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Background Brief:

Explaining Vietnam's Stance on the War in Ukraine

April 16, 2022

We are preparing a report about Vietnam's response to the Ukraine conflict. The Vietnamese government abstained on the UN vote condemning the invasion and voted against suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.

Q1. How did Vietnam's relations with Russia, China and the United States influence its vote in the UN General Assembly against expelling Russia from the Human Rights Council?

ANSWER: Vietnam's enduring national interests support a multipolar global order in which the major powers form an essential part. Vietnam maintains its independence and autonomy by leveraging differences among its strategic partners (Russia and China etc.) and the United States (a comprehensive partner). Therefore, it is not in Vietnam's interest to see Russia substantially weakened as a consequence of Western sanctions. This would complicate Vietnam's relations with China and the United States. Also, Vietnam does not want to be forced to ally closer to either.

Russia is Vietnam's largest supplier of military weapons, platforms and technology. Russia also supplies Vietnam with coal and has substantial interests in Vietnam's energy sector. There is an historical legacy of defence cooperation that Vietnam is reliant on. It would be extremely costly for Vietnam if it lost access to Russian arms and military technology and had to procure arms from another source. Vietnam would be more vulnerable to military pressures from China.

The Russian Ambassador to the United Nations reportedly told UN members prior to the vote to expel it from the Human Rights Council that Russia would view a vote for the resolution as an unfriendly act. Vietnam voted against the resolution out of prudence and restricted reporting in its state-run domestic media.

Also, Vietnam does not want to see a protracted war in Ukraine. A protracted war would likely undermine multipolarity and lead to greater collusion between China and Russia. This would limit Vietnam's options in dealing with the major powers. A protracted war could disrupt the global economy and supply chains thus negatively impacting on Vietnam's economy.

Q2. How does the government of Vietnam view the UN Security Council?

ANSWER: Based on its past historical experience with the major powers, Vietnamese leaders firmly believe that they will always act in their own interests invariably at the expense of small powers. Vietnam has a clear eyed view of the limitations of the

Security Council due to its inaction to stop U.S. bombing over North Vietnam during the American war in Vietnam. On the plus side, the Security Council provides a platform for non-permanent members. Vietnam has served two separate terms as a non-permanent members. In sum, the United Nations serves as a useful conduit for Vietnam to enhance its prestige and influence on the international stage by building up a wide network of diplomatic contacts.

Vietnam, like other members of ASEAN and the Non-Aligned Movement, supports reform of membership on the Security Council by including India, Japan and Brazil.

Q3. How does the Vietnamese public view the war in the Ukraine?

ANSWER: There are substantial numbers of Vietnamese who have lived, studied and worked in Russia and the Ukraine. These communities have divided loyalties. The state media is slightly slanted in publishing material with a pro-Russia perspective but this appears alongside factual accounts of the conflict and stories on the impact on civilians. Vietnamese state media reflects government policy to support an end to the conflict and humanitarian aid to the victims while downplaying Vietnam's voting record at the United Nations.

Unlike Russia, where Putin has firm control over the domestic media and censors the foreign Internet, any Vietnamese citizen who wants to know what is going on in the Ukraine can find independent reporting in the social media. In the absence of scientific polling, it is not possible to offer a definitive assessment of how the Vietnamese public views the war in Ukraine. Social media, however, is more sceptical of the government's official position and is generally sympathetic to the plight of the ordinary Ukrainian.

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