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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Assessing Obama's Visit to Vietnam

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We request your assessment on the outcome of President Obama's visit to Vietnam with specific reference to the following issues:

Q1- What is the future of Vietnam-US relations after Obama's visit? Any changes?

ANSWER: The presidents of Vietnam and the United States have committed themselves to increase cooperation across all areas of common interest included in the 2013 Agreement on Comprehensive Partnership: economic cooperation, education, science and technology, health, security, national defense and people-to-people exchanges, human rights, humanitarian assistance and dealing with the legacy of the Vietnam War. They have agreed to set up a high-level mechanism to oversee bilateral cooperation under this agreement.

Q2- The outcome of Obama's visit to Vietnam with particular reference to the US rebalance towards Asia Pacific.

ANSWER: Obama's visit to Vietnam was to show case one of the success stories to his signature policies - the rebalance to Asia. Vietnam is one of Obama's success stories. In 2013 the two sides signed an Agreement on Comprehensive Partnership and Vietnam committed itself to signing the TPP. The two sides issued a Joint Vision Statement on defence cooperation in 2015. President Obama and Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong also issued a Joint Vision Statement that among other things recognised the legitimacy of their differing political systems. Obama's policy of rebalancing has witnessed increased defence cooperation in a number of areas such as naval operations to practice implementing CUES, the Code for Unexpected Encounters at Sea. The US has provided modest assistance to help Vietnam develop the capacities of its Coast Guard and Fisheries Surveillance Force. The US is assisting Vietnam's Peacekeeping Center to enable Vietnam to deploy a Level Two Field Hospital to UN operations in Africa. The two sides have also agreed to cooperate in dealing with climate change, disease control and wild life trafficking.

Q3- What are the benefits to Vietnam in the field of economic, commercial and trade relations with US?

ANSWER: Vietnam-US trade has grown enormously over the past decade. At the same time Vietnam has a growing and large trade deficit with China. Vietnam needs

continued access to the US market for its goods. President Obama said that the US was Vietnam's largest export market. The US ranks number eight among the top ten investors in Vietnam but not on the scale of Japan or South Korea.

Q4- TPP negotiations.

ANSWER: TPP negotiations have concluded and Vietnam and the US along with ten other states have signed this agreement. The next step is national ratification by Vietnam's National Assembly, likely in June, and by the U.S; Congress. There is no certainty about what the US Congress will do between now and the November elections and even in the period from the elections to January 2017 when the new president takes office. President Obama was upbeat on the prospect for ratification. But during the current primary campaign in the US Hillary Clinton has shifted from being a supporter of the TPP to a critic. Donald Trump has taken a more extreme stance, he opposed all multilateral trade agreements. Vietnam must hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

Q5- What is the position of Vietnam in US foreign policy?

ANSWER: The US is a global power. The US has recognised that Vietnam plays a constructive role in both regional and global security issues. The US puts Vietnam among the groups of constructive states that it would like to partner with to address global issues ranging from climate change to terrorism to non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Q6- How does Vietnam - US relations impact on the region?

ANSWER: If we narrow the focus to Southeast Asia, Vietnam looms higher in US priorities because of its constructive role in ASEAN, ASEAN-related multilateral institutions (the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus) and in the East Asian Summit. Both Vietnam and the United States have a convergence of interest in dealing with maritime disputes in the South China Sea and with environmental issues related to the Greater Mekong Region. The US views Vietnam as a partner in promoting a rules-based regional order that upholds international law including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Q7- The new US leadership's policy towards Vietnam?

ANSWER: There will be continuity in US policy towards Vietnam under an Administration headed by Hillary Clinton. Clinton is expected to backtrack from her criticism of the TPP once she is in office. Even if the Republicans regain control of the Senate she will be able to work with them because they generally support free trade. Donald Trump represents another kettle of fish. He wants to promote America First and for the US to be "predictably unpredictable." All in-coming US presidents need roughly one-hundred days in office to review policy, fill political vacancies in the White House and government, and set priorities. The good news is that Vietnam will not rank high on the radar screen of the new American president as a problem. The new US president will have to deal with conflict in the Middle East including Iraq and Syria, Russia, and China. This means that the legacy left by Obama will be more continuity than change in relations with Vietnam.