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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Trump Visit Scene Setter

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We are preparing a report on President Trump's state visit to Hanoi and how it will impact on Vietnamese foreign policy, particularly in light of the Party Congress in Beijing. We request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1) How well has Vietnam negotiated American foreign policy in the Trump era? Has Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit earlier this year to the White House born any fruit?

ANSWER: Vietnam was quick off the mark after Donald Trump was elected president. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first leader from Southeast Asian to meet with President Trump at The White House. Their joint statement reaffirmed their commitment to enhance the comprehensive partnership agreement reached under the Obama Administration. Shortly after, Vietnam's Minister of National Defence visited Secretary of Defense James Mattis at the Pentagon. A U.S. Navy aircraft carrier will call in at the Cam Ranh International Post next year. Finally, President Trump not only accepted Vietnam's invitation as Chair of APEC 2017 to attend the APEC summit in Da Nang but also to make an official visit to Hanoi. The most important result of all these interactions is that Vietnam has been reassured of continued U.S. support for a raft of programs initiated by President Obama.

Q2) The Hanoi presidential visit was announced very late. How surprising was the decision to include Hanoi on the Asia tour (as opposed to Da Nang)?

ANSWER: Vietnam sounded out U.S. officials about issuing President Trump an invitation to make an official visit to Vietnam as soon as he took office. The late announcement of Trump's acceptance was somewhat surprising as his visit took shape and included stops in South Korea, Japan and China in addition to Vietnam for APEC and Manila for the ASEAN-US summit.

Q3) Has Hanoi interpreted Xi Jinping's elevated status, or anything else related to the CPC [Chinese Communist Party] party congress, as threatening? Do they have strong opinions about Xi?

ANSWER: Vietnam is very well informed about developments in China and Xi's renewal of term and his elevated status was expected. They have worked with Xi for five years already and all top Vietnamese leaders have made visits to Beijing. Vietnam received Xi in Hanoi in late 2015. Vietnamese leaders are very pragmatic. They view China as

their major threat but at the same time view China as presenting opportunities. In other words, Vietnam concentrates on managing bilateral relations using a variety of conduits including party-to-party, government-to-government, military-to-military and people-to-people. Whatever Vietnamese leaders think privately about Xi, they fully appreciate a leader who builds a strong communist party as the dominant force in society, weeds out corrupt officials, promotes socialism with national characteristics (Vietnam promotes a market economy with socialist orientations), promotes economic development, and keeps society stable.

Q4) How much diplomatic capital is Vietnam expending to get these meetings with Trump, first in the White House with Phuc and now in Hanoi? Is Vietnam the one trying to pull strings to get Trump to pay attention to their concerns, or is the interest mutual at the presidential level?

ANSWER: Recognition must be given to the roles of career diplomat Ted Osius who is ambassador to Vietnam, and Pham Quang Vinh, Vietnamese ambassador to the United States. Both have been instrumental in getting their respective governments to move quickly to keep the momentum going in bilateral relations. Vietnam has emerged as a strong regional player with a growing convergence - but not congruence - of interests with the United States. Of course, Vietnamese leaders are well aware of the importance of relations with the United States as part of their "diversification and multilateralization" of foreign relations. Vietnam vitally needs continued U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia to counter-balance China and to maintain stability in the South China Sea. President Trump, no doubt, had to be educated about the importance of Vietnam as an informal strategic partner. Vietnam pushed all the right buttons; during Prime Minister Phuc's visit - business deals worth several billions of dollars were signed, Vietnam agreed to discuss trade and investment issues with the United States, and Vietnam agreed to improve investment opportunities for American companies, and protect and enforce U.S. intellectual property rights. Trump and Phuc found common ground on the South China Sea as well as stepped up cooperation in defence, security and intelligence.

Q5) What would Hanoi consider to be a successful Trump trip to Hanoi?

ANSWER: Vietnam would consider Trump's visit a success if the joint statement issued after Trump's meeting with President Tran Dai Quang reaffirmed the commitments in the May 2017 Trump-Phuc joint statement and included specific details of how the comprehensive partnership would be enhanced, such as cooperation in defence technology and continued U.S. financial support to clear up dioxin poisoning around Bien Hoa airport.

Q6) Any indication of how Vietnam will try to impress Trump? We've seen, for instance, Saudi Arabia hitting the right tone during the Riyadh visit with their shows of pomp for Trump in the form of gold, personality cult and that funny orb. I'm wondering if Vietnam has any tricks up their sleeve, or if they will keep the ceremonies relatively modest.

ANSWER: President Trump will only be in Hanoi for a short period, a day at most although no official schedule has been released. Vietnam will mobilize huge crowds with American flags (a recent Pew poll showed that 56% of Vietnamese interviewed had a favourable opinion of the United States in contrast to lower approval ratings in

the region). Trump will be given full ceremonial treatment. If time permits Vietnam might arrange for Trump to address the National Assembly. Of course, Trump's visit will coincide with an official visit by Xi Jinping.

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