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Vietnam's 13th CPV Congress: New Leaders, New Vision 2045?

By Yang Razali Kassim

SYNOPSIS

The Communist Party of Vietnam, the country's backbone, is currently huddled in a crucial national congress in Hanoi. By the time it ends on Tuesday, it would have decided on a new leadership core and set the roadmap for a new vision towards a "developed economy with socialist orientation" by 2045.

COMMENTARY

THE 13th NATIONAL Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), now under way in Hanoi from 25 January till 2 February 2021, comes at a crucial time. This is a significant event as the country embarks on a leadership transition that will take it to a new vision of Vietnam in 2045 – as a "developed economy with socialist orientation".

A crucial decision of the five-yearly CPV Congress will be whether to return to the "Four-Pillars" power-sharing structure – the party general secretary, president, prime minister, and the national assembly chair. These are the four most powerful political positions in the country's top leadership. In 2018, party chief Nguyen Phu Trong stepped into the president's post when the incumbent died. Whether the party will revert to the traditional four-pillar model is one of the key things to watch at this congress.

Returning to the Four Pillars of Leadership?

Should the 76-year-old Trong step down from his dual position as president and party general secretary, two personalities could be in contention to succeed. The first is Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc as party chief. The second is Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh as president. If Minh's elevation materialises, it may signal Vietnam's

deeper integration with ASEAN as Minh has been a frontliner in Vietnam's role in the regional grouping.

Vietnam's core leadership has traditionally reflected the four poles in the country's power balance. Apart from the party chief – officially known as the general secretary of CPV – and the state president, the other two are the prime minister as head of government, and the National Assembly chair as head of the legislature.

Speculation has been on whether Trong, a two-term party chief, will relinquish both his posts or one of them. Should Trong continue for a third term, he will be the longest-serving party general secretary since Le Duan, who succeeded revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh.

To be sure, Vietnamese watchers say, the leadership transition is opaque and secretive, giving rise to much speculation. But should Trong step down, the party chief's post may be filled by Prime Minister Phuc, 66, or Tran Quoc Vuong, the 67-year-old anti-corruption chief who is currently a member of the CPV Secretariat.

Another candidate for prime minister is Vuong Dinh Hue, 63, a former deputy prime minister and the current Hanoi party secretary.

The position of chairperson of the National Assembly is no less important. Some scholars of Vietnamese politics expect this to be a contest between Truong Thi Mai, the woman head of the CPV commission on mass mobilisation, and Pham Minh Chinh, the head of another CPV commission on personnel and organisation. Hue is also reported to be in the running.

Vision 2045: Vietnam as a Developed Economy

Under the CPV leadership, Vietnam has strongly maintained its political stability, economic growth as well as extensive integration into the regional and global economy. It is noteworthy that the main candidates for the top four leadership positions are either highly educated or economics-trained. For example, president-cum-CPV chief Trong is a Russian-speaking professor with a PhD in politics.

Whoever emerged as the top four, they will be responsible for the country's next lap. Vietnamese media say several draft documents have been submitted to the CPV Congress that will, among other things, review the country's "renovation" and define two milestones.

The first is 2030 – a landmark coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the CPV's establishment. The second is a bold agenda of a new national Vision 2045, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, now the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The main objectives of the communist leadership are to transform Vietnam into a socialist-oriented developed country by the middle of the 21st century. This vision will be realised in three phases:

By 2025, Vietnam is set to surpass the low-middle-income developing nation status.

By 2030, it will strive to become a developing nation with modern industry and upper-middle-income status. By 2045, Vietnam will become a developed, high-income socialist-oriented economy.

These ambitious goals, however, will depend much on how Vietnam manages to balance its post-pandemic reforms with stability. That is why the 13th party congress is so vital to determine the future trajectory of Vietnam by putting in place the right leadership at the core of the power balance.

CPV's Central Role

Central to all these changes is the pivotal role of the CPV. Vietnam is already one of the few countries that have a sustained economic expansion despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The CPV's steering role is in laying down the national direction, taking into account strategic changes in the country, surrounding region and globally.

Significantly, the CPV has also made adjustments to its Doi Moi (renewal) process of the socialist-oriented market economy, thereby helping it to develop with stability despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 or not, Vietnam has managed to raise its profile and played a constructive role in the international arena as it pursues its external policy of peace and to be friends to all countries. Vietnam's success in managing the COVID-19 pandemic is due to the close and symbiotic partnership between the CPV and the government.

Vietnam's Foreign Policy & ASEAN

In 1995, Vietnam joined ASEAN. Since then, Vietnam has been one of the most economically-dynamic countries in Southeast Asia. When it took over the rotating ASEAN chair last year, ASEAN reaffirmed the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as the basis of sovereign rights and claims in the South China Sea, which Hanoi calls the East Sea. Vietnam is one of the claimant states.

Also last year, under a Vietnam-led ASEAN, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was signed, creating the world's largest free trade agreement.

The RCEP was a breakthrough for Vietnam's pursuit of international economic integration. Vietnam also concluded other FTAs such as the EU-Vietnam FTA (EVFTA) and the UK-Vietnam FTA (UKVFTA), thereby creating new impetus for the nation's economic growth trajectory. Also in 2020, Vietnam became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2020-2021 term.

Vietnam's active role in international economic relations has smoothen the way to diversify its markets and partners, attract resources for development, and complete the goal of rapid, sustainable recovery from the pandemic. Its chairmanship of ASEAN last year and its non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council have helped Vietnam raise further its profile and influence on the regional and international stage.

Whoever fill the Four Pillars of Leadership next week will have to shoulder and sustain the mission of taking Vietnam into the next phase and realising Vision 2045.

This is even as the country strives to become a peaceful influential player in the geopolitics of a region that is getting increasingly tense due to the volatility of the South China Sea and the unresolved big power competition between the US and China in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

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