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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Should Tet (Lunar New Year) Be Abolished?

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January 21, 2017

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We request your opinion whether or not Vietnam should abolish the traditional celebrations on Lunar New Year (Tet). We seek your views on the questions below:

Q1. As someone with years of observation and research on Vietnam, China and Southeast Asia, what are your thoughts on the traditional Lunar New Year?

ANSWER: Different civilisations have different ways of determining their yearly calendar. The Lunar New Year is typically a product of Asian civilisations, including Vietnam. Every nation should take pride in its heritage. Countries in the West, and other countries influenced by the West, use the Gregorian calendar named after Pope Gregory 13th; it was introduced in 1581. The Lunar New Year originated in what is today modern China. Vietnam's Tet derives from this calendar and welcomes the first day of Spring. Traditions that bring family and friends together should be cherished.

Q2. Having worked with Vietnamese and Chinese people, have you ever encountered any difficulties due to the fact that your colleagues take a holiday that is too long? Have you ever heard similar complaints in Australia?

ANSWER: Generally Chinese and Vietnamese who live abroad follow the customs and the legal holidays where they live. Under modern working conditions all employees are entitled to a number of days of annual paid leave. Vietnamese who want to return to Vietnam to be with their families are entitled to request leave for that period. If the employer grants leave they are free to go. If I plan a visit to Taiwan or Vietnam, for example, I take local customs and legal holidays into account. My only difficulty arose during a trip to Malaysia many years ago when I couldn't travel out of Kuala Lumpur on commercial transport because it was completely booked out for the Chinese New Year.

Q3. In Vietnam, at the moment, some argue that Tet should be abolished, or merged with the Western New Year, in order to avoid clashing with international trade. From your perspective as someone steeped in politics and international relations, do you agree with this idea?

ANSWER: There is no reason Vietnam cannot continue to observe both New Years. Each holiday period should be kept limited by law. Companies and the government can adopt suitable policies to ensure that a skeletal staff is kept on duty to manage

business affairs. If holiday periods are known in advance businesses, governments and ordinary people can plan around them.

In 1994 I was given tickets to the World Cup in the United States. My wife and I went to Boston. This was during a school break in Australia. My wife was recalled back to work in the Defense Department where she was employed. The rules gave priority to families with children to go on leave. Since we did not have any children at that time my wife was required to fly back to ensure proper staffing during this period. She missed the quarter-final game between Nigeria and Italy (1-2).

Q4. A Japanese diplomat in Vietnam maintains that Vietnam should keep the traditional Tet, so as to preserve it's national identity, and also for its soft power. What is your assessment of this idea?

ANSWER: Vietnam should keep Tet not only for traditional, cultural and national identity reasons, but also because there are many Vietnamese living abroad. I attended Tet celebrations here in Canberra today and it was an opportunity to meet many Vietnamese friends, including those who had married Australians. It was also a time for Australians who have connections to Vietnam to meet. This is a good example of soft power. The Vietnamese Ambassador spoke as well as the head of the Vietnam-Australia Business Council. Many in the audience were brought up to date. At the same time, many Vietnamese-Australians are visiting Vietnam to be with their families.

Q5. What is the longest holiday in Australia, and how does the Australian government maintain the balance between the citizens' need for taking breaks and protect its traditions while keeping international integration unaffected?

ANSWER: In Australia, the longest holiday is from Christmas to the 2nd of January, especially for government workers. Government employees are entitled to a holiday on 25th and 26th December (Christmas and Boxing Day) and New Year (1-2 January). The government shuts down during this period and orders its employees to take leave for the days between 28-31 December. Government offices open on 3rd January. The exception would be for Departments with responsibilities for security and defence.

In Australia both the federal government and the state governments determine official holidays. The federal holidays are national holidays, in addition each state observes its own state holiday. All employees and workers are entitled to take these days off with pay.

Since Christmas falls during the summer months and is close to New Year (January 1), many people take official leave at this time. It is true that some services suffer. Some Government departments continue to function and they determine the appropriate staff that must be kept on duty. Private businesses are free to set their own rules. For example, an employee may elect to work during the holidays and receive a bonus. Business and the government are able to penalize staff who do not follow the rules. This provides a disincentive for a worker or employee to take time off for a holiday without permission. The bottom line is for each country to determine the balance between maintaining a good cultural life and time off from work and the need to keep government services running and productivity continuing.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Should Tet (Lunar New Year) Be Abolished?," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, January 21, 2017. 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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