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Background Brief:

Vietnamese Media Coverage of The White House Dinner for ASEAN Leaders

June 29, 2022

We are drafting a report on an event at the White House last month. President Biden hosted a dinner for Southeast Asian leaders as part of the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit. The White House advised the media that the event was closed to the press, but video footage from inside the dining room ended up on Vietnamese state media hours after the dinner ended. This footage was used by almost all of the largest state-run outlets in their reports about the event.

We want to understand what motivated such behavior and its potential consequences. We request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1. Do you think this was a diplomatic blunder on Vietnam's part? If so, how serious was it?

ANSWER: I have reviewed all the links listed in the Appendix, in some cases replaying them or freezing specific pictures to look more closely.

The White House Daily Guidance dated 12 May states that the dinner for the leaders of ASEAN countries and ASEAN Secretary General hosted by President Biden "will be closed to the press." The media was obviously permitted to film the arrival of leaders as they were greeted individually by President Biden on the steps to The White House. The press was present when a group photo was taken on the lawn of The White House. It is also clear that the media were permitted to enter the State Dining Room to film ASEAN leaders walking in and taking their seats. Leaders hosted by President Biden were accompanied by interpreters. They sat in chairs immediately behind their leaders at the dining table.

The official Cambodian coverage showed President Biden rise and offer a toast to his guests before the meal was served. This was shot from the head of the table on Biden's left side in order to capture Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, ASEAN Chair, seated directly opposite Biden on the right side. The footage ended with Hun Sen rising along with the other leaders to respond to President Biden's toast.

The Vietnamese media focused on the pre-dinner conversation between President Biden, seated in the middle of the table on the far side of the dining room, and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, who was seated on President Biden's immediate left. There was also some brief footage of their conversation after the entrée was served. The angle of this shot was taken further down the right side of the table facing President Biden and focused across the table on Biden and Prime Minister Chinh in

conversation. The footage briefly captured National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan putting food on his fork and ASEAN guests opposite eating.

It seems reasonable to surmise that after the toast, White House staff announced to the media that they should leave and began escorting them out of the State Dining Room as the entrée was served. I can only speculate that an accredited Vietnamese media representative briefly delayed his departure in order to capture additional footage of President Biden and Prime Minister Chinh in conversation.

Video footage of this episode clearly shows a White House official (perhaps a Secret Service Agent) standing in the corner at the end of the table to President Biden's left. It seems improbable that any Vietnamese media representative (or official from the Vietnamese delegation) could have remained in the State Dining Room and filmed after the entrée was served. None of the footage I reviewed showed leaders eating their main meals.

A close review of video footage shows that Vietnamese media repeatedly played a loop of Biden and Chinh in conversation thus giving the impression that they talked longer. The brief footage shot after the entrée was served, which shows Jake Sullivan eating, was focused on Biden and Chinh, was also replayed in a loop.

It would appear that the media were cleared from the State Dining Room as the first course was served. This process does not appear to have taken place as expeditiously as possible in which case The White House needs to review its handling of this matter. If a Vietnamese cameraman tarried to get a different angle for his video he was likely spotted and escorted from the room without incident. This incident does not amount to major breach of protocol.

If a breach of protocol occurred there are several ways it could have been handled – a face to face comment to the individual(s) concerned, or a note to the accredited media agency involved (VTV or VNA).

Q2. Could this incident impact on Vietnam's reputation?

ANSWER: On the face of it, it is highly doubtful that this particular event was such a major breach of protocol as to affect bilateral relations or undermine Vietnam's international reputation. This type of matter is between The White House/Department of State and the individual and his/her media agency concerned not the Vietnam government.

Q3. Does Vietnam have a strong desire for its leader to be seen shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. president? What objective was served by releasing the video footage? What kind of message did Vietnam want to send?

