we can build a better future.

We could have remained bitter enemies, but we chose partnership – partnership to clean up the Agent Orange – or, contamination; partnership to find and defuse unexploded ordnance that’s scattered across the landscape. There are still hundreds of thousands of cluster munitions and mines left over from the Vietnam legacy. So all that we have found and cleaned up, enormous number; enormous number remain. So that continues to be a key project. A partnership to assist families that have been affected by exploding ordnance or by Agent Orange contamination. And a partnership to identify the remains of Vietnam’s wandering souls who were lost on the battlefield and return those remains to the families. And the U.S. is bringing the best DNA technology in the world to assist in that effort. So, really, it all amounts to healing the wounds of war and using that as a foundation for an expanded partnership.

So I was very pleased that, following the delegation that I led last year, there were a lot of high-level meetings. Secretary of state was there. And then President Biden went in September, where he and General Secretary Trong upgraded the relationship. I’m sure you’ve been talking about that a lot today, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. And today’s event touches on some of the key pillars of that partnership and the opportunities for the future.

And one is certainly economic cooperation. It is pretty stunning to visit Vietnam and see the level of economic enterprise: the amount of infrastructure that has been built in just a couple intensive decades; expanding of sector – market-economy sector within the – within the country; certainly, a hugely growing manufacturing sector. And that manufacturing sector, that’s going to continue to grow at a fierce clip. There’s a lot of opportunity for companies that have been operating in China and want to have a foot outside of China due to some of the complexities of our relationship with China, and Vietnam is a great alternative. Also, there is the opportunity of companies that are looking to have their supply chain be developed with renewable energy – to develop
partnerships with Vietnam so that they – as renewable energy expands in Vietnam, they can build out zero-carbon or minimal-carbon manufacturing supply chains. This opportunity for Vietnam to transition from a coal-based economy to a renewable clean-energy economy as a destination for 21st-century manufacturing and energy leadership is a very real opportunity.

Working together, Vietnam and the United States, we can deepen commerce, we can strengthen supply chains, we can do so across the Lower Mekong River Basin and southeast more broadly. And speaking of the Mekong Delta, I’m proud to have partnered with Senator Sullivan of Alaska. So we had a bipartisan resolution recognizing the importance of the Mekong River to Southeast Asia and the role of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership in promoting prosperity.

In addition, there is the opportunity to work on projects in the delta to address environmental challenges. The delta has been really strongly affected by the upriver dams, which contain the silt that would otherwise be in the river. The lack of that silt means there’s a tremendous amount of erosion. You also have rising seawater creating saltwater intrusion. You also have a response to that being groundwater pumping that is causing land settling, which is adding to the saltwater-intrusion challenge. And there’s chemical contamination. So there’s a series of issues for us to work on in partnership to help with that.

A second pillar – first pillar being economic cooperation – security cooperation. Our countries have a common commitment to regional peace and stability. We can work together with the multinational institutions and platforms like ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, strengthen the rules-based international order to create a more secure, prosperous future for Vietnam, for the United States – really, for all of Southeast Asia.

A third pillar is the people-to-people connections. Back in the 1990s, when I was head of the World Affairs Council of Oregon, we hosted a lot of delegations from Vietnam. Now there are some 7,000 Vietnamese who have come to the United States under different people-to-people connections, including the International Visitor Leadership Program. And that’s a – you know, that’s a significant amount of connection, and it’s one we want to build on.

And one way we’re building on it is the re-establishment of the – well, not actually re-establishment; first-time establishment of the Peace Corps. In 2022, I was working to accelerate the confirmation of Carol Spahn as Peace Corps director to get her confirmed in time to go to Vietnam to celebrate the opening of the first Peace Corps program, right around Christmastime. And that’s the first-ever Peace Corps connection we’ve had with Vietnam, and
now we have a second cohort. So the program’s expanding from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City.

