

# Vietnam





# VIETNAM IN 2013

## Domestic Contestation and Foreign Policy Success

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### Introduction

The year 2013 marked the mid-way point in the tenure of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) Central Committee elected at the eleventh national party congress in 2011. During the year the Central Committee began to assert its prerogative as the party's executive authority between national party congresses. The Central Committee's new political assertiveness has been at the expense of party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong and his supporters in the Politburo. The Central Committee's assertiveness also strengthened the power and influence of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

Outside party circles, as events in 2013 illustrated, Prime Minister Dung was widely criticized for his handling of the economy. The Prime Minister and his Cabinet did poorly in the first vote of confidence conducted by the National Assembly.

During the year political activists, bloggers and journalists became more vocal in criticizing corruption and the party's efforts to entrench further its role as "the force leading state and society" in the state Constitution.<sup>1</sup> The state responded to these challenges by stepping up repression against its critics.

In contrast, Vietnam's external relations went from strength to strength. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung played a high-profile role internationally delivering major addresses to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Senior Vietnamese leaders paid visits to all the major powers and Vietnam hosted official visits by government

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leaders from Japan, South Korea, China and Russia. Vietnam also forged strategic partnerships with five countries. Vietnam increased the number of strategic partnerships from nine to fourteen.

## Domestic Politics

This sub-section reviews major domestic developments under six headings: anti-corruption campaign, seventh Central Committee plenum, National Assembly vote of confidence, eighth Central Committee plenum, political repression, and constitutional amendments and leadership changes.

### Anti-Corruption Campaign

In 2011, during his first term in office as prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung set up the Central Steering Committee for Anti-corruption and appointed himself as chair. The Steering Committee made little progress. Early in his second term, Prime Minister Dung was removed as chair and replaced by party Secretary General Trong. In January 2013, Trong appointed Nguyen Ba Thanh, secretary of the Da Nang municipal party committee, to head the Central Commission on Internal Affairs.<sup>2</sup>

As head of the Internal Affairs Commission Thanh was given responsibility for leading the national campaign against corruption as well as implementing the new Law on Corruption. According to well-informed sources, Secretary General Trong set up seven working groups to check on high-profile corruption cases.<sup>3</sup> Thanh was given powers to consult with a number of bodies including party committees in government ministries, the Central Military Party Committee, and other agencies specifically charged with dealing with corruption, such as the Ministry of Public Security. Thanh reported directly to the Central Steering Committee, a body comprised of representatives from the party's various factions.

Thanh gained a reputation in Da Nang for being progressive in managing urban development and pioneering the first direct election of the chairman of the municipal people's committee. In 2000 rumours circulated that Thanh had accepted bribes in connection with several infrastructure construction projects. He was also mentioned in letters of denunciation for accepting kickbacks from urban development schemes. These rumours and allegations found their way into party and government reports but no formal action was taken against him.<sup>4</sup>

Thanh obviously had the support of Secretary General Trong and soon became the target of Prime Minister Dung and his faction. The Government Inspectorate issued a report concluding that Thanh, as chairman of the Da Nang People's Committee in 2003, should be held accountable for any "land-related wrongdoings".<sup>5</sup> Acting on the report Prime Minister Dung ordered an investigation and authorized making its finding public.

The year ended with several high-profile trials and convictions of officials involved in embezzling funds from the Vietnam National Shipping Lines (Vinalines). In December, Vinalines Chairman Duong Chi Dung was sentenced to death. Dung later gave evidence that he bribed Deputy Minister of Public Security and member of the VCP Central Committee Pham Quy Ngo.<sup>6</sup>

### Seventh Central Committee Plenum

The VCP Central Committee held its seventh plenary session from 2–11 May. The plenum considered six major topics: reform of central and local government institutions; propaganda and mass mobilization work; constitutional amendments; party-building; leadership selection for the next national party congress; and climate change adaptation, resource management and environmental protection. In addition, the plenum adopted recommendations on adjustment of wages, social insurance and pensions for workers, public servants and the armed forces.<sup>7</sup>

The Central Committee reviewed the Politburo's report on the implementation of the fourth plenum's resolution on "Some Urgent Issues of Party-Building" aimed at "overcoming the degradation of ideology, ethics, and lifestyle of some party members". The plenum concluded that was necessary to strengthen party discipline and "deal with complex cases" arousing public concern.<sup>8</sup>

