

Vietnam edges towards a succession crisis

Ruling Communist Party is splitting on pro- and anti-China lines ahead of a **pivotal** 2021 Congress that will determine new leaders and direction

By DAVID HUTT

As Vietnam begins preparations for the Communist Party's 13th National Congress in early 2021, a **quinquennial** event at which the nation's next leaders will be decided, cadres' and cliques' positions on China could determine who wins and who loses.

At a Central Committee plenum in May, the Party began selecting "strategic cadres" – the next generation of apparatchiks **deemed** "moral" and untainted by corruption by current leaders – who can be selected as members of the powerful committee in 2021.

Carl Thayer, a Vietnam expert and emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia, says that as the leadership selection process intensifies over the next sixteen months, "it is likely that the focus will turn on how the next [Party] Secretary General will handle relations with China."

Fraught bilateral relations have come into stark relief in recent weeks as China has **ramped up** pressure on Vietnam to stop exploring for oil near the **Vanguard Bank**, a contested feature in the South China Sea.

It is usually taken for granted that such disputes won't upset broad **fraternal** ties between two of the world's last few ruling communist parties, which have remained on friendly terms even when they appear on the **verge** of violence.

Hanoi is frequently keen to **stoke** nationalist feelings, but not so much that it affects diplomatic and trade relations with China, or unintentionally **fosters** too much of a sense of people power among the repressed Vietnamese public.

But anti-China nationalism among the Vietnamese public, often **sparked** by sea disputes, could play a bigger role in Party affairs, especially if the current dominant clique centered around Party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong struggle to win the support for their China position among rising new generation Party cadres.

The Party's legitimacy rests largely in a fast-accelerating economy – one of the fastest growing in Asia – and **safeguarding** that status-quo. But one way in which the Party could bolster its standing among the public, however, would be to take a harder line **vis-a-vis** China.

In a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2017, some 64% of Vietnamese respondents saw a growing Chinese economy as bad, while 92% said Chinese power and influence was a threat to their country.

Yet anti-China nationalism – as opposed to the party’s state-enforced strain of ideological nationalism – tends to also overlap with pro-democracy sentiment the Party ruthlessly suppresses.

For the last three years, Vietnam’s politics seemed strong and stable. Back in 2016, Trong secured a majority of votes – and a pass on his age, then 72, which should have seen him retire – to remain in the post for another five years.

Trong, who rose through the ranks as an editor of a communist periodical and respected theoretician, represented the party’s traditional consensus-based, decision-making ethos and its abhorrence of individualistic leaders. He has also been at the forefront of maintaining ideological ties to China.

At that year’s National Congress, he **routed** then-prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung, a populist politician who was at the time mounting a campaign to become the next party chief.

Where Trong represented an old-fashioned belief in the Party’s role over society, Dung was the embodiment of a new Party cadre who saw personal advancement and financial gain as the new norm within the party.

Dung wanted the new capitalist classes to have more influence within the ruling party; Trong wanted the ruling party to have more control over the fast-rising capitalist classes.

Trong won and quickly launched a far-reaching campaign against corruption and immorality within the Party, one that appeared to ape Chinese President Xi Jinping’s power-consolidating purge of his Communist Party.

But Trong has so far studiously steered clear of reorienting foreign policy, continuing instead the Party’s traditional approach of building “as many friends as possible”, even as Beijing ramps up its aggression in the South China Sea.

If the 2016 National Congress was basically a contest between the old and new, the upcoming event in early 2021 will be more complex, with competing notions of how to handle China a potential dividing and deciding factor.

Currently, there is no standout candidate to replace Trong, who will be 76 years old in early 2021. Having served two terms, Trong will almost certainly step down as Party chief, though he could remain as state president, a position he took on last year when the incumbent died in office.

Even this, though, will require informal rules that have governed Party decisions for decades to be fudged or reformed. One analyst who requested anonymity reckons there could be a “succession crisis” leading to instability in the Party, significantly at a time when the country needs **deft** and strong leadership to manage rising regional tensions, including with China.

