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Background Brief:

Biden Nominates Marc Knapper as Next Ambassador to Vietnam

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It has just been announced that U.S. President Joe Biden has officially nominated Marc Knapper as the new U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam. Could you provide us an assessment of this nomination and comment on the new ambassador?

Q1. Given Mr. Knapper's diplomatic expertise in East Asia (South Korea, Japan, Vietnam), how do you think his experience will fit with the policy of the new Biden Administration towards Vietnam? And will be the main challenges he will face when he officially assumes the position of U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam?

ANSWER: In September 2020, I was informed by a very reliable source in Hanoi that Marc Knapper would replace Daniel Kritenbrink as Ambassador to Vietnam. That indicates Knapper was held in high respect by the Department of State run by Trump-appointed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Knapper is a career Senior Foreign Service Officer who has held senior posts in East Asia, most recently as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Korea and Japan since August 2018. Knapper is ideally placed to assist in implementing President Biden's strategy of revitalizing and modernizing U.S. alliances as well as relations with security partners. Japan and South Korea are at the centre of this strategy and Vietnam is a high-priority potential security partner.

All ambassadors – professional and political appointees – serve at the pleasure of the president. As a professional Knapper definitely would have no problems implementing Biden's policy.

Knapper will face at least three major challenges. First, he will have to work with Vietnamese officials to resolve frictions in their bilateral economic relations that are a legacy of the Trump Administration.

Second, Knapper will have to convince Vietnamese officials to trust the United States and work with it to maintain a stable, secure Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Vietnam supports this objective in principle but will not want to anger China in the process of working with the U.S. Knapper will have to navigate Vietnamese concerns about an unstable Biden government in Washington that could lose control of Congress in the mid-term elections in November 2022.

Third, human rights are likely to become an issue in bilateral relations under a Democratic Party-controlled House of Representatives and Senate.

Q2. What will the Biden Administration's policy to Vietnam be? What part priorities will be continued, and what issues would need to be improved/fixed?

ANSWER: There will be considerable continuity in the Biden Administration's policy from that of the Trump Administration.

President Biden's *INational Security Strategic Guidance* issued in March sets out to engage Vietnam (along with India). The Biden Administration will set a priority on enhancing its comprehensive partnership with Vietnam in all nine areas of cooperation spelled out in the 2013 original joint statement during the Obama Administration when Biden was Vice President.

As mentioned, Knapper will have to address bilateral economic issues such as charges of currency manipulation and Trump's withdrawal of least developing country status under the World Trade Organisation. Defence and security relations will be given a higher priority and the U.S. and Vietnam will have to negotiate a middle ground taking Vietnam's interests into account.

It is notable that former Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, Pham Quang Vinh, and former U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Daniel Kritenbrink have said virtually the same things regarding raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. Both placed emphasis on the practical content of bilateral relations rather than the wording of the relationship. That is, whether it was called a comprehensive partnership or a strategic partnership, what matters was if cooperation was of a strategic nature.

Economic irritants will be handled by the senior leaders of both countries on advice from relevant working groups.

Q3. There are some concerns that if Mr. Knapper would actually become the new Ambassador to Vietnam that his style would create tensions in bilateral relations. Last year, for example, he urged Japan and South Korea to speak out against China's behavior. This was assessed by some media as a "blunt" remark by a U.S. diplomat. Do you agree with that? Do you think there could be tensions if he would assume the position of Ambassador in Vietnam?

How do you see his personality in addition to his respected diplomatic career?

ANSWER: When Marc Knapper served under the Trump Administration, and more particularly, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, he was required to carry out U.S. foreign policy. In sum, he was obliged to use the harsh rhetoric of Secretary Pompeo. Knapper is unlikely to be placed in the same situation as Ambassador to Vietnam because that is not the style of President Biden and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Knapper served in the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi for three years as Political Counselor (2004-07). He was trained in Vietnamese language before his appointment. Knapper will be well-versed in Vietnamese culture and how its political system works. I see no reason why his appointment as Ambassador should produce tensions. It is up to Vietnam to formally accept Knapper. Knapper's appointment should be a plus for Vietnam because of his experience in Japan and South Korea, two countries that work well with Vietnam.

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