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## **Background Brief:**

# **Can Vice President Harris Convince Vietnam to Engage Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy?**

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We request your assessment of two issues related to U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' upcoming visit to Vietnam.

Q1. Vice President Kamala Harris will no doubt speak about U.S. policy on security in the South China Sea. For many Hanoi observers the central question is how Vietnam can or should engage with Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy while continuing to balance a constructive relationship with Beijing. What is your assessment?

ANSWER: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's recent official visit to Vietnam offers an instructive insight into how Vietnam is responding to the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. Austin was received with protocol status accorded to a comprehensive partner, that is, he met his counterpart and two of Vietnam's top leaders but not the party Secretary General. It is significant that no joint statement was issued by the two defence ministers, in contrast to Austin's visit to Singapore.

It is clear from Austin's meetings with Vietnam's President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, that they give top priority to cooperation to secure COVID-19 vaccine and related medical equipment and technology from the United States.

In addition, Secretary Austin's meeting with his counterpart Minister of National Defence General Phan Van Giang, revealed that Vietnam also prioritized long-standing cooperation in dealing with war legacy issues as Agent Orange remediation, humanitarian assistance to victims of dioxin poisoning, and demining, as well as capacity-building in maritime law enforcement.

Three new areas of cooperation were agreed – military medicine to combat COVID-19; future discussions to explore each other's needs and capabilities in national defence industry; and a Memorandum of Understanding for U.S. assistance to Vietnam to locate, identify and repatriate the remains of Vietnamese soldiers missing-in-action during the Vietnam War.

Prior to arriving in Vietnam, Secretary Austin delivered the Fullerton Lecture in Singapore in which he sketched three lines of action in the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy: recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, integrated deterrence, and strategic partnerships to support a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

No mention of Vietnam's participation in integrated deterrence or as a member of a network of strategic partners alongside the United States was made by Vietnamese media reports and Pentagon statements on Austin's visit.

From Hanoi's point of view, its relations with China at present "are as good as it gets." There have been no major maritime incidents in the South China Sea or in waters surrounding Vanguard Bank in over twenty-one months. In contrast, the Philippines and Malaysia have been on the receiving end of China's grey zone operations. Vietnam's leaders are understandably reluctant to initiate any new form of defence cooperation with the U.S. that goes beyond the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Defense Cooperation and the 2015 Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations.

Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Vietnam later this month likely will focus more developing personal contacts with Vietnam's top leaders and on long-term engagement than about achieving agreement on specific issues. When White House Chief Spokesperson Symone Sanders announced Harris's visit on 30 July, she set out a general addenda for the Vice President's visit – "issues of mutual interest, including regional security, the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and our joint efforts to promote a rules-based international order."

Q2. Do you see any movement or possibility that the U.S.-Vietnam relationship will evolve from a comprehensive into a strategic one during the Biden Administration? Why or why not?

ANSWER: The proposal to raise U.S. relations with Vietnam to a strategic partnership was first advanced by Hillary Clinton when she was Secretary of State. In the end both sides agreed on a lower-level comprehensive partnership. Why? Vietnam and the United States may "sleep in the same bed but they have different dreams" on what a strategic partnership entails. The U.S. puts greater stress on defence and security cooperation than Vietnam. Vietnam views a strategic partnership as a broad-based relationship that included multiple areas of cooperation.

Marc Knapper, President Biden's nominee as the next U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing on 13 July, "Right now, we have what we call a comprehensive partnership [with Vietnam]; we hope to raise it to a strategic partnership, and I will take steps to do that by strengthening even further our security relationships with Vietnam."

Secretary Austin suggested raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership in his meetings with Vietnam's President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. In his meeting with President Phuc, Secretary Austin suggested that "the two sides study and upgrade the relationship to a strategic partnership in the future." President Phuc replied cautiously that he believed Austin's visit "will make practical and effective contributions to the promotion of the comprehensive partnership between Vietnam and the United States in the immediate and long-term."

Secretary Austin told Prime Minister Chinh that he attached importance to the comprehensive partnership and suggested "elevating the relationship between the two countries." Chinh replied that he believed that Austin's visit would "contribute

to a more substantive development of relations between the two countries, in line with the relationship between the two countries' comprehensive partnership." Chinh suggested strengthening cooperation in trade and investment, climate change, science and technology, and education and training. He also noted that economic cooperation "still has a lot of room for development."

It is very likely that Marc Knapper, once accredited as the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, will initiate discussions with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. This is likely to be a long drawn-out process, however. In addition to Vietnamese concerns about being entrapped in an anti-China partnership with the United States that results in Chinese punitive measures, there are a number of bilateral issues that must be addressed and resolved. For example, American officials reported that Secretary Austin raised human rights concerns during his high-level discussions in Hanoi. Vietnam will want reassurance that the Biden Administration will not invoke legislation and impose penalties on Vietnam on human rights grounds. Vietnam will seek a reclassification of its status as a non-market economy to a market economy and its redesignation as a developing country in the World Trade Organisation. Finally, Vietnam also will seek a pledge from the Biden Administration that it will not impose measures under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act for its procurement of Russian weapons and military technology.

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