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Background Brief:

Vice President Kamala Harris Visit to Vietnam Scene Setter

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Q1. What will Vietnam expect from Vice President Kamala Harris' trip to Vietnam?

ANSWER: Vietnam will expect Vice President Kamala Harris to reaffirm the United States' commitment to expanding their bilateral relations under the framework of their comprehensive partnership. Particular priority will be given to combatting COVID-19 through the provision of more vaccines, medical equipment, and the transfer of technology to enable Vietnam to produce vaccines domestically.

As a second priority, Vietnam will expect Vice President Harris to elaborate on how to improve bilateral economic cooperation in trade and investment. Vietnam's leaders will want to be informed about U.S. plans for a regional digital trade agreement and U.S. support to upgrade Vietnam's IT manufacturing capacity to include semiconductor chips for sale in the United States.

Q2. What will be Vice President Harris' purpose in visiting Vietnam?

ANSWER: Vice President Harris' main purpose will be to amplify President Biden's priorities for the Indo-Pacific encapsulated in such expressions as "America is back" and "free and open Indo-Pacific." Harris will stress comprehensive engagement and strategic partnerships with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN as the cornerstones of U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia.

Q3. What will Vice President Harris discuss with Vietnam's leaders? What are her priorities for this trip?

ANSWER: Vice President Harris will have two main priorities. First, she will raise global and regional issues, such as mitigating climate change, cyber security, and cooperation among Southeast Asian states and the U.S. on a rules-based international order, including the free passage of trade in the South China Sea, and regional security cooperation.

Second, Harris will also discuss how to strengthen the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership by expanding cooperation in such areas as political-diplomatic relations, trade and economic ties, science and technology, educational exchanges, environment and health, war legacy issues, promotion and protection of human rights, and people-to-people exchanges (culture, tourism and sport).

Q4. Who is Vice President Harris likely to meet/what's the agenda, where will she go? Will the U.S expect to upgrade relations to a strategic partnership with Vietnam?

ANSWER: Harris is expected to arrive in Hanoi on 24 August and depart on 26 August. Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on 5 August that her agenda will be announced at a suitable time. U.S. sources report that Harris will meet government officials, private sector representatives and civil society leaders. Harris' schedule does not leave room for travel outside Hanoi.

Vice President Harris' visit raises an important protocol issue because Vietnam has not yet indicated who issued the invitation for her visit. Harris' formal counterpart is Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan, who is not among the four pillars of Vietnam's leadership.

A more appropriate host would be Vuong Dinh Hue, the Chairman of the National Assembly's Standing Committee. As Vice President, Harris is also president of the U.S. Senate.

It is likely that Vice President Harris will pay courtesy calls of either or both the President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. They would be appropriate interlocutors for her to raise the issue initiating discussions on raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. These discussions are best served when the next U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam is confirmed by the Senate and takes up his post in Hanoi.

Harris' meeting with private sector representatives will likely focus on ramping up the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to ensure that Vietnam's textile, apparel, footwear and travel goods industry is able to maintain production during the current pandemic. Discussions with the private sector will also focus how to upgrade Vietnam's electronic industry to manufacture semiconductor chips for sale in the U.S. market

Q5. How will China view Harris' visit not long following Defence Secretary Austin's visit to Hanoi?

ANSWER: Chinese propaganda has already begun to criticise Harris's visit as an attempt to contain China and to disrupt the China-Vietnam supply chain.

Q6. How will human rights figure in Vice President Harris' visit to Vietnam?

ANSWER: Harris' presumed meeting with civil society leaders conjures up the fiasco when President Obama visited Vietnam and security officials took steps to prevent several Vietnamese activists from meeting with the U.S. president.

Harris is obliged to raise human rights issues as President Biden has made American values a key part of his foreign policy. Harris' is under domestic and international pressure to raise human rights issues with her Vietnamese hosts. No matter the outcome, Vice President Harris' visit to Vietnam will ensure that human rights issues feature more prominently in bilateral relations than during the Trump Administration. This irritant could serve as a domestic constraint in America to raising relations to a strategic partnership.

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