So none of this would have been possible without the foundation created by those who have gone before us, and particularly the war legacy programs that Senator Leahy championed. And imagine along with me you are now sitting in that small section of rehabilitated land at Bien Hoa Base, the edge of the peace park, sitting on the Leahy Bench, and you’re looking across this field of grass. And at the other end of the field, you will see two fighter jets – one American, one Vietnamese. And those two fighter jets have been positioned so that they are not facing each other. They are not in combat with each other, but they are parallel with each other, facing in the same direction, very much symbolizing the partnership of Vietnam and the United States going forward together.

Thank you. (Applause.)

Mr. Poling: Well, Senator, thank you so much for I think some very poignant remarks about how far we’ve come and how far we have yet to go.

Now, I’ll apologize at the top; as I said, the senator has to get back up on the Hill for a vote, so we’re going to have to truncate the Q&A session. But he has agreed to take a few questions from prerogative of the moderator. So anything else you had for the senator, save it for the next questions. Throw it at DASD Ford or something; she’ll have to deal with it.

Let me start with where you kind of left off, the role of some of these champions in the Congress over the years like Senator Leahy, Senator McCain, Senator Kerry, who helped really drive normalization. Here we are now three decades later. How has the role of the U.S. Congress evolved and changed to continue to push this partnership?

Sen. Merkley: Well, I’m glad you started with mentioning the role of Senator McCain and Senator Kerry, since both were combatants in the Vietnam War. And, of course, Senator McCain has a special role because of his detention after his plane was shot down. I visited the spot where he was drug from the lake with his parachute. And the fact is, to have individuals who had been participants in war reach out and reconnect, they paved the path for everyone else to reconnect across those boundaries. And so that really was very, very significant. And that’s why the war legacy programs authorized by Congress, and reauthorized, and so now we’re looking across the decades. The programs are not inexpensive. They require advocacy and competition with many other programs around the world. And this is – so this is an ongoing project.
And I was very pleased that Senator Van Hollen could go with me on that trip. Senator Van Hollen is chair of the Foreign Relations – of the subcommittee dealing with Southeast Asia. So that creates an anchor. Senator Coons is head of the subcommittee on appropriations that deals with international aid. So that’s another key connection. Tim Rieser, who really was a key – you know, we always – we call him Ambassador Tim. (Laughter.) I mean, he did so much making – where Senator Leahy made several trips through – I think three or four trips over a period – a span of a couple of decades. Tim did so much continuously and is still now working with Senator Welch. So very much helping to sustain the congressional side.

The congressional side is also important in some of the key deals that are being worked out between our two nations. One of those is certainly the semiconductor industry. While the CHIPS Act is primarily focused around bringing semiconductor manufacturing back to the United States, it also has a piece of partnership with Vietnam in producing semiconductor chips. So you have – within the CHIPS Act, you have the International Technology Security and Innovation Fund. And that is that is a key. Also, Congress is always involved in the issue of human rights. And so, carrying on a dialogue. And the agreement between the United States and Vietnam is to work together in open dialogue about human rights issues. So those can be particularly sensitive and difficult, coming with different perspectives. But with the foundation for communication that we’ve built, I feel like we’re in a much better position to address those issues. But those will be issues that continue to come up in Congress as well.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. Let’s pull back a little bit and talk about the value of the comprehensive strategic partnership overall, to both Washington and Hanoi. From your perspective, what does this elevation mean for both sides?

Sen. Merkley: Well, when I was in Vietnam it was brought up time and time again that both nations were aspiring towards this higher level of connection. This is not a framework – so if you’re mostly involved in South America, or Central America, or Africa, this is not the framework that exists. But in Asia, this strategic partnership has these kinds of established different key levels – comprehensive, strategic. And so it’s both substantive in terms of the negotiations that led to establishment of that highest level, but it’s also symbolic about the strength of the relationship between our two nations.

One of the issues that’s hovering in the background is certainly the role of China in Southeast Asia. Security concerns about the South China Sea, about conflicts that are occurring with multiple nations, and how do you have a rules-based order. So the partnership is important in that regard. Certainly, agricultural collaboration is a piece of this. You have in
the Mekong Delta, I think, half of the rice in the country, a lot of freshwater fish, three-quarters of the fruit produce. And so agricultural collaboration’s a piece of the of the comprehensive partnership. Certainly, the continuation of the war legacy programs are part of that.