Tran Quoc Vuong seems Trong's natural heir, serving as his anti-corruption czar as head of the Central Inspection Committee since 2016.

When the once-powerful Dinh The Huynh, another Trong ally, was forced to retire from some of his posts last year due to ill-health, Vuong took on even more authority as executive secretary of the Party's Secretariat, which is charged with implementing Politburo and Central Committee policies.

But Vuong has no real experience in a senior government position – he is a committee man of a yesteryear – and by 2021 will be 65 years old, so would be expected to retire unless usual age restrictions are relaxed.

Another Trong loyalist who is thought to be in the running for top job is Pham Minh Chinh, a ex-vice police minister who in 2016 became head of the powerful Central Organization Commission, which sits just below the Politburo but is responsible for nominating and approving the appointment of Party officials. That means he is the **gatekeeper** of political offices.

But, as Nguyen Khac Giang, a senior research fellow at the Vietnam Institute for Economic and Policy Research, has pointed out: “there has never been a secretary general who previously worked as the **head of the Central Organization Commission**. There is a clear logic for that, as such a person will be seen as too powerful when holding the top post and securing all the senior personnel files.”

Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc could make the transition from civilian government head to party chief, just as his former boss wanted to do in 2016. But he will by then be 66, and, more inhibitory, he hails from the country's south, which would make him the first ever southern party chief, an unlikely development.

There is now a debate within the Party about loosening the mandatory retirement age of 65, says Thayer. If accepted, it would allow the party's geriatric politicians to maintain power, and would certainly improve the odds of Vuong being named the Party's next chief.

This handwringing and wrestling over Party **decorum** and tradition will take place at a crucial period for the nation's foreign policy.

Recent Chinese aggression near Vanguard Bank has shown that Hanoi's traditional policy of appeasing Beijing isn't working. Vietnam stopped oil exploration in 2017 and 2018 in contested sea areas in response to Chinese threats, yet the pressure has continued. Hanoi's more robust response this time around likely indicates a realization that yielding to past pressure has only emboldened China.

Whether Trong will maintain the Party's traditionalist foreign policy of balancing relations between China and the West, allowing the country to maximize benefits from both, or take a new path, will be seen in the coming months.

Trong has already **upended** many of the Party's traditions while in power, meaning he could yet flip the script on policy towards China. Hanoi's relationship with Beijing "will come to a head" in October when Trong is expected to meet US President Donald Trump in Washington, said Thayer.

"One important issue is whether to raise bilateral relations from a **comprehensive** to a **strategic partnership**. This is obviously inter-connected with Vietnam's relations with China."

If Trong does upgrade relations with the US, it will represent one of Vietnam's biggest foreign policy shifts in decades, and would mollify a growing number of Party members who are demanding stiffer action against China.

But if Trong does not make such a bold move, and if he attempts to again appease China through traditional means while Beijing ramps up pressure in the South China Sea, it could prompt a **backlash** from within the Party.

Indeed, a new generation of Central Committee members could try to take more responsibility in choosing the next set of Party leaders in 2021, and thereby reduce the Politburo's power.

A **groundswell** of opposition to Trong's foreign policy stance might not be enough to dislodge his entire clique, but senior Politburo members would no doubt have to heed rising anti-China sentiment, both inside the Party and at the grass roots.

"If there is a push for a younger leader it will likely come from within the Central Committee," said Thayer.

Maintaining the status quo in foreign affairs could also be problematic if other senior Politburo members are perceived as **tainted** by their soft stances on China.

Phuc could well stay on as prime minister for another five years after 2021 and, though seen as a competent pair of hands, his civilian government made an enormous error in early 2018 when it floated a proposal to allow foreign companies to lease land in special economic zones (SEZs) for up to 99 years.

When the Vietnamese public came to perceive this meant selling out parts of the country to China, it sparked some of the largest nationwide protests in years.

"There is no doubt nationalism will play a part in the succession politics in Vietnam, but we are not sure of its degree and to which sections it will affect," Giang, the analyst, told Asia Times.