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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Foreign Relations in the New Year

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We are preparing a report regarding Viet Nam's diplomacy. We request your input into the following questions:

Q1. Viet Nam has successfully hosted a series of international events like APEC Leaders' Week in 2017, US-DPRK Summit in 2019 and managed to maintain good relations with neighboring countries and major partners, so what are behind the success according to your views?

ANSWER: Three reasons come to mind – expertise, experience, and pragmatism. Vietnam has built up a highly professional diplomatic corps with extensive expertise in international affairs and the domestic politics of all the major actors. Diplomacy has always been an integral part of Vietnam's long struggle against foreign domination. Vietnam also has extensive experience at international conferences going back to the Geneva Conference in 1954, the Paris Conference on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam in 1973 and the Paris International Conference on the conflict in Cambodia in 1991. More. Particularly, Vietnam has successfully hosted the Francophone summit in 1997, APEC Leaders' Meetings in 2006 and 2017, and ASEAN Summits in 1998 and 2010. Finally, Vietnam approaches these major events with a sense of pragmatism or put in another way "the art of the possible."

Q2. What Viet Nam should do to continue sustaining and promoting its international prestige and position?

ANSWER: There are three major avenues that will help sustain and promote Vietnam's international prestige and position – education and training, self-evaluation, and the promotion of Vietnam's independence and autonomy.

Vietnamese historians and retired diplomats should continue to write about the "lessons from their experience" so it can serve as a guide for present and future leaders. The Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam must continually strive for excellence in training the next generation of diplomats. Vietnam must continue to educate its diplomats and leaders in all relevant foreign languages.

The second avenue is for Vietnam to constantly evaluate the effectiveness and professionalism of its diplomatic corps. Only the best talents should serve as senior ambassadors abroad. There must be constant monitoring of performance and results.

Thirdly, Vietnam has been the unanimous choice of the Asia block at the United Nations as its nominee for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council. And Vietnam has been elected twice by a commanding majority of the General Assembly as non-permanent member of the Security Council (2008-09 and 2020-21). This indicates that Vietnam is viewed as a constructive and reliable member not only of the Asia-Pacific region but the international community as well. Why? Because Vietnam is valued for its independence and autonomy on issues affecting international peace and security and its reputation for expertise and experience.

Q3. As ASEAN Chair and UNSC non-permanent members, what are the advantages and possible challenges for Viet Nam to lead the two organizations and how the two organizations could cooperate to advance global peace and security?

ANSWER: The roles of ASEAN Chair and non-permanent member of the UNSC are different. The ASEAN Chair is a rotating position for one year. The ASEAN Chair is expected to conform to the “ASEAN Way” and promote dialogue and consensus “at a peace comfortable to all.” The ASEAN Chair is also expected to follow through on ASEAN policies already in progress such as community-building, integration and connectivity.

Vietnam has set a theme for its chairmanship, Cohesive and Responsive, and five major goals: strengthening of ASEAN unity and solidarity, intensifying ASEAN’s economic integration and connectivity, promoting ASEAN identity and awareness, enhancing ASEAN’s global partnership for peace, stability and sustainable development, and increasing ASEAN’s institutional capacity and effectiveness.

A year is short time to achieve these objectives. Vietnam must be a proactive leader and a consensus-builder at the same time. Vietnam must set priorities for the year, and leave a legacy that the next ASEAN Chair will have to follow up and implement.

One of the most important issues for the ASEAN Chair will be to make progress on negotiating a South China Sea Code of Conduct with China that is relevant, effective and binding on all parties.

Vietnam will serve for two years as a non-permanent member of the UNSC. There are ten non-permanent members. Decision-making in the UNSC is by majority vote but each of the five permanent members has the right of veto. Vietnam can only influence UNSC policy by joining coalitions of members on particular issues and act as a broker when a logjam is reached by the major powers. The major challenge Vietnam will face is when the major powers are divided on an important issue. For example, if the United States seeks to maintain or increase sanctions on North Korea while China and Russia seek to ease the sanctions Vietnam will have to decide which policy it will support.

One advantage for Vietnam is that permanent members will lobby Vietnam for its vote on many issues. At the same time Vietnam will be ASEAN Chair. This will give Vietnam more prestige than normal. If Vietnam takes an independent stance on major issues its role will be valued and this will give Vietnam increased influence. This was demonstrated when the United States asked Vietnam to host the second summit between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un.

If Vietnam adopts a proactive stance on certain issues it can build relationships with other non-permanent members and thus increase its influence in affecting the wording of resolutions on issues affecting world peace and security.

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