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## **Background Briefing:**

### **Vietnam: Scene Setter for Xi Jinping Visit - 1**

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Q1 - What is the purpose of Xi Jinping's visit to Vietnam this time?

ANSWER: Xi Jinping wears two hats, he is China's state President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Xi will come to Vietnam in both capacities. In strict protocol terms Xi's visit is a reciprocal one following the visit of Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong to Beijing earlier this year. Xi will come to advance the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with Vietnam. Xi will adopt a strategic overview of bilateral relations and promote broad areas of "win-win cooperation. In short, Xi will attempt to demonstrate that Vietnam has much to gain by cooperating with China and taking China's interests into account.

Q2 - What is the meaning of the timing in November, after Vietnam, US and other countries just have concluded the TPP? Many countries in the world have been complaining about China's construction in Spratly Islands.

ANSWER: Xi's visit comes after the 12<sup>th</sup> plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Communist Party that decided on preparations for leadership selection at the 12<sup>th</sup> national party congress; and Xi's visit comes after agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Xi's visit also comes when Vietnam and the United States are attempting to finalize the dates of the visit by President Obama to Vietnam. And, of course, Xi's visit comes at a time of growing regional concern about China's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. In summary, Xi's visit is designed to re-take the initiative, encourage Vietnam's future leaders to be more accommodating in their relations with China, promote bilateral and regional economic relations outside the TPP framework, counter-balance U.S. influence, especially if Obama visits Vietnam this year, and present a soft image regarding the South China Sea.

Q3 - Will the visit result in any changes to disputes in South China Sea?

ANSWER: While Xi and his Vietnamese hosts will discuss the South China Sea in general terms, they will leave it to government-level committees to continue

negotiations. China is embarked on a diplomatic offensive to overcome negative regional reactions to its construction of artificial islands and China is therefore not likely to upset relations with Vietnam. Of course now that the US has launched freedom of navigation patrols China is on the defensive before the end of year round of summit meetings. So far China has been restrained. Xi will try to convince Vietnam's leaders to mute their public comments on the South China Sea and not openly support US actions.

Q4 - Xi affirmed "China's sovereignty in South China Sea" twice recently in conjunction with his visits to the US and UK. What should Vietnam do to persuade Xi to resolve differences in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: China and Vietnam have already adopted Fundamental Guidelines for the Settlement of Maritime Disputes, and the two sides have government-to-government level discussions that are on-going. In other words, the two sides have a mechanism to deal with their bilateral differences. But Vietnam has always made clear that it will not discuss matters involving third parties if they are not represented. China and Vietnam will not solve their sovereignty dispute any time soon, the best that can be hoped for is to moderate China's behaviour.

Q5 - What are main topics that will be discussed in Xi's meetings with Vietnam's leaders?

ANSWER: All matters that come under the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership will be discussed: economic relations, trade, investment, China's involvement in infrastructure building, encouraging Vietnamese investment in China, people-to-people exchanges, education, science and technology, party-to-party relations, and defence cooperation. In addition, the leaders will also discuss international issues such as China's One Belt, One Road proposal, cooperating to address transnational challenges, opposing terrorism, and even climate change.

Q6 – Are any agreements likely to be signed?

ANSWER: It is likely that Chinese ministers and businessmen will sign MOUs (memoranda of understanding) and contracts. The leaders will issue a non-binding Joint Statement setting out their vision of how bilateral relations should develop in the future.

Q7 - How will US freedom of navigation patrols within 12 nautical miles around Mischief and Subi reefs affect Xi's visit to Vietnam?

ANSWER: If tensions continue to rise between China and the United States over freedom of navigation (FON) patrols in the South China Sea, this could put Vietnam in a dilemma. Should Vietnam support the US freedom of navigation patrols? Vietnam has supported freedom of navigation in the past. Or should Vietnam keep a low profile so as not to disturb Xi's visit? Recall that President Truong Tan Sang recently declared that China's construction of artificial islands was illegal under

international law. Vietnam will also have to adopt a response if the US Navy sails close to the features Vietnam occupies. At present US FON patrols are a bilateral issue between Beijing and Washington. China has responded only verbally through its foreign ministry, by calling in the US Ambassador and publishing hawkish commentary by retired officials. Xi and his Vietnamese hosts will not want this issue to negatively impact on their broader bilateral relations.

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