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**Background Briefing:**  
**Vietnam: Party Secretary**  
**General to Visit China**

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[client name deleted]

We have heard that the Secretary General of the Vietnam Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, is set to visit China "soon".

We request your assessment about Trong's China trip in the context of the Secretary General's trip to the United States afterwards. What is Vietnam up to through such high-level visits?

ANSWER: Private sources report that the Secretary General Trong will visit Beijing this month. It is worth noting that Vietnam has already invited Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping to visit Hanoi and, in showing deference, Vietnam's party chief will make the first move.

The Secretary General's trip is being made in the context of his later visit to the United States in mid-year. Secretary General Trong's visit to Beijing holds out the promise that bilateral relations will continue on their upward trajectory. China is likely to pressure Vietnam against taking legal action on the South China Sea dispute and moving too close to the United States. Chinese pressure on South Korea not to install U.S. anti-ballistic missile defences hint that China may be prescriptive in its dealing with Vietnam to prevent it from acquiring weapons from the United States. Vietnam will want China's assurances that there will be no repeat of the HD 981 crisis.

Besides the South China Sea, China and Vietnam have strong interests in maintaining good economic relations. Vietnam will not be able to reduce its massive trade deficit but it can lobby for better terms for access for its goods to the China market and Chinese investment in Vietnam, especially in infrastructure. China is promoting connectivity in mainland Southeast Asia and this includes rail connections via Vietnam. China will want reassurance that Vietnam's membership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership will not be at the expense of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Because Secretary General Trong is going to the United States after his China visit, he will have some leverage in his dealings with Xi. If China pushes too hard or is not accommodating, Vietnam has the option of stepping up ties with the U.S.

Conversely, if Xi is accommodating, Trong can use this leverage to bargain more with the U.S.

Finally, Secretary Trong's two visits will set up the Vietnam Communist Party to play a stronger role in shaping foreign relations over the next five years after the 12<sup>th</sup> national party congress in early 2016.

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