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Vietnam's New Leadership: Back to the Four Pillars

By Yang Razali Kassim

SYNOPSIS

As Vietnam's political top brass convene this week to elect the country's new leadership, domestic and international attention is on whether the traditional power balance revolving around the so-called Four Pillars will be maintained.

COMMENTARY

VIETNAM'S TOP leadership is changing. This political transition is taking place at the 11th session of the National Assembly (NA) or legislature, currently under way amid some debate in the media whether Vietnam is an emerging middle power in Asia. The country's steady economic rise and the growing regional clout this consequently brings seems to suggest that Vietnam is on course to be one. But Vietnamese leaders themselves are reticent and cautious about such portrayals. Vietnam, to them, still has a long way to go, notwithstanding its commendable economic growth accompanied by one of the strongest militaries in the region.

Whether Vietnam is a middle power or not, the trajectory to this status will be defined by the new political leadership that is currently being put in place since February's 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) — the country's political backbone. By next week (8 April 2021), this new leadership team will have been finalised at the NA elections to complete the leadership transition. Whoever are elected will form the quartet of power — the so-called Four Pillars — that will shape Vietnam's political and economic direction in the new term.

Back to the Four Pillars

Significantly, the CPV general secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, has stepped down as state president, a second post he took over upon the death of his predecessor Tran

Dai Quang. That assumption gave Trong two out of the four most important positions in the country. The other two are the prime minister and the chair of the NA.

Except for the most powerful post of party chief, which Trong continues to hold, the other three will be decided at the NA elections in an indirect system of choosing the country's leadership. In other words, the power balance in the national leadership will revert to the four-pillar structure.

The fact that Trong relinquished the presidency seems to suggest that holding two powerful posts at the same time was not meant to be a permanent fixture. Trong, the longest-serving CPV chief since Le Duan, is known as a firm leader and effective anti-corruption campaigner. With Trong already in his late 70s, the quartet will be dominated by a younger team. But who are they likely to be? And will they herald change or continuity of foreign and economic policies?

The New Quartet

Likely to step into Trong's shoes as president is the current prime minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 66. With his experience of running the government as well as exposure to regional and international diplomacy, Phuc will make a high-profile president, further raising Vietnam's growing prominence in the region and internationally.

In that position, he is likely to continue Vietnam's pro-ASEAN diplomacy and the country's foreign policy of balancing China and the United States as the two major powers vie for influence in the South China Sea. This big power rivalry taking place at Vietnam's doorstep has been a big worry for Hanoi, one of six claimants to the disputed waters that the Vietnamese refer to as East Sea.

Stepping in turn into Phuc's shoes as prime minister is likely to be Pham Minh Chinh,⁶² a current Politburo member and Head of the Central Organising Committee. Unlike previous prime ministers, Chinh has never been a minister or deputy prime minister, so his expected rise is an impressive elevation. Coming from a security-related background, he is also known to be a firm and decisive leader.

The just-elected NA chair or parliamentary head is Vuong Dinh Hue, a 64-year-old professor of economics who had served previously as deputy prime minister and finance minister and currently holds the party post of Secretary of the Hanoi Party Committee.

What the Likely New Line-Up Means

There are several points of significance from the emerging Vietnamese leadership for the next lap.

Firstly, the return of the four-pillar power structure means that the political direction in the next few years will remain constant and stable. This is interpreted by some in Vietnam as a "better way to check, monitor and control power". Just as significantly, it means that the country's political elite prefers a more balanced power structure between the ruling party, the executive branch and the legislative branch, rather than the consolidation of power in one person.

Secondly, the leadership renewal marks a combination of experience and freshness, a suitable formula for Vietnam's planned transition towards developed status by 2045. The leaders' main objectives are aspirational; the strategic tasks of the Vietnamese communists are to develop a prosperous and stable country, striving to be a socialist-oriented developed state.

To be sure, General Secretary Trong will continue to oversee the strengthening of the party's hold on power and in the fight against corruption where his success has been proven. Meanwhile, Phuc, if he eventually gets elected as president, will leverage on his experience as prime minister to expand and strengthen Vietnam's relations with other countries.

The biggest attention will be on Chinh, the likely new prime minister, whose decisiveness is seen as a quality needed for a head of government. He will have the unenviable task of steering the country towards the dual goal of rolling back and containing the pandemic while maintaining and promoting economic growth. For the new leadership, this goal is foremost.

Leadership and Foreign Policy

Foreign policy under the new team is likely to continue the strategy of "openness, multilateralisation and diversification". This is another way of describing the search for a new balance that tilts towards the US, a former foe, in response to China's growing dominance in the South China Sea.

International economic integration will continue with more free trade agreements (FTAs) being signed, thereby creating new impetus for the nation's economic recovery. Vietnam has set up a network of 17 FTAs and frameworks for economic cooperation with the world's leading economic regions.

Vietnam's diplomatic foray will continue to deepen following its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 while its entry into the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member for one year has raised its voice on the global stage.

As Vietnam pursues its balancing of China and the US, it will continue to back ASEAN's centrality amid the fluid geopolitical landscape, even as it keeps a close watch on protecting Vietnam's territorial sovereignty. On 11 March, the Vietnamese foreign ministry responded to the recent meeting of the emerging platform of Quad partners – the US, Japan, Australia and India – by urging them "to respect the central role of ASEAN in the formation of regional structures".

In a related signal earlier to China, reported by the Vietnamese News Agency, the deputy foreign minister Le Hoai Trung said the most important goal in Vietnamese foreign policy is to "firmly and persistently maintain national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity". "This goal has been put at the top of Vietnam's foreign policy throughout many party congresses, including the (most recent) 13th Congress," Trung said.

By the end of the NA elections on 8 April, the new Vietnamese core leadership will be ready to take over. This new "Group of Four" – a communist party veteran backed by

a set of younger leaders — will steer Vietnam towards a more prominent regional role — regardless whether it is a middle power or not.

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