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## **Background Brief:**

# **Domestic Repercussions of Vietnam's Alignment with the United States: Hypothetical**

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We are writing an analysis of a hypothetical Vietnamese pivot away from China. We request your input into the following issues:

Q1. What would be the impact on domestic politics in Vietnam if Hanoi was to join a counter-China alliance, such as the Quad or entering a security agreement with the United States?

ANSWER: Vietnam's sudden alignment with the United States appears implausible at the present and would only occur if Vietnam's leaders felt that national sovereignty and/or territorial integrity were at stake. In 2014, at the height of the Hai Yang Shi You 981 crisis, retired senior officials pushed for an extraordinary meeting of the party Central Committee to "exit China's orbit" and lean towards the United States. China caught wind of this, ceased operation and withdrew the mega oil drilling platform. This defused the crisis and no emergency meeting of the Central Committee was held.

If, in the absence of a threatening Chinese provocation, Vietnam's leaders reached consensus that Vietnam should align more formally with the United States and/or enter into some arrangement with the Quad, this would be well-received by the general public in Vietnam. Vietnam's one-party state is well-primed to use state mass media to offer a patriotic rationale for this shift.

Alignment with the U.S. in such circumstances would not be a popular move with elements of the military-security blocs and elements of society who produce and sell goods to China.

Q2. Would the Vietnam Communist Party be able to control any nationalist sentiment alignment with the U.S. would create?

ANSWER: Recent public opinion polling by ISEAS Singapore reveals that Vietnamese respondents listed the United States as the second most trusted country in the Indo-Pacific after Japan. Nationalist sentiment now and in the future would support leaning towards the United States in the face of Chinese pressure or provocations in the East Sea.

Opposition to a pro-American shift would likely take the form of open letters to party leaders and postings on social media. Public protests would be sparsely attended. Restrictions would be put on the media preventing them from covering public protests.

The Ministry of Public Security would monitor and exercise control over any public protests.

Q3. What domestic political problems might a geopolitical shift create, and how much is this a factor in Hanoi's thinking on foreign policy?

ANSWER: China would react to any pro-U.S. shift by Vietnam's leaders by imposing selective curbs and restrictions on Vietnamese exports to China and Chinese tourists going to Vietnam. China would also selectively disrupt bilateral cooperative programs currently underway. China would also apply pressure in the East Sea by selectively harassing resupply vessels to islands or DK1 Service support structures.

China would instigate a combined diplomatic and public propaganda campaign warning that the United States would take advantage of this situation to engineer peaceful evolution of Vietnam's socialist regime to a multiparty democratic one.

China is Vietnam's largest trading partner and enjoys a considerable trade surplus. Pressure on this front would harm Vietnamese producers and suppliers. There is no quick fix so Vietnam's leaders would have to manage disgruntlement by those who were disadvantaged until new markets were found.

In sum, if Vietnam's leaders decided to align more closely with the United States and/or enter into some cooperative arrangement with the Quad this would not lead to massive public protests that would threaten regime survival. Pockets of the military and public security establishment would oppose such a move but it is unlikely that their dissent would cause party leaders to alter course.

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