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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

Vice President Harris to Visit Vietnam Scene Setter 2

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August 18, 2021

We are preparing a preview about Vice President Kamala Harris' upcoming trip to Hanoi and would like to include your assessment of her first visit to Vietnam.

Q1. Kamala Harris would be the first American sitting vice president to visit Vietnam. What does this signify about the U.S.-Vietnam relationship's development?

ANSWER: Vice President Harris' trip to Vietnam signals that the Biden Administration gives priority to its relations with Vietnam within the context of its Indo-China strategy. The visit to Vietnam by a U.S. Vice President is unprecedented. Because of her senior role in the Biden Administration her visit will confer recognition of Vietnam as a responsible member of the international community.

Vice President Harris' visit also signals that the U.S. is committed to strengthening and developing their comprehensive partnership.

Vice President Harris' official program has not yet been released. It is unclear who will be her host Vietnam's Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan, the Chair of the National Assembly Vuong Dinh Hue or some other official. The formal Vice President has little power in Vietnam, while the Chair of the National Assembly is one of the "four pillars" of the Vietnamese leadership.

It will be important to note who Harris will meet among the top leadership. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met the state President and Prime Minister but not the party Secretary General. Austin held substantial discussions with his counterpart, Minister of National Defence General Phan Van Giang.

Harris's status in the U.S. political system does not have a comparable counter-part in Vietnam. This raises the question with whom can Harris have substantial discussions? This raises the possibility of a meeting with one of the senior Deputy Prime Ministers, such as former Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

Q2. What will be Harris' agenda when she meets Vietnam's leaders?

ANSWER: Vice President Harris will bring with her three baskets of issues to discuss with Vietnamese leaders: U.S. commitment to the region, U.S. assistance to address global and regional issues, and U.S. commitment to enhance their bilateral relations.

Vice President Harris will offer a strong endorsement of the key tenets of President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy that "Americas is back" and supports a "free and open

Indo-Pacific.” Kamala Harris will have to be especially convincing as the pall of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban casts its shadow over her visit.

Vice President Harris’ agenda will include announcing further U.S. assistance to and cooperation with Vietnam to address the COVID-19 pandemic, including more vaccines, medical equipment, and copyright transfer of intellectual property so Vietnam can produce vaccines domestically. Other issues include climate change, cyber security, digital trade and a rules-based international order.

Vice President Harris’ agenda on bilateral issues includes priority on trade cooperation and investment. Private industry in America has already lobbied Harris to push for COVID-19 vaccines for workers in Vietnam’s apparel, footwear, and travel goods industry. This is because Vietnam is the largest exporter of these items to the U.S. Harris will also raise the stability of supply chains linking Vietnam to the United States. One important area of discussion will be how the U.S. can assist Vietnam in upgrading its capacity to manufacture semiconductor chips for sale in the U.S. where there is a current shortage.

Q3. Vice President Harris' visit will come within a month of Defense Secretary Austin's trip to Vietnam. Why is Vietnam suddenly so important to Washington?

ANSWER: Since the Obama Administration, every *U.S. National Security Strategy* has identified Vietnam as a key potential security partner of the United States. This was true for the Trump Administration. In March, the Biden Administration released its *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. This document listed Singapore and Vietnam as the two priority security partners in Southeast Asia.

The Biden Administration’s initial plans to engage Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, came a cropper for reasons beyond its control. Secretary of States Anthony Blinken’s first virtual meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers fell victim to technical difficulties in communications. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s planned visit to Singapore and Vietnam was postponed due to the upsurge of the COVID-19 pandemic in both countries.

The interval between the visits by Secretary Austin and Vice President Harris to Singapore and Vietnam were not due to some urgent reason but to a long-standing U.S. determination that both countries played a constructive role in regional security affairs in line with U.S. interests. Under the Biden Administration developing a partnership with Vietnam is a key priority.

Vietnam is important to the U.S. because it has consistently resisted Chinese intimidation in the South China Sea and built up a credible military deterrent to China. Vietnam also plays a constructive role in ASEAN and is well-respected by the international community as evidenced by its election twice as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2008-09 and 2020-21). Hanoi also served as the venue for President Trump’s second summit with North Korea’s lead Kim Jong-un.

Q4. Do you expect to see the U.S. and Vietnam raise their partnership to the strategic level during Vice President Harris' trip?

ANSWER: It is unlikely that Vietnam and the United States will raise bilateral relations to a strategic partnership during President Harris’ visit. Marc Knapper, President

Biden's nominee as the next U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, said during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that he would pursue negotiations on raising bilateral relations when he was accredited. Secretary Austin suggested studying and elevating U.S. relations with Vietnam in his conversations with Vietnam's President, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and Prime Minister, Pham Minh Chinh. Both were guarded in their replies. Vice President Harris is likely to echo Secretary Austin.=

Q5. What will Vietnam expect from the U.S. Vice President's trip?

ANSWER: Vietnam will expect Vice President Harris to express U.S. respect for Vietnam's political system and independent foreign policy.

Vietnam will expect Vice President Harris to offer further support to combatting and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic in the immediate future and mitigation of the effects of climate change in the long term.

Vietnam will expect Vice President Harris to reaffirm U.S. commitment to strengthening their comprehensive partnership in trade and investment, environment and health, maritime security, educational cooperation, science and technology, war legacies, and people-to-people exchanges (sports, tourism and culture).

Vietnam will also expect Vice President Harris to reject China's claims to the South China Sea while supporting Vietnam's rights under international law.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vice President Harris to Visit Vietnam Scene Setter 2," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, August 18, 2021. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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