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Background Brief:

Vice President Harris' Visit to Vietnam: Post-Mortem 3

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We request your analytic input into a report we are preparing on the recent visit of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris to Vietnam and future military cooperation between Vietnam and the United States.

Q1. What is your overall assessment of the result of Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Hanoi?

ANSWER: Both Vietnam and the United States will view Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Hanoi a success.

Vietnam will be pleased to have received a reaffirmation that the Biden Administration intends to strengthen their comprehensive partnership with a priority on combatting the COVID-19 pandemic and economic ties. Harris' pledge to deliver one million doses of Pfizer vaccine was met.

The United States was able to sign a lease on grounds for a new Embassy, get the go ahead for the Peace Corps to become operational, and agreement to establish a regional Center for Diseases Control and Prevention.

Both sides put the ructions of the Trump Administration behind them.

Q2. Vietnam's leaders always state that they will not align with one country against another and will not join any military alliance. Is this a wise choice? Under what circumstance would Vietnam take sides?

ANSWER: Vietnam's long-standing policy of "three no's" has served it well since the late 1990s. In 2019, Vietnam added a fourth no to its Defence White Paper - no use or threat to use force in international relations. But Vietnam added a caveat, "Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Viet Nam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries..." In other words, Vietnam put China – and any other potential adversary – on notice that its policy of "four no's" could change if its national interests were infringed, presumably in the South China Sea.

Q3. During the visit, Vice President Harris seemed quite eager to talk about the possibility of upgrading the relationship between the two countries to a strategic partnership. The response from the Vietnamese side was not as enthusiastic. What is your assessment of the reaction from each side?

ANSWER: It is clear since the Biden Administration issued its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance in March that Vietnam was viewed as a priority security power (along with Singapore). Marc Knapper, President Biden's nominee as the next Ambassador to Vietnam, has pledged to work to upgrade relations to a strategic partnership. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin asked his hosts to consider ways to upgrade bilateral relations. A read out of Vice President Harris' meeting with President Nguyen Xuan Phuc quotes her as saying, "we are here to consider doing what we can to upgrade our relationship as a strategic partnership."

Vietnam's leaders reacted cautiously to both Austin and Harris and stressed building on and strengthening the comprehensive partnership first. Vietnamese leaders specifically mentioned making economic relations the foundation to this endeavour. Vietnam is wary of committing itself to any agreement that has the appearance of being aimed at China. Vietnam's second no includes "[not] siding with one country against another."

It appears likely that the U.S. and Vietnam will eventually enter into discussions on raising their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership. This will be a drawn-out affair because both must focus on strengthening the current comprehensive partnership.

Q4. What are the limitations and challenges in the current U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership that the two countries face?

ANSWER: The comprehensive partnership includes nine areas of cooperation. Three areas need to be further developed – economic ties, defence and security, and promoting and protecting human rights.

Vietnam would like the U.S. to change its designation as a "non-market economy" to a market economy and to restore Vietnam's status as a developing country in the World Trade Organisation which the Trump Administration took away from Vietnam.

The U.S. has legislation, Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), that would impose sanctions on Vietnam for purchasing weapons and military technology from Russian entities proscribed by this Act. Vietnam views this an unwarranted interference in its internal affairs. Vietnam would be severely troubled if it cut back on procurements from Russia.

Vietnam always views U.S. concerns for human rights – democracy, religious freedom and civil and political rights – as part of the plot of peaceful evolution and a no-go zone in bilateral relations. During Marc Knapper's Senate confirmation hearing, several Senators stated that they would oppose a strategic partnership with Vietnam unless its record on human rights improved.

Q5. Is Washington willing to offer Vietnam more than symbolic support and non-lethal weapons in defence and security cooperation?

ANSWER: The U.S. lifted its embargo on arms sales to Vietnam in 2016. Each Vietnamese expression of interest is treated on a case-by-case basis. Vice President Harris informed her Vietnamese hosts that the U.S. government approved Vietnam's request for a third Hamilton-class Coast Guard cutter. The U.S. has already agreed to sell ScanEagle UAVs to Vietnam as well as trainer aircraft. Given U.S. approvals of arms

sales to the Philippines, there appears no reason why the U.S. wouldn't sell similar weapons to Vietnam.

Q6. While U.S.-Vietnam military cooperation has been continuously improved, with the U.S. supplying second-hand Coast Guard vessels to Vietnam and conducting various joint-military activities, Russia remains the main defence supplier for Vietnam. What is your assessment about the possibility that Vietnam will buy military weapons from the U.S. and not limit itself to non-lethal equipment?

ANSWER: The U.S. prohibition on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam is mainly focuses on internal security. This is not the main impediment to Vietnamese requests for U.S. weapons and military technology.

The real issue is not U.S. approval for Vietnamese requests, but Vietnam's ability to purchase and integrate U.S. weapons and technology in its largely Russian inventory. In 2018, Vietnam was the tenth largest importer of weapons globally. Eighty-four percent came from Russia.

In 2017-19, Vietnam's arms acquisitions dropped noticeably and this trend is likely to continue because of the impact of COVID-19. In sum, compatibility and cost are restraints on Vietnam's procurement of U.S. weapons and military technology at this time.

Q7. There is concern in the United States about Vietnam using U.S. weapons against its own people in domestic security operations. This makes it unlikely that the U.S. would be willing to sell lethal weapons to Vietnam. It is possible that the U.S. could supply lethal weapons to Vietnam with imposing conditions on improving human rights?

ANSWER: The United States is unlikely to change legislation on the books. Vietnam is also unlikely to request approval for the purchase of lethal weapons used in internal security such as crowd control.

Vietnam is very cautious about its expression of interests for procurements from the United States because it does not want to be refused. U.S. restrictions on the sale of certain lethal weapons to Vietnam does not prevent Vietnam from finding alternate sources.

In the present climate, Congress would object to the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam for domestic security. Vietnam is highly unlikely to make a request to purchase such weapons. In sum, this is not an impediment for Vietnam to request arms and military technology to address external threats.

Q8. Will the fact that the US accelerates its activities in the South China Sea and eagerly improves its relationship with Vietnam (and other SEA countries) make China angry or worried? While making China angry is not something that Vietnam intends to do, how can it keep the balance between the two superpowers?

ANSWER: China is already expressing its concerns over Vice President Harris's comments on her visit to Singapore and Vietnam accusing the U.S. of trying to contain China and undermine China's relations with Vietnam.

China and the U.S. are already locked into an action-reaction cycle in the South China Sea. China responds to U.S. naval deployments with simultaneous military exercises in several areas at once.

China's demonstrated its concern by having its Ambassador call on Vietnam's President and by announcing the delivery of two-million COVID vaccines to Vietnam, including 200,00 to the Vietnam People's Army on the eve of Vice President Harris' visit.

Vietnam has clearly demonstrated that it is not going to pick sides between China and the United States. Vietnam's leaders stressed that Vietnam will follow a foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, and diversification and multilateralization of relations.

Vietnamese leaders have responded to U.S calls to raise bilateral relations to a strategic partnership by stressing the strengthening of its comprehensive partnership with the U.S.

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