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Background Brief:

Leadership Dismissals in Vietnam: Implications for U.S.- Vietnam Relations

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Pham Binh Minh "resigned" last week from the Politburo and Central Committee.

Q1. Does the dismissal of Pham Binh Minh from party posts mean the United States has not a key conduit within the Vietnam Communist Party?

ANSWER: Pham Binh Minh speaks English and earned an M.A. degree in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School in Boston. He later served as Deputy Chief of Mission in Vietnam's Embassy in Washington (1999-2003). Thereafter he rose up the ranks in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs eventually becoming minister for two terms (2011-2021).

Minh's resignation from his high-level party posts represents Vietnam's loss of a very experienced statesman and his network of personal contacts. This goes not only for relations with the United States but Vietnam seventeen other strategic partners.

The reality is that Vietnam's policy towards the major powers, including the U.S., is overseen by the Politburo. From August 2011 to January 2016 Minh was Foreign Minister but not a member of the Politburo.

Minh was first elected to the Politburo in January 2016 and continued to serve as Foreign Minister until 2021. Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential elections in November 2016 and assumed office in January 2017. Vietnam's relations with the U.S. went on a roller coaster ride, rising in the early years of the Trump presidency (Vietnam's Prime Minister was received in the White House in May) and then plummeting at the end of his term when Trump called Vietnam the "single worst abuser" on trade with the United States, worse even than China (November 2019).

Minh ceased to be Foreign Minister in 2021 after serving the statutory maximum of two terms in office.

In sum, Minh may have been a conduit for relations with the U.S. but there is little evidence he played a decisive role during his tenure as foreign minister.

Q2. How concerned should the U.S. be that much of the Vietnamese foreign ministry has now been purged, especially after a rather lack luster year for U.S.-Vietnam relations?

ANSWER: Since 2021, American-educated Bui Thanh Son (MA, Columbia University) has been Vietnam's foreign minister. Foreign Minister Son has been reprimanded and ordered to make a severe self-criticism for his failure to oversee the proper running of the COVID repatriation flights on his watch.

Vietnam's Foreign Ministry is represented by a small group on the party Central Committee none of whom serve on the Politburo. From 2021 until the present, the weight of evidence suggests that the lack of progress in upgrading bilateral relations from a comprehensive to a strategic partnership rests with the party's most senior members.

This situation is likely to persist irrespective of the dismissal of a network of corrupt officials who abused their positions to profit from COVID repatriation flights for Vietnamese citizens stranded abroad. This network included diplomats who served in a variety of countries, such as Angola, Japan, Malaysia and Russia, and not just the United States.

In sum, the dismissal of Minh from the Politburo and his resignation from the party Central Committee (along with deputy prime minister Vu Duc Dam) will only reinforce the power of senior Politburo members. The Politburo will appoint one of their members to take on the foreign affairs responsibilities of departing member Minh. This means bilateral relations with the United States are likely to be put in a holding pattern until the dust settles.

Q3. And how should Minh's resignation be read amid General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's focus on an ideological partnership with China?

ANSWER: The removal of Minh from the Politburo, as well as concurrent disciplinary action against a wide number of government officials, including two deputy prime ministers, is best explained as the inevitable outcome of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's anti-corruption campaign. Under Trong's direction officials who abuse power or engage in criminal activities will be punished as well as officials who fail in providing effective oversight of those under their responsibility.

It is my assessment that there is no internal power struggle taking place within the Vietnam Communist Party involving pro-United States and pro-China factions. China under Xi Jinping, in Vietnamese eyes, represents continuity and stability in bilateral relations for the near term future. General Secretary Trong is making ideological hay while the sun shines.

The United States, post mid-term elections, is a riskier proposition over the next two years because of domestic polarisation, America's heavy investment in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression, and focus on the 2024 presidential elections.

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