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Background Brief:

U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit – 1 May 9, 2022

Last month, the White House announced that the U.S. – ASEAN Summit will be held on 12-13 May 2022. We request your analysis of the following questions/issues:

Q1. What is your assessment of the recent moves by the U.S. in South East Asian countries, including visits made by senior U.S. officials prior to the Summit?

ANSWER: Since coming to office the Biden Administration has issued an Interim *National Security Strategic Guidance* and an *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Both documents highlight the importance of economic growth in the Indo-Pacific, of which Southeast Asia is the engine, to the U.S. economy. These policy documents also highlight the importance of working with allies (Australia, Japan, the ROK, the Philippines, and Thailand) and leading regional partners, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands.

The resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted travel plans by top Biden Administration officials in 2021. Now that international travel has been resumed recent visits by senior U.S. officials were aimed at laying the ground work for the second U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit in late March this year. But scheduling difficulties led to the summit being postponed to this month.

In order for the summit to be a success it is necessary to work out an agenda and map the road ahead.

Q2. What is the purpose and message of the U.S. when holding the Summit after repeated delays?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration initially wanted to reassure Southeast Asian states that the United States was serious about engagement with the region. That is still the case. But the war in Ukraine has dominated politics in Washington this year, especially after 24 February.

The Biden Administration wants to doubly reassure the region that a war like Ukraine will not occur, with Taiwan in mind.

Q3. What is your assessment of the context of the Summit and your appreciation of the likely agenda at the Summit?

ANSWER: The first U.S. Special Leaders' Summit was hosted by President Obama. There was no second summit under Donald Trump, indeed Trump absented himself

from several high-level meetings. The Biden Administration is attempting to overcome this legacy. More important from the U.S. point of view, China has been identified as the main rival of the United States. President Biden does not want to give China a free pass while the war in Ukraine takes centre-stage, so Biden is determined to demonstrate that the U.S. “can walk and chew gum at the same time,” that is deal with contingencies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific at the same time.

The agenda will be wide-ranging because the central component of Biden’s Indo-Pacific Strategy complements many of the issues of concern to ASEAN members. The agenda is likely to cover COVID-19 mitigation and recovery, health security, stimulating broad based economic growth, secure supply chains, human resource development, digital economy, quality infrastructure, climate change, and people-to-people exchange.

The Special Summit will also discuss maritime security and the South China Sea, the crisis in Myanmar, denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the impact of the war in Ukraine on the global and regional economy. It is unlikely that the Special Summit will agree on any specific action but will reinforce international law norms.

Q4. What is the U.S.’s ASEAN policy under the Biden’s Administration? What is your assessment?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration’s declaratory policy is to support ASEAN-centrality, ASEAN-led mechanisms, and the *ASEAN Outlook on the Pacific* (AOIP). The execution of this policy involves a contradiction. The U.S. provides support to build-up ASEAN capacity at the same time as the U.S. pursues a policy of trying to enlist regional states to oppose China. The AOIP stresses that the major power should support ASEAN and the key regional security architecture and not pressure ASEAN to take sides.

Q5. What is your assessment of the current development of the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S.?

ANSWER: Senior U.S. officials are on record of wanting to raise bilateral relations with Vietnam from a comprehensive to a strategic partnership. This is a sensitive issue that senior officials from both sides must work out. Vietnam has indicated it favours a new agreement on economic and trade co-operation. The two sides must discuss how U.S. sanctions on Russia and China will impact on Vietnam.

The meeting between President Biden and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh will be crucial for setting the future direction of various senior officials’ working groups to achieve practical results that are mutually agreeable.

Q6. Recently, Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin made important visits to Vietnam. In light of those visits, what is your assessment of Vietnam’s position in United States’ foreign policy?

ANSWER: During the visits by Vice President Harris and Secretary Lloyd, Vietnam’s top leaders adopted a positive yet cautious response to raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. Vietnam must be cautious because for two main reasons. First, the Biden Administration is poised to lose control of the Senate if not House of Representatives in the November mid-term elections. This will add uncertainty to the Biden Administration’s capacity to deliver.

Second, the Biden Administration's increasing sanctions on Russia are likely to spill over and impact on Vietnam's relations with Russia. Vietnam pursues a policy of autonomy and independence. As Senior Lt. General Nguyen Chi Vinh said recently, Vietnam is not neutral, Vietnam is independent. It is not in Vietnam's interest to see a deterioration of relations among the major powers. Vietnam has to be careful that any improvement in relations with the United States are not viewed as taking sides by either China or Russia.

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