On the economic side, the supply chains, that the U.S. is looking for – to have uninterrupted supply chains. And, just for example, during COVID – and if any of you were buying a car last year you would find it far more expensive because of the supply chain problems that had occurred due to the lack of chips that were critical to the production of cars. My son was very excited that the first used car he bought basically doubled in value as a result. So there were some winners in that situation. And then the partnership in terms of infrastructure development for ports, and working together on the issue of illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing, which is important on an environmental level but also on an economic side. So many, many pieces of this partnership.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. Let’s drill down on one more piece that you brought up in your opening remarks, which is potential U.S. support for Vietnam’s clean energy transition. Where do you see the opportunities?

Sen. Merkley: So let’s just step back for a moment from the direct relationship, and look at the broader challenge of climate chaos. We had the warmest year in the history of human civilization last year. My home state has a fire season that has roughly doubled in length. We have lost 20 feet of average snowfall in the Cascades, affecting the water supply both for our trout and salmon streams but also for agriculture. We have acidification of the Pacific Ocean affecting very much the sea life off our coast. That’s just my state.

Well, Vietnam is a low-lying country. So it also has a series of environmental challenges that are accentuated by rising sea levels, stronger storms, so on and so forth. This is the biggest challenge human civilization has had before it. And right now, we’re failing. The key test is how much carbon dioxide and methane are we putting into the atmosphere each year. And it’s still – it’s still rising. Not that long ago, we were going up by one part per million per year in carbon dioxide. Now we’re at three parts per million per year. In other words, accelerating upward. We’re not leveling off and coming down.

I say all this because this means that this issue of the transition to renewable energy from fossil fuels is essential. And the United States has a lot of work to do on this. Our carbon dioxide and methane emissions are going up. And one of the conversations I’ve been having with our administration is: As we partner with the world, we have to have the power of our example. Which means I’m somewhat critical – or, quite critical – of some of the new fossil fuel projects that have been approved here in the United States. We have to
do better at home, but we also want to work in partnership with every country of the world.

And Vietnam has laid out the goal of zero carbon emissions by 2050. And they've laid out the goal of phasing out the use of coal by 2040, and to cut methane emissions by 30 percent. These goals that are even as far off as 2030, or certainly as 2050, they can be real or they can be a mirage. And the challenge we have – all nations in the world, working together – is to have those goals not be a mirage, not just be something, well, it’s way out there and we have a goal, but how are we actually going to get there? What concrete steps can we take to get there? And in the context of Vietnam in December, so last month, Vietnam finalized its just energy transition partnership, or JETP. And that partnership is, in theory, going to develop more than $15 billion of private sector capital and public sector support to accelerate the transition for Vietnam to renewable energy. So JETP is a key piece of that effort.

And, well, that’s the type of challenging conversation for all of our nations. For the United States, right now the administration is wrestling with whether to approve another LNG export facility. What we know is that fossil gas, methane gas, natural gas, if you – if you will, is, when you look at the entire lifecycle, as damaging as coal to climate. And if it’s turned into LNG, it’s more damaging than coal. So we have our work at home, but every nation has that work. We have to work in collaboration. And I think in terms of Vietnam having these aggressive goals, that’s something to celebrate. And then with JETP, we’ve got resources to bring to bear. And that transition will also help bring a lot more industry that’s seeking low carbon or zero carbon supply chain. So there’s an economic side to that.

Plus, that Vietnam can be a major provider of solar panels. So that’s another opportunity. For the United States to meet its goal by 2035 of having an electric sector completely free of carbon, of fossil fuels, we have to deploy some 3 billion panels. I’d love to see as many of those possible made in the United States and create jobs here, but the fact is there’s no way – if you look at the number of factories that have to be built – there’s no way we can reach and produce 3 billion panels. So we need partners like Vietnam to produce a tremendous number of panels for their own use, and for us to be able to purchase and use here in the United States.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. We are going to have to cut it off there. For those watching online, we’ll be back at 1:00 with the next panel. And for those here in the room, please join me in thanking the senator for his time. (Applause.)

Sen. Merkley: Thank you all very much.

(END.)