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Background Brief:

Vietnam's New Cabinet: An Analysis of 6 Key Posts

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We would like to follow up on your previous *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief* "Vietnam's Likely New State Leaders and Cabinet Members" dated March 16, 2021.

1- *Your list and other sources confirm that Mr. Pham Minh Chinh will be the next Prime Minister of Vietnam. With a diverse working background from foreign affairs, law, to public security and socio-economic development (as Quang Ninh's Party Secretary), in your opinion, will he be a successful Prime Minister and what could be the priorities in his agenda?*

ANSWER: Pham Minh Chinh's career has been very diverse. He spent his first twelve years in various posts starting in 1984 as researcher in the Ministry of Home Affairs and diplomat in Romania (1989). He then served in the Ministry of Public Security beginning in 1996 in various capacities (General Department and Department of Logistics-Engineering) before becoming Deputy Minister in 2010. He then gained experience at provincial level spending four years in Quang Ninh, rising to party secretary. His career took a marked turn in 2015 when he was posted to Hanoi as deputy and then chairman of the party's Organisation Commission as well as member of the Secretariat.

Chinh does not have experience at senior levels of the government and it remains to be seen if his diverse background will enable him to be an effective prime minister. What is clear is that Chinh has the support of a large number of members of the party Central Committee. He will have to rely on his deputy prime ministers for their expertise in central government administration and economic policy.

Chinh's immediate priorities have already been determined – defeating the coronavirus pandemic and kick-starting Vietnam's economic recovery. The government's development plans for the next five and ten years have already been approved by the 13th congress.

2- *Rumors has it that Lieutenant General Phan Van Giang seems to be the only candidate for the Minister of Defense and in recent month, Mr. Giang has taken over quite a few activities of the outgoing Minister Ngo Xuan Lich. While both General Ngo Xuan Lich and General Luong Cuong had the background as the head of the General Political Department, Lieutenant General Phan Van Giang comes from the combat arm. In your opinion, are there any implications of this background change, particularly in the rising tension between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea?*

ANSWER: LTGEN Luong Cuong let it be known prior to the 13th national party congress that he did not wish to stand for the post of Minister of National Defence. This set the stage for LTGEN Phan Van Giang, Chief of the General Staff, to replace outgoing minister, General Ngo Xuan Lich, and the return to the norm that the most senior general from the combat services will serve as defence minister. In 2016, at the 12th national party congress, the prevailing norm was broken when Lich, the head of the General Political Department, was selected as defence minister.

Giang's career includes deputy commander and commander of the 312th Division, 1st Corps and Commander of Military Region 1. Giang's elevation is not directly related to rising tension between China and Vietnam. But his experience does mean he is well versed in the military threat posed by China on the land border and at sea. His major task will be to manage the continual modernisation of the three services – army, navy and air defence-air force.

3- *The possible new Foreign Minister, Mr Bui Thanh Son, seems to be little-known in Vietnam. Do you think Vietnam's diplomacy will be in good hands if he's elected?*

ANSWER: Son is the consummate diplomat who has had a career spanning more than three decades with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He spent thirteen years in various capacities at the Institute of International Relations (now the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam) including study abroad at Columbia University in New York where he earned an M.A. in international relations in 1993.

In 2000, Son was posted as Minister Counsellor at Vietnam's Embassy in Singapore. On return to Vietnam in mid-2003, Son rose through the foreign ministry ranks to become Assistant Minister and Director-General of the Department of Foreign Policies from 2008-09.

Next, Son gained nearly four years of practical experience as Vietnam's chief negotiator with the European Union on the Partnership and Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement (2008-12). Son was promoted to Deputy Minister in 2009 and First Deputy Minister in 2015. In 2016 he was elected a member of the party's Central Committee.

The foreign ministry should be in good hands under Son's direction. Besides, his former boss, Pham Binh Minh, will be on the scene as Standing Deputy Prime Minister.

4- *As you said, there are "two surprises" in the Cabinet list which are the inclusions of Minister of Education and Training Phung Xuan Nha and Deputy Minister of Construction Nguyen Thanh Nghi, the eldest son of former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. What do you think of the possibility of these two candidates to be selected as the top leaders of their ministries given the general public discontent?*

ANSWER: Phung Xuan Nha's name was in circulation before the 2nd plenum of the Vietnam Communist Party's Central Committee made the final decision on the composition of the new Cabinet on 8-9 March. His failure to gain election to the Central Committee at the 13th congress makes it highly likely he will be passed over as the next Minister of Education and Training.

Nguyen Thanh Nghi, on the other hand, was not implicated in scandals in Kien Giang province where he served as party secretary. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc

transferred him to Hanoi to serve as Deputy Minister of Construction. He was elected to the Central Committee by the 13th national party congress coming in at 71st place of 180 full members.

- 5- *Also according to rumors, Ms. Pham Thi Thanh Tra, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs will be promoted as the Minister of Home Affairs, making her the 2nd woman to hold the ministerial level in the Vietnamese Government. Do you think her quick rising, at a certain extent, is an effort to promote gender balance in Vietnam's leadership structure and what highest level of position will she be likely.*

ANSWER: Pham Thi Thanh Tra's rise is more likely due to her competence than any effort by the Vietnam Communist Party to promote gender balance. There are only nineteen women on the Central Committee out of 180 members. Tra came in at 96th position.

Tra was born in January 1964 and will be 62 at the time of the fourteenth national party congress in 2026. Her future could include a second term as Minister of Home Affairs or she could be promoted to Deputy Prime Minister.

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