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Background Brief:

Vietnam-US Relations: Two Cancellations in a Month?

July 27, 2022*

According to a State Department source earlier this month, the *USS Ronald Reagan* would become the third US aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam. The visit was scheduled for the latter half of this month. Vietnamese sources, however, reported that the scheduled visit to Danang has been canceled due to concerns about a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Q1. What are your comments about the cancellation of the visit by the *USS Ronald Reagan*? What do you think might have led to the cancellation? Who is the most likely decision-making side?

ANSWER: It is my assessment that Vietnam took the initiative to cancel the scheduled visit of the *USS Ronald Reagan* aircraft carrier because of rising tension in the South China Sea. From the very beginning, when the United States first proposed visits by nuclear powered aircraft carriers, Vietnam rejected annual visits out of concern this might send the wrong signal to China that Vietnam was tilting towards the U.S. Vietnam's policy has been to welcome a U.S. Navy presence in the South China Sea as long as it contributed to regional peace and security. At the present time, given China's strong verbal condemnation of the U.S. as the cause of regional insecurity, China's conduct of short-notice military exercises, and likely Chinese diplomatic pressure on Hanoi, Vietnam decided to opt out and cancel the visit.

Q2. A visit by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Vietnam was also planned in July around the time Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was scheduled to visit. Blinken's visit was also cancelled. What do you make of the cancellation of visits to Vietnam by the *USS Ronald Reagan* and Secretary Blinken? What factors do you think influenced it?

ANSWER: When I first heard that Secretary Blinken's visit had been cancelled, I contacted my network of Vietnam-based sources as well as current and retired U.S. officials. I quickly learned that the visit had been postponed. However, there were a variety of conflicting views on what caused this. The most plausible explanation from a reliable source was that the postponement had nothing to do with Vietnam but arose from scheduling issues in the White House related to President Biden. Secretary Blinken visited Thailand instead.

The most recent senior U.S. official to visit Hanoi was Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman who met with Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son and other officials on 13

June. According to a read out issued by the Department of State, her visit went well. She discussed the US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership, praised Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's successful visit to the United States to attend the US-ASEAN Special Summit, welcomed Vietnam's participation at the launch of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and pledged continuing efforts to address war legacy issues. In sum, bilateral relations appear to be on a good track and no issue at that time stands out that would have caused the cancellation of Secretary Biden's visit. This was a very low-key affair. One Vietnamese diplomat said privately that no visit by Blinken was [officially] scheduled.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Hanoi from 5-6 July. His visit was announced on 4 July on the same day that I heard Secretary Blinken's visit was postponed. A check of the State Department's Public Schedule does not reveal any announcement that Secretary Blinken would visit Vietnam at this time. On 5 July, the Public Schedule showed that Secretary Blinken would visit Indonesia and Thailand from 6-11 July. Blinken visited Bangkok from 9-10 July. Both Lavrov and Blinken attended the G20 ministerial meeting in Jakarta so I don't think Lavrov's stopover in Hanoi was the reason for Blinken to postpone his visit.

*On July 29, the Department of State announced that Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Cambodia (August 3-5), and the Philippines (August 6).

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