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## **Background Brief:**

### **‘Comrade and Brother’ – China-Vietnam Relations**

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We seek your assessment on the current state of China-Vietnam relations.

Q1. What is your initial reaction to the phone conversation between Mr. Wang Yi and Mr. Bui Thanh Son, where Wang said China will continue to firmly support Vietnam in taking the socialist road for a better future?

ANSWER: Wang Yi is acutely aware that the new Biden Administration has picked up where the Trump Administration has left off in declaring that China is America’s greatest strategic challenge. Wang Yi also fully grasps the implications of President Biden’s strategy of creating a “network of interoperable allies and partners willing and able to protect their sovereignty from coercion.” Therefore, Wang Yi’s remarks were designed for the ears of Vietnam’s communist party members who are ideologically conservative as well as nationalist. This faction within the Vietnam Communist Party benefits from Vietnam’s one-party system and its socialist market economy. This faction stands to lose its position if Vietnam engages too closely with the United States and loses the support of China. In sum, Wang Yi was basing his appeal where the interests of party elites in both countries overlap.

Q2. Reacting to this news, Mr. Derek J Grossman, RAND Corporation’s national security and Indo-Pacific analyst said on his Twitter account that it’s all “standard talking points”, do you agree, or was there some hidden message from Wang Yi, specific to the South China Sea, when Mr. Wang Yi said “properly handle maritime issues,” which is one of Vietnam’s major concern?

ANSWER: The expression “properly handle maritime issues” is more than a “standard talking point,” it is nuanced diplomatic code to Vietnam’s leaders to resolve maritime disputes in the South China Sea on a bilateral basis without the involvement of “countries from outside the region” meaning the United States.

On August 23, 2020, for example, when Wang Yi met with Vietnam’s then Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the delimitation of the China-Vietnam land border, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs quoted Wang Yi as saying, “we also realize that holding good neighborly and friendly relations is the political guarantee for properly handling sensitive issues while persisting in dialogue and consultation is the correct way to resolve divergences between the two sides.”

Q3. Mr. Wang Yi also mentioned “common interests” between the two countries, in your opinion, what are these interests?

ANSWER: China and Vietnam share a common interest in peaceful and stable bilateral relations, mutually beneficial trade and economic relations, a secure and prosperous region, and more importantly, the continuation of one-party rule and state control over their respective economies facilitated by close party-to-party relations.

Q4. Both parties mentioned the “Lancang-Mekong cooperation” several times. What is this “Lancang-Mekong cooperation” and why do you think it is important to both countries?

ANSWER: Lancang is the Chinese word for Upper and refers to cooperation between China and the countries to China’s south that lie along the Mekong River – Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. China has built a cascade of dams that have had a negative impact on water flow downstream. The United States initiated a Lower Mekong Initiative over a decade ago to make common cause with the downstream states. The Trump Administration expanded this initiative into a Mekong-U.S. Partnership to counter China.

Wang Yi stressed Lancang-Mekong cooperation to bolster China’s role and to counter U.S. attempts to capitalize on downstream concerns about the impact of China’s dam building upstream.

Q5. Same question for “the synergy of the Belt and Road Initiative and “Two Corridors and One Economic Circle...”?”

ANSWER: In 2004, Vietnam proposed “two corridors and one economic belt” to link development in China and Vietnam along their land border and in the Gulf of Tonkin. Vietnam has been a lukewarm supporter of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since it was first announced. In order not to give offense Beijing, Hanoi let the “two corridors and one economic belt” be melded into China’s list of approved BRI projects. In short, this is a diplomatic sleight of hand to accentuate the positive.

Q6. Reacting to the same news, another analyst, Mr Mark Buckton <https://twitter.com/MarkBuckton1970> said that “all the while as Hanoi continues to move further and further away both morally and economically. One source in Vietnam has already termed these assurances of ‘friendship’ as little more than veiled warnings to toe the socialist line.” Is there some truth to what he wrote about Hanoi’s sentiment toward Beijing?

ANSWER: These are two separate issues. Since 2003, and reaffirmed a decade later, Vietnam pursues a policy of “cooperation and struggle” (vừa hợp tác, vừa đấu tranh) with China. In other words, Vietnam will continue to cooperate with China for mutual benefit and when its national interests are not adversely affected. So maintaining friendship with China is the *sine qua non* of bilateral relations.

Both China and Vietnam profess to be socialist countries and each has interpreted what socialism means in their own way. China may pressure and interfere in Vietnam in a variety of ways, but it refrains from telling Vietnam “to toe the socialist line.” This heavy-handed action would undermine the basis of their bilateral relationship. What China does do, is suggest that the United States is out to undermine and subvert socialism.

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