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Background Brief:

Vice President Harris to Visit Vietnam Scene Setter 3

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U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris will visit South East Asia with stops in Vietnam and Singapore later this month.

Please provide us your assessment about the trip's aims and its implications for the region.

Q1. In recognizing Southeast Asia's role in the security and rules-based 'free-and-open' order that the United States propounds, it appears that the visit of Vice President Harris could bolster United States' engagement in the region. Will Vice President Harris' visit create momentum for the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy? And what will be the United States' policy towards Southeast Asia in particular?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration issued an *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* in March. The general themes of this strategy are clear: the U.S. will re-engage with Southeast Asia as part of its larger strategy of giving priority to the Indo-Pacific.

U.S. strategy has two key components – comprehensive engagement and forging a network of allies and partners. Secretary Austin added “integrated deterrence” as a third objective in his Fullerton lecture in Singapore.

The U.S. will encourage cooperation for a rules-based international order and a region that is free and open for commerce. The U.S. will support ASEAN centrality and *ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. The U.S. will support regional states in standing up to China's bullying and intimidation in the South China Sea.

And the U.S. will work with China where possible to address the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate the impact of climate change.

Vice President Kamala Harris' visit is part of the Biden Administration comprehensive engagement with Southeast Asia, and follows the virtual meeting between Secretary of State Anthony Blinken with his ASEAN counterparts, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's official visits to Singapore and Vietnam.

Harris' visit is unprecedented because she is the first sitting U.S. vice president to visit Southeast Asia. Because Vice President Harris works so closely with President Biden, regional leaders will know that her words carry weight. In brief, when Biden or Harris proclaim “America is back” they mean to match words with deeds.

Q2. Following the earlier trip by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin last month, why is Vice President Harris visiting the same countries? Do Vietnam and Singapore embrace the same values that the United States is promoting in the region?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* specifically mentioned Singapore and Vietnam as priority partners for the United States. It comes as no surprise that two top Cabinet officials, the Secretary of Defense and the Vice President, should visit these two countries.

The geostrategic interests of Singapore and Vietnam converge very closely with those of the United States. This forms the basis of future cooperation to address emerging regional security challenges.

It must be realised, however, that the United States and Vietnam have different political values and systems of government. They have found common ground, to a certain extent, by publicly stating their respect for each other's political systems. Nonetheless, there will be continuing irritants in bilateral relations due to differences over democracy, religious freedom and human rights.

Q3. What do you forecast will be the potential bilateral or multilateral partnerships as a result of Vice President Harris' visit? Do you think that non-traditional cooperation will gain traction in such an eventuality?

ANSWER: Vice President Kamala Harris' visit is tailor-made to address non-traditional security cooperation after Secretary Austin's visit to meet Minister Phan Van Giang to discuss defence and security issues.

Harris will suggest stepping up cooperation in health (more COVID-19 vaccines, medical equipment and intellectual property/copyright transfer) and environment (climate change), economic ties (digital trade, investment and stable supply chains), education, science and technology, cyber security, and people-to-people exchange (culture, tourism and sport).

Harris' will likely suggest strengthening the comprehensive partnership with a view to raising it to a strategic partnership and perhaps deliver an invitation from President Biden for a high-level visit by one of Vietnam's top leaders.

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