ANSWER: The Vietnamese media have a strong incentive to portray any overseas visit by Vietnam's prime minister positively. Accordingly, the Vietnamese media gave coverage to the official limousine flying the Vietnamese flag transporting Prime Chinh to the White House; President Biden greeting Prime Minister Chinh on the steps of the White House; the group photo of ASEAN leaders with President Biden on the lawn of the White House; Prime Minister Chinh entering the State Dining Room; and the pre-dinner conversation between Biden and Chinh.

The intention behind this media coverage was to portray Vietnam's high international standing and prestige and demonstrate that its leader can meet on equal terms with the President of the United States. One message was loud and clear – President Biden has a lot of affection for the Vietnamese people.

Q4. Does this episode indicate that Vietnam was willing to risk violating diplomatic protocol and common courtesy to serve its own interests?

ANSWER: When all the footage is taken as a whole this appears as “much ado about nothing.” There is no evident breach of diplomatic protocol or common courtesy.

The Vietnamese media cannot be faulted for taking the photo opportunity of filming their Prime Minister seated next to and talking with President Biden before the start of dinner. The fortuitous seating arrangements, with Biden and Chinh at the centre of the dining table seated next to one another, lent itself to elevating the status of Vietnam's prime minister in the eyes of its intended audience back home in Vietnam and Vietnamese living abroad.

Q5 What do you think about the role of state media outlets in this episode? Did they function as a propaganda arm of the Vietnamese state?

ANSWER: Of course Vietnam's state media is the propaganda arm of the one-party state. They could be accused of overplaying the importance of Prime Minister Chinh's greeting by President Biden on the White House steps. Biden greeted each ASEAN leader in the same manner as they arrived.

I have already noted that Vietnamese state media played loops of Biden and Chinh talking with one another thus giving the impression of a longer conversation.

Q6. A [fact sheet](#) by the U.S. Department of State describes the U.S. and Vietnam as “trusted partners with a friendship grounded in mutual respect.” [Another](#) fact sheet by the White House says the two countries “have overcome a difficult past to become trusted partners.” How can Vietnam be trusted if it's not willing to play by the rules that others accept?

ANSWER: An alleged minor breach of protocol – if that was what it is – by one Vietnamese media outlet should not be blown out of proportion. There was no evident duplicity on the part of Vietnamese news media or any person in the official Vietnamese delegation.

APPENDIX

Cambodian National Television TVK

https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=781756816164357 (from 9:29 to 10:10)

ANTV

<https://youtu.be/nZsA41pcOHA> (from 2'43 - 4'04)

Nhan Dan TV

<https://nhandantv.vn/thu-tuong-pham-minh-chinh-gap-tong-thong-hoa-ky-jos-biden-d202399.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uR-6BFLIVdo&t=211s>

VGP (Chinh Phu VN)

<https://media.chinhphu.vn/video/tong-thong-joseph-biden-luon-danh-nhieu-tinh-cam-cho-dat-nuoc-va-con-nguoi-viet-nam-16507.htm>

VNA Vietnamese

<https://vnews.gov.vn/video/thu-tuong-pham-minh-chinh-gap-tong-thong-joe-biden-38960.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOD98iYExHE>

VNA English

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ijuTvcA3h0>

VNA French

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAbc1R9HUd0>

VTV1

<https://media.chinhphu.vn/video/tong-thong-hoa-ky-don-tiep-cac-nha-lanh-dao-asean-16508.htm>

<https://vtv.vn/video/thoi-su-19h-vtv1-13-5-2022-559216.htm>

(full newscast, May 13) (from 15'27 – 18'49)

VTV4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20z7YXcHb70&t=219s>

VTV4 English

https://youtu.be/WDksMCPvl_o (from 3'50 - 4'12)

VTV4 French

<https://youtu.be/zQcP-ZSfwWQ?t=250> (from 4'10 - 5'20)

VTV4 Russian

<https://youtu.be/04O-kE--7tE> (from 9'12 - 10'16)

Zing News

<https://zingnews.vn/video-tong-thong-my-tiep-cac-nha-lanh-dao-asean-tai-nha-trang-post1316731.html>

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