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Press Briefing with Secretary Kerry, Deputy NSC Advisor Ben Rhodes, and Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz

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SECRETARY KERRY:  Eric, thank you very much.  Sorry to sidetrack there for a minute.

Good evening, everybody.  It's really a pleasure for me to be here with all of you, but it's also a tremendous privilege to be here with President Obama on what is unquestionably an historic demarcation effort.

I have to tell you that for many years I have looked forward to a time when people would hear the word "Vietnam" or the name "Vietnam" and think more of a country than a conflict.  And with President Obama's visit this week, with the crowds that we saw along the street today, the remarkably warm and generous welcome, the unbelievable excitement of people that we are here with a President of the United States at this moment is absolutely palpable, and I think it is a demarcation point.

This is a country that is practicing a raging form of capitalism.  It is engaged and has been called the tiger of this region.  And I think that, by every measure, this is a significant emphasis on the policy of President Obama with respect to the rebalance to Asia.  This is a prime example of the way in which the United States has been able to forge a new relationship out of the ashes of war and to create real peace.

And when people ask what does it mean to have lifted the lethal weapons ban -- what it means is it's normal.  We don’t have lethal embargoes or bans for countries that we treat normally.  And after 20 years of recognition, it is time to honor that normality.  The fact is that it is also a very important decision in terms of making certain that Vietnam has the equipment that it needs in order to be able to defend itself and to stand up as part of ASEAN, as part of a rule of law, a rules-based structure -- which is what President Obama has been trying to seek both in TPP, as well as in our overall policy.

So this visit and this moment, in my judgement, reaffirms what has been clear for some period of time to many of us:  The United States and Vietnam no longer define our relationship by the enmities of a bygone era.

Q    Thank you, Mr. Secretary.  The China Daily is warning the United States not to spark a fire in Asia.  And I'm quoting now:  "The United States and Vietnam must not spark a regional tinderbox" -- noting the concerns of trying to curb the rise of China.  What's your reaction to what the China Daily has written? And if I could follow, based on what you've observed in the time since 1990, is there any doubt in your mind that there will be an even greater openness here in Vietnam in the years to come?  And how can you manage that as a country that still has so many fundamental differences between governments?

Q    The U.S. and Vietnam.

Now, on the first part of your question about China, I'd say several things.  First of all, this is not about China.  Nothing that we did here or are doing here is focused on China.  It is focused on the fastest-growing marketplace in the world.  It is focused on a rules-based order that we have consistently -- Republican and Democrat, President alike -- held at the center of our policies.  And it is focused on strengthening the ability in this region to be able to promote that rules-based order.

Now, part of that rules-based order, frankly, requires the peaceful resolution of the problems of the South China Sea.  We have consistently urged in private conversations and public conversation with China that they respect the rule of law and that they engage diplomatically with the countries that are contesting claims and that they not move unilaterally.

If you want to point to the possibilities of tinderbox and of perhaps igniting something, I would caution China, as President Obama and others have, to not unilaterally move to engage in reclamation activities and militarization of islands and areas that are part of the claims that are in contest today. We don’t take a position on those claims.  China should note that.  We're not saying China is wrong in its claims; we're simply saying, resolve it peacefully, resolve it through a rules-based structure.

So nothing we've done here is out of the ordinary.  We have lifted an embargo, which was out of the ordinary.  The embargo itself, the lethal arms embargo, was a restraint on normality.  Now we have a normal relation, so we lift it.  That's very normal.  Not out of order, and certainly not inflammatory.  And I hope China will read this correctly, because our hope is for normal respect for maritime law and for the relationships that are so key in this region in terms of resolving the code of conduct and moving forward in a diplomatic way to resolve these differences.

Q    Mr. Secretary, you said that this is not about China. But it's hard not to see many of the President's comments:  "Big nations should not bully smaller ones."  "Vietnam is an independent and sovereign nation, and no other nation can impose its will on you."  These were all big lines that got a lot of applause today, and they got a lot of applause because the audience clearly understood that the President was talking about China and Vietnam.  And so huge parts of this trip are clearly directed at pushing back on China, both in the South China Sea.  And the President is going to be going to Japan.  He's going to talk about proliferation.  In this region, the most important proliferation problem is in North Korea, which is Chinese technology gotten through Pakistan, and China has the most leverage in the North Korea situation.  So again and again -- even TPP is a trade organization that you all have sort set up without China, in the Pacific.  So it's hard not to see each one of the things that you're talking about, the speeches that you're making -- and even now you're talking about you immediately pivot to the South China Sea -- without seeing China being a huge part of this trip.

SECRETARY KERRY:  Well, I think what's happening is you're confusing, if you don’t mind my saying so, respectfully, the focus and the direction of what we're doing versus some of the impact, collaterally, of what we do.  I'd obviously be either misleading you or pretty stupid if I didn’t suggest that order in the South China Sea and encouraging peaceful resolution and making sure that ASEAN is strong doesn’t collaterally have an impact on perceptions there.  But it's not focused on China.

President Obama could not have been more clear.  I've said it a hundred times -- and we mean it:  We welcome the rise of a strong China, a China that assumes responsibilities as a global superpower leader, and plays out its responsibilities in ways that are helpful.  And that means encouraging peace and stability.  As long as China is playing by those rules and adopting it, none of this is focused on China.  So it's really something we have worked on in our country and stood for since World War II.  I mean, we've been working on this rules-based structure, freedom of navigation, codes of conduct, peaceful resolution, diplomatic process.  That's the hallmark of American policy for throughout the Cold War and beyond.

So it's not specifically focused on China.  Obviously there is a collateral impact to the degree China chooses to do X, Y or Z.  And so we're very clear -- we encourage China not to be unilaterally militarizing, unilaterally moving.  But we're not focused on China.  I just can't say it enough.  We're focused on this region.  And I think the primary threat of the entire region is North Korea, Kim Jong-un, and the proliferation activities of the DPRK.  That's the primary threat.  It's actually perhaps the lead threat globally with respect to one of the two or three currently.

I think these guys are going to take over here.  I answered more than I thought I was doing.

Thank you.  Good to see you.  Thank you very much.

MR. SCHULTZ:  Ben and I are your second act and happy to take any remaining questions.