

Diversity and momentum

By H.E. GARETH WARD

AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM



GARETH WARD was appointed Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in July 2018. He joined the FC0 in 1996 and began his career serving as Desk Officer for Hungary and Bulgaria before moving to Moscow as Second Secretary and St Petersburg as Consul General. His subsequent career took him to Beijing and he then became Head of China Department at the Foreign Office.

As I complete my first two months as British Ambassador to Vietnam, and prepare to accompany Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh on his visit to the UK, I have been struck by the diversity and momentum that now exists in our relationship.

The recent visit to Vietnam of HMS Albion, the flagship of the Royal Navy, was a highlight for me. Albion spent several days in port at Ho Chi Minh City as part of her deployment to the Asia-Pacific region - a clear signal of Britain's global maritime presence, and commitment to freedom of navigation. I also participated in the departure ceremony for the first ever Vietnamese UN peacekeeping contingent, who flew to South Sudan to take over from British medics, running the Level 2 Military Hospital in Bentiu to support the UN mission as it seeks to provide peace and security. Given that the UK and Vietnam only signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defence co-operation 7 years ago, and posted Defence Attachés in each other's capitals in 2013, this level of joint activity is impressive.

At the start of the academic year, I gained an insight into the power of British education, as I met a group of 30 Chevening scholars, the best and brightest young Vietnamese professionals, heading off to start graduate degrees in the UK's world-renowned universities. I also opened the new campus of the British University of Vietnam, partnered with Staffordshire and London Universities, which provides higher education to UK standards. I witnessed the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the British Council and the Hanoi City Education Department to increase teacher training, as they implement the A-level curriculum in several senior schools. Altogether over 25,000 teachers across Vietnam have had access to British Council skills programmes to improve the quality of education. There are now 50 joint degree programmes operating in Vietnam with British Universities to widen access to UK education.

I have enjoyed meeting hundreds of British citizens living and working in Vietnam. They range from long-term residents who have been in business here for 21 years, to newly arrived teachers for the booming English language sector. The numbers of British tourists attracted by Vietnam's wonderful scenery and culture is also on the up. This year we

expect around 300,000 will visit (up from 100,000 ten years ago). I have already worked with several British companies here in market, and looking to expand. I also met the board of the British Business group in the dynamic Ho Chi Minh City, a group which has been supporting companies since 1998 and now has 450 members across all sectors.

As I am writing this article, I am looking forward to the biggest public event the UK has ever held in Vietnam, which is the Great Britain Festival on the shores of the historic Hoan Kien lake. Tens of thousands of people will watch and listen to fashion, music, and education from Britain, as well as engage with our awareness raising campaigns on the illegal wildlife trade, climate change and other shared problems. The centrepiece will be an open-air concert by the London Symphony Orchestra.

Finally, an attempt at some historical perspective. Before leaving the UK I met with a diplomatic predecessor of mine who had worked in Hanoi in 1980. At that time the bilateral relationship was still in its infancy, contacts were difficult and co-operation was extremely limited. There were lots of barriers to be broken down. 10 years ago, another of my predecessors wrote for First Magazine ahead of a previous Prime Ministerial visit to the UK, and whilst the relationship had been transformed, the top story was of deep co-operation through development assistance for poverty reduction.

In 2018 we have entered a new era of policy dialogue and research collaboration for future challenges. The Vietnamese Government has prioritised anti-corruption and improving the business environment, which are areas where we are well placed to provide expertise, advising on new legislation in those areas. We are also expanding our co-operation across various sectors of mutual interest including financial services, renewable energy, green finance, healthcare, smart cities and digital construction. I am most excited by the fact we have already established 29 research partnerships between UK and Vietnamese universities. This includes cutting edge clinical research to address the spread of anti-microbial resistance. Even more to my surprise, we are soon to launch a project to use satellite assets of the UK Space Agency to forecast dengue fever outbreaks in Vietnam so that action can be taken to prevent them. Our bilateral co-operation has reached outer-space!

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