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Background Briefing:

Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang Dies - 3

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President Tran Dai Quang passed way at 10:05 this morning. He fainted yesterday. People wanted to take him to Japan for medical assistance, but failed. Vietnamese state media have not allowed publishing news at this time.

Quang was the former Minister of Public Security before being elected president. He met President Trump last year and was scheduled to fly to New York for the UN General Assembly next week.

Q1. How will his death impact on Vietnam internal politics?

ANSWER: Usually the office of the state president is reserved for a senior member of the party leadership who has served one five-year term on the Politburo.

Tran Dai Quang's death will have an immediate impact on the work assignments of the current members of the Politburo. It should be recalled that at the 12th national party congress in January 2016, nineteen members of the Central Committee were elected to the Politburo.

With Quang's death there are now three vacancies. Dinh La Thang, former party secretary of Ho Chi Minh City, was expelled and Dinh the Huynh, Executive Secretary of the Central Committee, also passed away.

Selecting a new state president from the Politburo will have a "knock on" effect. In other words, someone must fill the vacancy of the person elevated to president, and so on. It would seem likely that the next party Central Committee plenum, normally scheduled to meet around October, will have to consider adding new members to the top leadership.

Q2. What is Quang's image in the eyes of U.S politicians? Prodemocracy? Or anti?

ANSWER: President Quang was viewed by American politicians as a conservative party ideologue who supported one-party rule and opposed political pluralism and a liberal democratic multi-party system. As former Minister of Public Security Quang was viewed as someone who would use the full power of the state to ensure the stability of one-party rule. This image was tempered by Vietnam's economic openness and engagement with the United States. President Quang successfully met presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump to advance their bilateral comprehensive partnership.

Q3. Who will be candidates for the next president?

ANSWER: If past form is a guide to the selection of Quang's replacement, his replacement should be drawn from the senior leadership ranks, that is, a person who served on the Politburo prior to the 12th national party congress. It is very unlikely that anyone holding one of the three top leadership posts will be selected, that is, party secretary general, prime minister and chair of the National Assembly.

That leaves two potential candidates: Nguyen Thien Nhan, seventh ranking Politburo member and party secretary of Ho Chi Minh City, and Tong Thi Phong, tenth ranking Politburo member and deputy chair of the National Assembly.

There is no fixed rule that the state president must serve a full-term on the Politburo, it is only a norm. Because the new state president will serve for just over two years, the Politburo may decide to consider those members who were elected in January 2016. Political rumours suggest that General Ngo Xuan Lich, the Minister of National Defense, may be a likely candidate because of his seniority, he ranks fifth in the party hierarchy. He was head of the army's General Political Department before becoming defense minister.

Q4. Does Quang's death cause any political chaos for Vietnam?

ANSWER: Quang's death has given rise to speculation that political in-fighting will develop as party factions vie to fill his vacancy and this will be a source of political instability. I disagree with this view in part because the term faction is too vague and loose to be used analytically. It is often invoked by some analysts in the form of a dichotomy between so-called conservatives and liberal reformers; this obscures more than it clarifies about how Vietnam's leadership works under the post-2016 collective leadership.

It has been revealed that Quang was diagnosed with a form of cancer in July 2017, eighteen months after he became president. He went to Japan at least six times for treatment and it soon became apparent to Vietnamese medical authorities that he was terminally ill. His sudden death may have come as a surprise as he was scheduled to address the UN General Assembly. But Politburo members would have known about his serious illness and made plans for an orderly succession.

Vietnam is at an important political juncture. It is at the half-way point between five yearly national party congresses. In May this year the party Central Committee's seventh plenum began the initial steps of vetting potential nominees for the next Central Committee to be elected at the 13th national party congress in 2021. The eighth and subsequent plenums will accelerate this pace by appointing a committee to determine the structure, composition and potential candidates for election to the next Central Committee.

It is my judgment that it is too early for any so-called faction to make its move now; that would give time for others to block it. Intense political jockeying is most likely to emerge in the final months prior to the next party congress.

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