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## **Background Briefing:**

### **Vietnam and the U.S. National Security Strategy**

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Yesterday elements of President Donald Trump's National Security Strategy were reported in the media. These reports identified four main themes: protecting the homeland and the American way of life; promoting American prosperity; demonstrating peace through strength; and advancing American influence in an ever-competitive world.

We are preparing a report on the impact of the U.S. National Security Strategy on Vietnam and the South China sea. We request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1. What does "Demonstrating peace through strength" mean in terms of the U.S. role in the South China Sea dispute? What kind of "strength" does the U.S. wants to demonstrate in the region if needed?

ANSWER: Trump's campaign slogan of "peace through strength" was incorporated into the new U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) in a section that gave prominence to the military dimension of national power. This was juxtaposed to the following smaller section on diplomacy. What this term means is more funding for the Pentagon. Priority will be given to modernizing the U.S. nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, and developing new defense technologies to meet the threats posed by North Korea as well as Russia and China.

"Peace through strength" will also mean the gradual expansion and modernization of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region primarily to deal with contingencies on the Korean peninsula, to reassure U.S. allies Japan, South Korea and Australia, and to counter-balance China in the South China Sea. The NSS commits the United States, as a priority action, to "maintain a forward military presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary."

The Trump Administration is being bolder in declaring that it will pursue U.S. national interests first. Vietnam has long understood that major powers will pursue their own interests. On some issues this will benefit Vietnam on other issues it may not.

Q2. "Advancing American influence" in the world: This clause seems to conflict with President Trump's "America First", doesn't it?

ANSWER: The NSS mentions that nations look towards the United States because of its values and leadership. Trump even asserts that the world now respects the United States more. Advancing American influence is not incompatible with America First

because Trump holds that U.S. economic and military power is sufficient to bend other countries to do what the U.S. wants. This is a transactional view of influence. Trump will always apply the test “what does America get out of any arrangement or deal with another country?”

Most of the NSS references to multinational international organizations are designed to push narrow U.S. interests. The NSS advocates reforming the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism, for example, on the assumption that it will lead to fairer trade in U.S. eyes.

The bottom line is that the NSS contains inconsistencies implied in your question. To take one example, the NSS advocates U.S. values while offering support to Duterte in the Philippines. The NSS views a global order based on sovereign states pursuing their own national interests under international law while at the same time preserving the greater power of the United States to act unilaterally whenever President Trump so decides.

Q3. How will “U.S. influence” impact on maritime disputes in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: It can be inferred from the NSS that the South China Sea is considered a potential arena for competition but is low on the list of priorities headed by nuclear proliferation on the Korean peninsula and international terrorism.

The situation in the South China Sea will generally remain stable as China and ASEAN pursue negotiations on a code of conduct. The United States is unlikely to react to China’s creeping militarization of its artificial islands because its main ally, the Philippines, will not support any robust pushback against Chinese behavior. Nonetheless, the NSS gives priority to reinforcing the U.S. commitment “to freedom of the seas and the peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law.”

The NSS also notes that China’s military outposts in the South China Sea “threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability.” In sum, according to the NSS, the U.S. is poised to take a leadership role in a collective response to uphold regional order based on respect for “sovereignty and independence,” a commitment that should be reassuring to Vietnam.

Q4. According to the NSS’ four main themes how does Vietnam fit into the new U.S. national security strategy?

ANSWER: As a result of two joint statements between the United States and Vietnam under the Trump Administration (in May and November), Vietnam is clearly viewed as a partner that the United States can work with on regional security issues. The NSS explicitly mentions that the U.S. will redouble its commitment to allies and established partnerships as its first priority action in the Indo-Pacific. The NSS also mentions Vietnam along with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (in that order) as “growing security and economic partners of the United States.”

Since Trump has elevated defense and security issues, Vietnam will face opportunities (buying defense equipment and technology from America) and challenges (pressure to step up military cooperation with the United States).

Vietnam's trade imbalance with the United States was addressed prior to the release of the NSS with Vietnam's agreement to negotiate a bilateral trade agreement with the U.S. Vietnam also announced that it would buy billions of dollars worth of goods from the United States such as aircraft and improve market and investment access for American companies. The NSS gives priority to "bilateral trade agreements on a fair and reciprocal basis... [and] equal and reliable access form American exports." Vietnam is not a stranger to negotiations with the United States and should be able to protect its interests in any new agreement.

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