

DIPLOMAT

11-1-23

Former Foreign Minister's Dismissal Complicates Vietnam's External Relations

Pham Binh Minh's unusual mid-term departure leaves a vacuum in the country's diplomatic leadership.

By **Hai Hong Nguyen**

Vietnam's external relations has experienced a seismic change. Pham Binh Minh, a career diplomat and a member of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)'s Politburo in charge of external affairs, was relieved from his post as the standing deputy prime minister by the CPV-controlled National Assembly on the opening day of a five-day extraordinary session that began on January 5. Vu Duc Dam, another deputy prime minister in charge of culture, education, and science and technology affairs, was dismissed along with Minh.

Minh's dismissal took place following the decision made at a half-day extraordinary meeting of the CPV's 200-member Central Committee on December 30, which accepted Minh's "personal request" to withdraw his membership from the Central Committee and the Politburo. A statement issued after the meeting did not offer a reason for Minh's action, though it was widely understood to be linked to the grand bribery case involving repatriation flights for Vietnamese stranded overseas. These were led and organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) under Minh's supervision at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier, current Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son was "severely reprimanded" by the Politburo, while the MOFA Party Caucus of the 2016-2012 term, which was chaired by Minh, was given a warning, the second severest disciplinary action that can be taken against a party organization under the CPV's regulations, for its role in the repatriation flights case. A MOFA deputy minister was arrested and expelled from the party and a former Vietnamese Ambassador to Malaysia was arrested last week, increasing the number of individuals involved in this case to 41.

While Son has survived and will remain in his job, Minh's abrupt mid-term departure will be a setback for Vietnam's diplomacy at a time when it is greatly in need of an experienced and skilled diplomat and leader with the ability to navigate a strategic environment by regional competition between major powers, to enhance and deepen relations with partners to protect sovereignty in the South China Sea, and to overcome the diplomatic dilemma posed by Russia's war in Ukraine.

In 2023, Vietnam is set to have a large number of celebratory diplomatic activities that offer an auspicious opportunity to elevate its relations with important partners, including the United States, to a strategic level. If he had been kept in the job until the next CPV Party Congress in 2025, Minh, who is 63 years old and seen as "one of the most skilled diplomats of all Asia," would have potentially continued for another term in the Politburo and gained one of the four key positions of the party-state, known as the "four pillars": namely, CPV general secretary, state president, prime minister, and the chairperson of the National Assembly.

While Vietnam implements a form of collective leadership, including in foreign relations, Minh has nevertheless played an indelible role in the country's diplomatic achievements over the past decade. Indeed, during his nearly ten years as foreign minister, and more than five years as a Politburo member overseeing external affairs, Minh made a significant contribution to the

shaping and realization of Vietnam's foreign policy as adopted at the 12th and 13th Party congresses for the 2016-2021 and 2021-2025 terms, respectively.

Under Minh's leadership, Vietnam's diplomacy made some impressive steps. These include the establishment of the Vietnam-U.S. comprehensive partnership in 2013; the successful resistance to China's placement of the giant HY-981 oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in 2014; the ratification of three major multilateral trade deals including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the European Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA); the signing of the Vietnam-U.K. Free Trade Agreement (UKVFTA); and the establishment or upgradation of relations to a strategic partnership with several countries including Australia in 2018 and New Zealand in 2020.

During Minh's foreign ministership, Vietnam's position and influence within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations have also increased after the country completed successfully its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 and a term as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council in 2021. Minh was also directly involved in advocacy for Vietnam's successful election to the U.N. Human Rights Council, despite the country being criticized by international non-governmental organizations for its poor human rights record. In his speech delivered at the 77th Session of the U.N. General Assembly in September 2022, Minh skillfully and indirectly criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as China's aggressive and bullying actions in the South China Sea.

On January 5, the National Assembly approved the appointment of the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Tran Hong Ha and the Secretary of Hai Phong Municipal Party Committee Tran Luu Quang to fill the deputy prime minister posts vacated by Minh and Dam's dismissal. There are now fully four deputy prime ministers within the government headed by Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. According to biographies published on the government's website, except for the newly-appointed deputy prime minister Tran Hong Ha, who had four years between 1992 and 1996 working as "a scientific collaborator at the Moscow-based ANTEI Centre for Electronic Engineering and Science Support," the **other deputy prime ministers have experience mostly at the local governance level.** This arrangement can be construed as suggesting that the government intends to place more emphasis on domestic affairs. As such, the **appointments are not commensurate with the CPV's recognition in its 13th Party Congress materials on the foreign affairs sector's "vanguard role" in "actively and proactively implementing international integration in a comprehensive, profound and extensive, and effective manner."**

There is no doubt that the CPV Politburo will in the months ahead make appropriate adjustments to the leadership of the external work, appoint and empower a Politburo or Secretariat member who can take over Minh's tasks to make sure that Vietnam continues to maintain a strategic balancing act in relations with China and the United States. An emerging candidate for this role is possibly Le Hoai Trung, who is currently the chairperson of the Central Commission for External Relations. Trung is a career diplomat, a former deputy minister of foreign affairs, and a close aide to Minh. He has experience working with both Chinese and American counterparts. However, his promotion still depends on a degree of luck.

The anti-graft furnace that has fired up under General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's watch and direction is now blazing intensely, releasing its heat outward to the entire society. The

general public would no doubt be pleased to witness more and more government officials being fed into the flames. At the other end, many officials observing the furnace from outside would be either anxious for themselves or excited by the possibility of promotion to the offices vacated by their corrupt peers. However, it can't be taken for granted that replacement officials will have the same, let alone better, capability as that of the dismissed ones. Unfortunately, this is the case for the foreign affairs sector, posing a serious challenge to the execution of Vietnam's foreign relations without a timely adjustment.

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