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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Significance of 2nd Visit by U.S. Navy Aircraft Carrier

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We would like to ask you a few questions regarding the visit of a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier to Vietnam for a report my organisation is writing today.

Q1. What do you think is the significance of a U.S. carrier visiting Danang at this time, the second visit in two years, especially against the back drop of the Philippines' recent decision to cancel the Visiting Force agreement with the U.S.?

ANSWER: When the United States first approached Vietnam to secure agreement for a friendly port call by a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, Hanoi was reluctant to approve out of concern about how China would react.

In May 2017, Japan secured Vietnam's permission for the *JS Izumo* Landing Platform Dock, a large aircraft carrier by another name, to visit the Cam Ranh International Port as part of its participation in the Pacific Partnership mission. This paved the way for Vietnam to approve the visit to Da Nang by the *USS Carl Vinson* in March 2018.

In 2019 the U.S. unsuccessfully lobbied Vietnam to approve the visit of a U.S. aircraft carrier on an annual basis. This proposal was part of a larger U.S. diplomatic initiative to raise bilateral relations to a strategic partnership.

It is likely that China's intrusion into Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone in waters near Vanguard Bank for several months last year proved to be a tipping point. Late in the year Vietnam released a White Book entitled *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*. This policy document declared, "Viet Nam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries..." The hosting of the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* from 5-8 March is the likely outcome of this new declaratory policy.

It is more than likely Vietnam approved the visit of the U.S. aircraft carrier before President Rodrigo Duterte officially announced that he was giving notice to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States. Nevertheless, if the U.S. does loose access to the Philippines as a result of the termination of the VFA, U.S. access to ports in Vietnam on a regular basis will become all the more urgent to support U.S. naval presence patrols in the South China Sea.

Q2. It seems this visit will not create as much fanfare as the last one. There are rumours that both governments wanted to keep a low profile about this. Your comment?

ANSWER: The press guidance issued by Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in late February certainly provides evidence that Vietnam wanted the forthcoming visit to be a low-keyed affair.

The press guidance sent out to accredited correspondents working in Vietnam only mentioned the visit of "U.S. Navy Ships" and not an aircraft carrier. This press guidance also informed the correspondents that they were "invited to listen to *short statements* and ask questions at a *brief press conference*" on 5 March (emphasis added). Since the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet will be present and speak briefly this indicates the U.S. agreed to keep the visit low key.

Finally, the press guidance ended with this statement, "*Information about this visit is not for public release until further notice.*"

Q3. On a related subject, do you think the U.S.'s decision to cancel the U.S.-ASEAN summit scheduled for mid-March was purely due to fear of virus corona or was there another reason?

ANSWER: The jury is still out on that question; but I am inclined to believe that the coronavirus explanation was a plausible but not convincing explanation. As late as 27 February, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was quoted as saying, "The ASEAN summit is still on... the second weekend in March in Las Vegas." The following day the State Department officially announced that the summit was cancelled "as countries around the globe continued to fight the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19)." It is unclear from this wording whether the United States cancelled the summit on its own accord or in response to a request from one or more ASEAN members.

As of this writing, no ASEAN state has come forward to argue that its leader had to remain home to fight the coronavirus. In fact, the U.S.-ASEAN Special Meeting would have been the perfect venue to co-ordinate U.S. and ASEAN responses to this virus.

There is another straw in the wind. It was already known before the cancellation that Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte would not attend. Kin Phea, Director of the International Relations Institute of Cambodia's Royal Academy, was quoted in the *Phnom Penh Post* as noting "some ASEAN leaders may not have attended anyway – including the leaders of the Philippines, Myanmar and Malaysia." The political crisis in Malaysia would most certainly have precluded Prime Minister Mahathir from travelling to Las Vegas.

This leads to the conclusion that the special meeting was cancelled by the U.S. because several ASEAN states were reportedly not enthusiastic about attending because no specific agenda had been agreed. This points to confusion between the State Department and The White House.

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