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Background Brief:

Vietnam's Foreign Policy Post-13th National Party Congress

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We request your assessment of the following seven issues:

Q1. Do you think at Vietnam's 13th national party congress, Vietnam will introduce a new foreign policy for the next five years?

ANSWER: The basic framework for Vietnam's foreign policy has been set for many years – to diversity and multilateralize external relations, to cooperate and struggle, to form comprehensive and strategic partnerships and expand them over time, and proactive and active international integration.

According to the Political Report to the 13th Congress, there are four priorities in foreign affairs: (1) to improve the efficiency of foreign relations, (2) proactively and actively promote foreign affairs, (3) promote multilateral diplomacy and (4) to fulfill international responsibilities.

Under the second priority, Vietnam will work to benefit from free trade agreements and enhance international integration through investment and trade dispute settlement. Under the fourth priority, Vietnam will meet its responsibilities in ASEAN, the United Nations peacekeeping, and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.

Q2. Vietnam has carried out a foreign policy stressing independence, self-reliance, peace, friendship, cooperation for development, and national interests for the past year. Do you think Vietnam has been on the right track in its foreign policy for the past five years?

ANSWER: Yes, Vietnam has been on the right track in preserving its autonomy by balancing its relations with the major powers. The proof of this is Vietnam unanimous selection by the Asia bloc in the UN General Assembly as its nominee for non-permanent membership on the Security Council, and by Vietnam's success for the second time in being elected to the Security Council with a commanding majority of the vote in the General Assembly.

Q3. How can Vietnam balance relations between China and the U.S in the context of China strengthening activities to infringe upon Vietnam's interests in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: Since 2003, and reaffirmed ten years later, Vietnam pursues a finely crafted policy of cooperation and struggle in its relations with the major powers, especially China and the United States. For example, Vietnam and China are able to cooperate

on economic and commercial matters and border security despite their dispute in the South China Sea through the mechanism of the bilateral Joint Steering Committee. Vietnam is also able to cooperate with the United States in a number of areas despite persistent economic and commercial irritations imposed by the Trump Administration.

Vietnam's defence policy of four no's has put China and the United States on notice that it will not side with one of them against the other. However, the 2019 Defence White Book made clear, "Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Viet Nam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries on the basis of respecting each other's independence, sovereignty, territorial unity and integrity as well as fundamental principles of international law, cooperation for mutual benefits and common interests of the region and international community."

Q4. Do you think there will be a split within the Politburo over how to deal with the U.S and China?

ANSWER: Vietnam's Politburo will not be split over Vietnam's relations with China and the United States. This is because the top leaders have worked together for at least five or more years and have reached a consensus on how to conduct relations with the U.S. and China. There will be differences, however, over how to respond to specific issues and disputes as they arise.

Q5. What do you think is the most difficult thing for Vietnam in dealing with China in the South China Sea in the coming year? Do you think joining in the Quad (U.S, Japan, India, Australia) will help Vietnam to deal with China's pressure in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: The most difficult issue for Vietnam is whether to resume oil exploration and exploitation in the waters near Vanguard Bank and Red Orchid Block. This is because on three occasions the Politburo has cancelled contracts with foreign companies for surveys in this area – Repsol of Spain (July 2017, March 2018) and the Noble Corporation (2019) – under pressure and threats by China.

Vietnam already participates in an expanded Quad with New Zealand and South Korea and the Quad's four founding members (U.S., Japan, India Australia) – but on combatting COVID-19 only. Vietnam is highly unlikely to participate in Quad naval exercises (tập trận) because this would be viewed as alignment against China. Vietnam's formal participation in the Quad would provoke a very negative response from China. Vietnam has more to gain by dangling the prospect of joining the Quad as a deterrent to China.

Q6. Do you think that Vietnam's top leaders do not trust China as China has not complied with international laws?

ANSWER: Vietnam's leaders have indirectly revealed that there is a trust deficit in relations with China by stressing the need to build strategic trust (lòng tin chiến lược). China's non-observation of international law is only part of the problem. The two sides agreed on the Fundamental Principles to Guide the Settlement of Maritime Disputes in October 2011. Yet China has provoked serious incidents by deploying a mega oil drilling rig into Vietnamese waters in 2014, threatening force regarding foreign survey

ships working in the Vanguard Bank, and the deployment of a survey ship for four months in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone in 2019.

Q7. How will leadership change/generation transition shape policy that could help Vietnam develop a better foreign policy?

ANSWER: The proposed age structure for the 13th Central Committee does not augur well for a new generation of leaders on the Central Committee having a decisive say in policy. Party officials have indicated that 70% of the next Central Committee should fall between 50 and 60 years of age. The target for new members under 50 is 15-20%. It will take the new members at least five years before they are eligible for election to the Politburo.

In the meantime, the 13th Congress appears poised to give the current Secretary General an unprecedented third term in office, while retiring Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh because he has served two terms in office.

The decision to break with precedent and appoint Pham Minh Chinh as prime minister, and not Vuong Dinh Hue, the Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for economic affairs, indicates that ideological orthodoxy will continue to influence foreign policy. This development is unlikely to result in any "new thinking" about relations with China.

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