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Background Brief:

U.S. Defense Secretary Austin to Visit Vietnam, Singapore and the Philippines – 2

Carlyle A. Thayer

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U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will visit Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines. We request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1. This weekend, the U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will visit Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines. Why has he chosen these three countries? And what does the timing of this visit say about the relationships between the U.S. and the three countries?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration has identified the Indo-Pacific Region as a theatre of strategic priority and has stressed the importance of building a network of allies and partners. The Biden Administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, issued in March, committed the United States to "work alongside" Singapore and Vietnam "to advanced shared objectives." The Philippines is a treaty ally of the United States, but the relationship under President Rodrigo Duterte has become fraught and in need of repair.

Up until now, the Biden Administration has given its attention to the Middle East, Europe, Northeast Asia and Afghanistan.

Attempts to engage with ASEAN got off with a bad start when a special meeting on 25 May between Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and ASEAN's foreign ministers had to be cancelled a few minutes after it started because of technical difficulties with communications. At that time, Blinken was flying to the Middle East. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was due to stop in Vietnam before attending the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore from 4-5 June. This trip was aborted due to the upsurge of COVID-19.

Secretary Austin's visit to Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines signals a quick reset in U.S. efforts to engage with Southeast Asia. It follows the rescheduled virtual meeting between Blinken and his ASEAN counterparts held on 13 July.

Secretary Austin gave a press conference on 21 July and identified the "key messages and agenda items" for his trip. Austin will outline U.S. foreign and defence policy in his address to the Fullerton Forum in Singapore; key themes include reaffirmation that the United States is a reliable partner in regional security affairs and will assist Southeast Asia in tackling the COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery. Austin will reiterate U.S. commitment to "a more fair, open and inclusive regional order" and freedom of the seas. And significantly, as Secretary of Defense, Austin will brief his

hosts on the Pentagon's plans to update and modernize U.S. military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and suggest the way ahead for bilateral cooperation.

Q2. Singapore and the Philippines are both close U.S. partners. Why does the list include Vietnam at this particular time? How do you assess U.S.-Vietnam relations?

ANSWER: Vietnam has been consistently viewed by successive U.S. Administrations, including Obama and Trump, as a constructive and influential contributor to regional (and global) peace and security and a potential security partner. The Biden Administration has adopted a similar assessment and now appears to have set its sights on raising bilateral relations to a higher level.

On 13 July, for example, Marc Knapper, President Biden's nominee as the next Ambassador to Vietnam, told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing, "Right now, we have what we call a comprehensive partnership [with Vietnam]; we hope to raise it to a strategic partnership, and I will take steps to do that by strengthening even further our security relationships with Vietnam."

Q3. The international media reported that the South China Sea will be on the table. So what will these countries talk about the South China Sea? And will it achieve a fruitful result?

ANSWER: First and foremost, Defense Secretary Austin will want to get to know his regional counterparts and build up a measure of personal rapport on his first official visit to the region.

Secretary Austin's remarks at his press conference indicate that the South China Sea will feature in his discussions. Austin stated, "I will also make clear where we stand on some unhelpful and unfounded claims by China in the South China Sea." Since this is his first visit to Southeast Asia, Austin will be keen to exchange views on the South China Sea to identify potential areas for future cooperation.

The results of Austin's talks will vary from country to country. Singapore already works closely with the United States on regional security matters. Combined naval-air exercises are likely to feature in discussions.

Austin's discussions in the Philippines will focus on convincing President Duterte of the credibility of a U.S. commitments in the West Philippines Sea under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and getting Duterte to agree to a revision of the Visiting Forces Agreement. Austin's discussions with his counterpart, Delfin Lorenzana, will likely focus on U.S. arms sales, training and support, and future military exercises.

Austin's discussions with his Vietnamese counterpart and high-level Vietnamese leaders will stress U.S. commitment to stability and security in the South China Sea and support for regional states against Chinese bullying and intimidation. These discussions likely will be more of an exchange of views on strategic issues, how to manage relations with China, and Vietnamese priorities for future defence cooperation.

It is unlikely that any formal agreement will be reached at this time, this will be task left , for senior defence officials to work out. They are likely to discuss the sale and/or transfer of military equipment and technology to Vietnam as well as specialist training.

Secretary Austin might extend an invitation to his Vietnamese counterpart, General Phan Van Giang to visit the United States.

Q4. Vietnam's media reports this visit in a balanced way. So, what do you think about defense cooperation between the U.S. - Vietnam after Austin's trip? Will there be any deal or some kind of agreement?

ANSWER: It is notable that the retired ambassadors from Vietnam to the United States and from the United States to Vietnam both stressed that how the two sides characterised their bilateral relations was less important than that the relations be strategic in nature.

The Biden Administration is now stressing the desirability of raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. If Secretary Austin raises this issue in Hanoi, it will create a quandary for Vietnam. This is because U.S.-Vietnam relations may be characterised as "same bed, different dreams." Both would like to see China behave in a less aggressive manner but they disagree on how to achieve this objective.

Current relations between Vietnam and China are probably "as good as it gets" after the maritime confrontations in 2014 and 2019, and Chinese pressure on Vietnam to stop oil explorations activities in the waters near Vanguard Bank in 2017 and 2018. Vietnam will be extremely cautious not undertake military cooperation with the U.S. that is viewed as provocative by Beijing. In other words, Vietnam will put a positive gloss on bilateral relations in public while drawing out discussions in private until an internal consensus is reached in Hanoi.

Q5. How will China react, in your expectations?

ANSWER: China reportedly has frozen defence relations with the United States and is putting pressure on the Philippines not to resuscitate its defence alliance with the U.S. Chinese propaganda will stress non-interference in Vietnam's internal affairs, the commonalities of their socialist systems, and urge Vietnam to remain true to its leader's commitment not to harm relations with China by leaning towards the United States. China will also blame the United States to tensions in region and South China Sea.

Recall that Xinhua New Agency reported on 26 April, when China's State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe met newly installed President of Vietnam, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, that "Vietnam will stay on guard against and firmly resist any schemes to undermine the Vietnam-China relations, and will never follow other countries in opposing China."

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