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Background Brief:

Vietnam's Independent and Self-Reliant Foreign Policy

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We are preparing a special report on Vietnam's 77th National Day on 2nd September and request your responses to the following questions:

Q1. How do you assess the independence and self-reliance factor in Vietnam's foreign policy?

ANSWER: Vietnam's pursuit of a foreign policy of independence and self-reliance has boosted its prestige among the international community. This is demonstrated by the fact that twice in recent years Vietnam was the unanimous choice of the Asia bloc at the United Nations as its nomination as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council. Vietnam was elected both times by a commanding majority of the votes in the UN General Assembly.

At least four factors have assisted Vietnam's pursuit of a foreign policy of independence and self-reliance: (1) domestic political stability, (2) a strong all-people's national defence force premised on "four no's", (3) a highly skilled and professional diplomatic corps and (4) long-term strategic policy planning.

Q2. Amid the current complex international affairs, competition among the big powers, and the Ukraine war, what are the advantages and disadvantages for Vietnam in maintaining its foreign policy line of independence and self-reliance?

ANSWER: Vietnam's foreign policy of independence and self-reliance is facing very difficult challenges because the international system is fracturing into blocs, one led by the United States, NATO countries and U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, the other bloc comprising Russia and China and their "partnership without limits."

Vietnam's policy of independence and self-reliance has meant that Vietnam has refrained from choosing sides. There are advantages and disadvantages of this approach. The main advantage is that Vietnam has not suffered direct sanctions or other forms of retaliation from either bloc. The main disadvantage is that confrontation between the two blocs diverts the major powers from addressing security issues in the Indo-Pacific that affect Vietnam.

Q3. How do you evaluate Vietnam's current efforts to maintain balance in its relations with the big powers – the US, China, and Russia?

ANSWER: Maintaining normal relations with Russia is difficult because of western financial restrictions on Russia, the interruption of international supply chains caused

by the war in Ukraine, and the threat of U.S. sanctions for purchasing Russian arms and military technology. Since the war in Ukraine broke out, Vietnam has received Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and is currently participating in Russia's Army Games.

The recent deterioration in relations between China and the United States as a result of the visit to Taiwan by the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi has also caused difficulties for Vietnam. For reasons that are still unclear, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken reportedly postponed a trip to Vietnam, the scheduled port visit to Vietnam by the *USS Ronald Reagan* nuclear-powered aircraft carrier did not take place, and Vietnam did not send observers to attend the Rim of the Pacific Exercise 2022 in Hawaii.

On the positive side, Vietnam and the U.S. held their 4th Energy Security Dialogue, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Special Presidential Envoy John Kerry both visited Vietnam. And significantly, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh was seated next to President Joe Biden at the official White House dinner during the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit and were photographed having an animated conversation. Finally, there are rumours President Biden is considering visiting Vietnam in November.

Vietnam's relations with China have been trouble free in the East Sea this year. China's policy of Zero COVID-19 has disrupted normal bilateral relations, especially trade relations and Vietnamese exports of agricultural products to China.

Vietnam is not alone in pursuing an independent foreign policy. The confrontation between the two blocs has opened opportunities for Vietnam to raise its relations with its other strategic partners, particularly India, Australia and Japan.

Q4. Vietnam completed its tenure as ASEAN Chair and non-permanent member of the UN Security Council with positive assessments from the international community. How can Vietnam make use of this success to cement its role internationally?

ANSWER: Confrontation between the two blocs is leading to global polarisation and the marginalisation of small and medium powers as the war in Ukraine and the Taiwan reunification question take centre-stage.

Confrontation, however, also opens opportunities for Vietnam if it chooses to take a proactive approach to address other current security challenges such as global food insecurity, living with COVID-19 and its variants, climate change mitigation, and preventing the erosion of multilateralism.

Vietnam can play a positive and constructive role in ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms by working with Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand, as this year's chairs of ASEAN, the Group of 20 and APEC, respectively, to ensure that practical arrangements are in place to prevent boycotts by any major power. Also, Vietnam can lobby ASEAN members to issue a statement calling on China, the United States and other parties to lower tensions surrounding Taiwan.

Also, Vietnam can play a positive diplomatic role by using its international prestige to gain support from members of the international community in a variety of multilateral institutions to call for a negotiated peaceful end to the conflict in Ukraine and support for post-war construction.

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