

Thayer Consultancy  
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## **Background Brief:**

### **Vietnam's Prime Minister to Meet President Biden and attend 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S.- ASEAN Special Summit**

**May 10, 2022**

We're seeking your expert assessment on the upcoming trip of Vietnam's Prime Minister to Washington and the U.S - ASEAN Summit this week. Our questions follow:

Q1. What are your expectations for this first special summit in six years between ASEAN leaders and a U.S president, given the current circumstances when Washington may have to diversify its focus beyond the Indo-Pacific region? The last time all sides met face to face was in February 2016.

ANSWER: . In 2015, ASEAN and the United States entered into a strategic partnership. They adopted a Plan of Action, 2021-25 to implement the partnership. The 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit will mark a return to continuity in relations since the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit hosted by President Obama in Sunnylands in February 2016.

Under President Biden the U.S. undertook three major initiatives to expand the strategic partnership: health security, climate change mitigation and economic cooperation. Each of these three initiatives involves numerous projects and activities.

In sum, the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit will result in broad agreement on cooperation to address a number of major transnational challenges that both parties share in common. The agenda almost certainly will address COVID-19 recovery and health security, economic recovery, supply chain security, digital economy, energy, connectivity, infrastructure, climate change, and people-to-people linkages.

President Biden will have to reassure Southeast Asian leaders that the United States will not be distracted from its support for ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms by the war in Ukraine. The fact that the Special Summit is being held at this time is evidence of U.S. commitment to the region. President Biden wanted the summit earlier, in late March, but scheduling difficulties disrupted his plans.

The Special Summit therefore will discuss the impact of the war in Ukraine on the global and regional economy and how to maintain security in the Indo-Pacific.

Q2. Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh will also make an official visit to the U.S and United Nations headquarters. The Prime Minister Chinh made two foreign visits in 2021 to Europe for COP26 and Indonesia for the ASEAN Summit. However, this is his first foreign visit since Covid-19 situation in Vietnam was under control nationwide and the country started to reopen.

Can you offer your assessment on the importance of this visit for U.S - Vietnam relations? Where do bilateral relations with Vietnam lie in the U.S strategy for the region?

ANSWER: Both President Biden and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh took office at the start of 2021 and they will both serve concurrently for several more years. Their meeting will provide an opportunity to get to know each other in person. This is important.

The Biden Administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* and *Indo-Pacific Strategy* both identify Vietnam as a potential partner for cooperation on a wide-range of issues. Already two high-level officials, Vice President Kamala Harris and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, as well as Ambassador Marc Knapper, have conveyed to Vietnam's leaders U.S. interest in raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. This is a complex and sensitive issue. The two leaders may give their approval for senior officials to discuss the details.

Prime Minister Chinh has indicated Vietnam's willingness to negotiate an updated framework for economic and trade cooperation and to support American companies and investors in coming to Vietnam. The U.S. will be keen to establish reliable supply chains.

Q3. What are the most challenging and the most promising factors in U.S - ASEAN relations now? Which has the potential for improvement?

ANSWER: The most promising factor in United States-ASEAN relations is U.S. willingness to expand its engagement with ASEAN to address COVID-19 mitigation and public health, transportation, women's empowerment, energy, the environment and climate change.

The major area in need of improvement is certainty about U.S. economic engagement in the region. It is clear the Biden Administration will not joint the Comprehensive and progressive TransPacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The Biden Administration has promised to issue a Framework on Economic Cooperation strategy. It would be fitting if this strategy were announced at the Special Summit. The Biden Administration has indicated this strategy would incorporate proposals for high quality digital commerce. This is of immense importance to ASEAN and needs to be expedited.

Q4. How is Vietnam contributing to the strategic relations between the U.S and ASEAN? Can Vietnam play a stronger leading role and if so on what issue(s)?

ANSWER: Vietnam is a strong supporter of multilateralism in general and ASEAN in particular. Vietnam plays a constructive and proactive role in strengthening ASEAN as evident during its term as ASEAN Chair. In other words, Vietnam and the U.S. share convergent views on the role of ASEAN.

Vietnam can play a stronger role in promoting practical diplomatic initiatives to address pressing security challenges such as the situation in Myanmar and the South China Sea. Vietnam could urge ASEAN members to play a stronger diplomatic role in calling for an end to fighting in Ukraine, humanitarian assistance for displaced persons, and negotiations between the parties directly involved. In particular, ASEAN

should use its relations with China to urge Beijing to play a more proactive diplomatic role with Russia in ending the conflict in Ukraine.

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