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## **Background Brief:**

### **U.S.-Vietnam Relations Under the Biden Administration**

**January 18, 2022**

We are researching how U.S.-Vietnam relations have progressed during President Biden's first year in office. We request your assessment of the following questions?

Q1. How would you characterize the development of U.S.-Vietnam relations over President Biden's first twelve months in office?

ANSWER: U.S.-Vietnam relations are in a steady state, shaped by the 2013 comprehensive partnership and past agreements on defence cooperation. For example, in 2011 the United States and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defence Cooperation in five areas – maritime security, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, exchanges between defence universities and research institutes, and UN peacekeeping. A decade later these five areas of cooperation remain the mainstay of defence cooperation.

In 2015, the two countries adopted a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation that included a list of twelve areas of cooperation most of which were on-going. Except for the sale of three former U.S. Coast Guard Hamilton-class cutters there have been no major new developments but a continuation of already agreed defence cooperation.

In March 2021, the Biden Administration issued its *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* in which Vietnam was listed a priority security partner. Both Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin visited Vietnam in 2021 and raised the possibility of elevating bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. Vietnam's leaders sidestepped this issue as premature because they do not have sufficient confidence and trust in the domestically shaky Biden Administration.

Q2. There have been fewer personal interactions in 2021 than in Trump's first year in office. (PM Phuc was one of the first foreign leaders Trump spoke to after his victory and PM Phuc visited Washington in 2017).

Has the Biden Administration slightly snubbed Vietnam, focusing its efforts in Southeast Asian instead on other countries? Or are US-Vietnam relations now so stable that grand displays of affection, such as what we saw under the Trump a

Administration, no longer needed?

ANSWER: The Trump and Biden Administrations are a study of contrasts. The Trump Administration was laser focused on U.S. trade deficits and what it viewed as unfair

trade practices. Immediately after Trump came to office he withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Vietnam reacted with alacrity to protect its economic interests in its largest export market. Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc successfully lobbied for an invitation to The White House to try and assuage President Trump. PM Phuc made a favourable impression. Vietnam basked in the sun when Trump picked Hanoi for his second summit meeting with North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un.

However, the bilateral relationship soured at the end of Trump's term in office. In June 2019, Trump told Fox News that "Vietnam takes advantage of us even worse than China... It's almost the single worst abuser of everybody." Trump Administration officials also accused Vietnam of currency manipulation.

Both the Trump and Biden Administrations identified Vietnam as a potential strategic partner. However, the Biden Administration's initial preoccupation was on the Middle East, and Afghanistan in particular, rather than Southeast Asia.

The Biden Administration identified ASEAN as key to the Indo-Pacific regional architecture. However, in an early set-back, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's effort to hold a virtual conference with his ASEAN counterparts while flying to the Middle East failed due to technical problems with communications.

The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for face-to-face meetings, especially when the Delta variant emerged. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was forced to postpone a trip to Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines. This resulted in compressed back-to-back visits to Hanoi by Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary Austin. Also, it should be noted, Secretary Blinken spoke by phone with Vietnam's foreign minister Pham Binh Minh and his successor Bui Thanh Son (as well as other counterparts in Southeast Asia).

However, Vietnam was not on the itinerary of either Secretary Blinken or Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink when they visited Southeast Asia later in the year. Because of President Biden's initiative to host a Summit for Democracy priority attention was given to Indonesia and Malaysia. This left Vietnam marginalised in the process.

Q3. What's the future of U.S.-Vietnam relations under Biden? What might 2022 have in store?

ANSWER: U.S. Ambassador-designate to Vietnam Marc Knapper publicly pledged to promote an upgrading of bilateral ties during his Senate confirmation hearings. His arrival in Hanoi should give new impetus to raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. There are several thorny issues that must be resolved first – economic issues including Vietnam's status as a non-market economy and the trade imbalance, Vietnam's dependency on Russia as the source of its defence armaments, U.S. pressure on Vietnam to join the United States to pushback against China in the South China Sea, and human rights.

The current crisis in Myanmar and how ASEAN Chair Cambodia handles this issue will receive greater priority than upgrading relations with Vietnam. Domestic American politics, especially the mid-term elections in November, will weigh heavily on Hanoi's deliberations on whether or not to negotiate a strategic partnership with the Biden

Administration. If the Democratic Party loses control of Congress, Hanoi will view the United States as an unreliable partner.

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