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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

Vice President Harris' Visit to Vietnam: Post-Mortem

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August 26, 2021

We request your assessment of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Vietnam.

Q1. Vice President Harris has proposed to raise Vietnam-U.S. relations to strategic partnership. What is the message the U.S. wishes to convey?

ANSWER: It is quite clear that the Biden Administration has given priority to cooperating with Vietnam more intensively across a range of shared interests. Marc Knapper, President Biden's nominee as the next U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, has pledged to work for an upgrading of bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin suggested to Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh that the two sides study raising bilateral relations. Now, Vice President Kamala Harris, the second highest official in the Biden Administration, has proposed that the two sides "consider what we can to upgrade our relationship."

The message is that the Biden Administration would like to engage in dialogue with Vietnam about how to make the current comprehensive partnership more effective across its nine areas of cooperation with a view to raising the relationship to a formal strategic partnership.

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh told Vice President Harris "Viet Nam attaches importance to further advancing the comprehensive partnership with the U.S. in an increasingly practical, effective and stable manner..."

The key issue is how Vietnam and the United States can advance defence and security cooperation while at the same time not undermining Vietnam's foreign policy of "independence, self-reliance and diversification and multilateralization of external relations, [and] proactive and active international integration."

Q2. Vice President Harris mentioned the South China Sea issue both in Singapore and Vietnam. She also urged Vietnam to support the statement on maritime principles in the Western Pacific that the U.S. proposed. Does this mean that the U.S. is more concerned about the current situation in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: The United States has been concerned about the situation in the South China Sea for some time, especially under the Trump Administration when Mike Pompeo was Secretary of State. The Biden Administration shares those concerns. Vice President Harris told President Nguyen Xuan Phuc, "We need to find ways to pressure,

raise pressure [...] on Beijing to abide by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and to challenge, its bullying and excessive maritime claims.”

In the U.S. view, the situation in the South China Sea is very worrisome and will get worse unless nations band together and push back against China. What the U.S. means by “raising pressure” is a sensitive issue that needs to be examined in depth by Vietnamese leaders.

Q3. Vice President Harris will launch the regional CDC Office in Hanoi. She has also promised the U.S. will provide one million doses of vaccine to Vietnam. Does this vaccine diplomacy assist Vietnam to fight against the pandemic?

ANSWER: There are two aspects to “vaccine diplomacy.” The first aspect is acquiring enough vaccines for the entire population of Vietnam to receive two jabs.

The second aspect involves appropriate health measures (lockdowns, quarantine, face masks, sanitation etc.) that the public adheres to voluntarily now until Vietnam has vaccinated more than seventy to eighty percent of its population.

Vietnam has been proactive in acquiring vaccines and pressing the COVAX facility for more supplies. Outside countries like the United States, China, Japan, Russia, Poland, Cuba etc. have offered assistance.

Q4. What are the most impressive features of Vice President Harris’ visit?

ANSWER: Vice President Kamala Harris lacks experience in foreign affairs. But she is a powerful figure within the Biden Administration. She delivered the key themes of President Biden’s foreign policy directly and with grace in Singapore and Vietnam.

The most impressive feature of her visit was the easy and friendly exchange of views with President Phuc and Prime Minister Chinh. The single most important outcome was the message she delivered that the United States would increase its support to assist Vietnam in combatting COVID-19 by providing more vaccine and medical equipment. The launch of the CDC regional office in Hanoi was the most practical outcome because it committed the U.S. to work with Vietnam and other regional states to address not only the current pandemic but infectious diseases yet to come.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vice President Harris’ Visit to Vietnam: Post-Mortem,” *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, August 26, 2021. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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