

Thayer Consultancy
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Background Brief:

How Will Leadership Change in Vietnam Impact on Foreign Policy?

January 17, 2023

We request your assessment of recent developments in Vietnam's politics, particularly the on-going anti-corruption campaign of incumbent General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. There is a rumor that state President Nguyen Xuan Phuc has submitted a letter of resignation and the National Assembly will meet on 18 January to accept it and select a new president. .

Q1. What is your assessment of this rumour?

ANSWER: I visited Vietnam from 7-14 January. On the day of my departure reliable sources informed me that the Politburo had requested President Nguyen Xuan Phuc to step down. Since President Phuc was elected by the National Assembly Vietnam will have to observe the constitutional proprieties and have National Assembly deputies vote to accept Phuc's resignation.

President Phuc reportedly failed in his duties as Prime Minister (2016-April 2021) and senior head of the party's committee in the government to properly supervise two deputy prime ministers, Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam, and other ministers under his watch. Minh and Dam have already resigned from office and their positions on the party Central Committee. Minh also resigned from the Politburo.

Due to the lack of transparency, it is not known, why Vietnam's Politburo engineered these leadership changes piecemeal. This gives rise to uncertainty who will be next, and who will replace Phuc as state president.

Q2. How do you evaluate Vietnam-US relations during the past years when Mr. Phuc was Prime Minister and later President?

ANSWER: Nguyen Xuan Phuc plays an influential but not decisive role in foreign policy due his membership on the Politburo. The same can be said of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh who has a junior member of the Politburo.

Vietnam's foreign policy towards the major powers is made collectively by the Politburo in which the influence of its most senior members is paramount. It is clear that since the Biden Administration was elected and sought to raise bilateral relations with Vietnam from a comprehensive to a strategic partnership Vietnam's leaders adopted a cautious approach and slow walked discussions. In sum, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc was not the decisive leader who set the course and directions of Vietnam relations with the United States.

Q3. Some sources claim that incumbent Minister of Public Security To Lam may become the state president and Vietnam may move closer to China? What do you think?

ANSWER: My sources report there are three likely candidates. First, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong might assume the office of president concurrently with his role as party leader. This would follow the precedent set when President Tran Dai Quang died in office in 2018. Second, Minister of National Defence General Phan Van Giang's name has been mentioned. And third, as your question suggests, To Lam is likely to be a prospective candidate.

Vietnam's policy on China, as that of the United States, is decided collectively by the Politburo. Vietnam has good relations with China at present but will not tilt so far as to fall into China's orbit. China under Xi Jinping is a known quantity and its actions are largely predictable. Xi's China represents an element of stability and continuity in relations with Vietnam. Vietnam will continue to follow a policy of nurturing trouble free relations.

The role of any individual, To Lam included, should not be overexaggerated. If he becomes president there will be no discernible change in Hanoi's relations with Beijing.

Q4. Newly-appointed Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang will oversee foreign affairs although he has no experience in the field. What is your assessment?

ANSWER: The implementation of Vietnam's foreign policy will go through a rough patch after the dismissal of former Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh as permanent deputy prime minister with responsibility in this area, criticism levelled at Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son, and the recent dismissal and arrest of a network of corrupt diplomats for their involvement in the COVID repatriation flights. Morale at the Foreign Ministry will also be at a low ebb because of these developments.

The new deputy prime minister Tran Luu Quang will come to office with scant relevant experience or expertise in foreign affairs. He will be on a steep learning curve as members of the Politburo constantly look over his shoulder.

In sum, Vietnam appears to be short on talent in international affairs at the highest level and this could affect the efficacy of Vietnam's diplomacy at a turbulent time in global affairs.

Q5. As Deputy Prime Minister Trần Luu Quang has no experience in foreign affairs, how will this affect Vietnam's course on the South China Sea issue?

ANSWER: There will not be any sudden changes brought about when Trần Luu Quang takes on foreign policy responsibilities as deputy prime minister.

Vietnam's policy on the South China Sea is set by the Politburo and implemented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

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