The Central Committee offered comments on preliminary plans for the selection of high-level party officials (Central Committee, Politburo and Secretariat) at the next national party congress for the term 2016–21. The Central Committee asserted its authority as the party's elected executive by declining to increase the Politburo from fourteen to seventeen members. A similar proposal had been put to and rejected by the Central Committee at its first plenum in 2011 following the eleventh congress. The Central Committee also rejected Secretary General Trong's recommendations that Nguyen Ba Thanh and Vuong Dinh Hue, respectively, the newly appointed heads of the party's Central Commission on Internal Affairs and Commission on Economic Affairs be promoted to the Politburo.<sup>9</sup> Instead, after several rounds of voting, the Central Committee promoted Nguyen

Thi Kim Ngan, Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly, and Nguyen Thien Nhan, Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>10</sup> Nhan was later appointed head of the Vietnam Fatherland Front and relinquished his post as deputy prime minister.<sup>11</sup>

The Central Committee's actions were a blow to the authority of the party Secretary General Thanh's failure to secure a place on the Politburo undermined his authority over the anti-corruption campaign. Hue's failure to gain promotion weakened the party's attempt to exert oversight of Dung's handling of economic policy. The Central Committee also overrode the Secretary General's nomination to the Secretariat and elected Tran Quoc Vuong to that body.<sup>12</sup> Vuong is head of the Central Committee's Office.

### **National Assembly Vote of Confidence**

In June, the National Assembly conducted an unprecedented vote of confidence on forty-seven high-ranking government officials.<sup>13</sup> Any official who received less than 50 per cent approval two times in succession was subject to dismissal. Every deputy was asked to vote on each official and indicate high confidence, confidence or low confidence. All government officials received a confidence vote above 50 per cent.<sup>14</sup>

Fourteen officials who held positions in the National Assembly, most notably chairmen of committees and members of the National Assembly Standing Committee (NASC), received the largest number of high confidence votes. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Deputy Chair of the NASC and newly promoted member of the Politburo, received the highest approval rating. She is being tipped to become the next Prime Minister. Nguyen Sinh Hung, the Chairman of the NASC, came in fourth.

The results of the confidence vote clearly indicated widespread disenchantment with the Prime Minister and most of his Cabinet. Prime Minister Dung ranked twenty-fifth out of forty-seven in the high confidence vote, while his political rival President Truong Tan Sang scored third highest. Eleven members of Cabinet received the lowest vote of confidence. The Governor of the State Bank of Vietnam received the highest no confidence vote, followed by the Minister of Education and Training, and the Prime Minister. There were three exceptions to the poor showing by Cabinet members. Phung Quang Thanh, Minister of National Defence, Tran Dai Quang, Minister of Public Security, and Pham Binh Minh, Minister of Foreign Affairs, all scored well in the confidence vote.

In sum, the Prime Minister and members of Cabinet generally took a drubbing while deputies serving in the National Assembly and on its committees did well. The vote of confidence indicates that there is widespread disenchantment with

Prime Minister Dung and his Cabinet over their handling of the economy and the persistence of institutional corruption.

### **Eighth Central Committee Plenum**

The VCP Central Committee convened its eighth plenum from 30 September–9 October. Five important topics were on the agenda: the economy, reform of education and training, amendments to the constitution, national defence strategy, and preparations for the twelfth national party congress.<sup>15</sup>

The eighth plenum noted that the rate of inflation dropped from 18 per cent in 2011 to 7 per cent in 2013 and Vietnam's Gross Domestic Product grew at an estimated 5.4 per cent in 2013, compared to an average of 5.6 per cent over the three previous years.

In his opening speech to the plenum Secretary General Trong stressed the importance of comprehensive economic restructuring.<sup>16</sup> But the communiqué issued at the end of the plenum made no mention of this issue. Instead, it stated that, “macro-economic stabilisation and inflation control are the most important tasks for 2014, in addition to trying to help enterprises overcome difficulties and challenges to restore production.”<sup>17</sup>

The plenum took note of the importance of providing social welfare to the people and identified protecting natural resources and the environment and developing a pro-active policy on climate change as “other key tasks”.

With regard to educational reform, the plenum's final resolution called it a “top priority” and noted “it is important to reform every level from the party leadership and state management to the grass roots education and training departments and institutions.” Nonetheless, educational reform should proceed cautiously by first focusing on “major and urgent issues” and “must be conducted systematically and made appropriate to the situation in each region”.

The eighth plenum considered proposed amendments to the state constitution in great detail and pronounced that it was “basically complete”. The final communiqué noted that the changes agreed at the plenum would be transmitted to the Constitution Drafting Committee for incorporation in the final draft before submission to the National Assembly for approval.<sup>18</sup>

The plenum reviewed the landmark Strategy for National Defence that was adopted a decade ago in 2003. Secretary General Trong asked Central Committee members to discuss “the advantages and disadvantages, as well as opportunities inside and outside the country, so Vietnam will be pro-active in defending the nation, sovereignty and territorial unity.”<sup>19</sup> The plenum's final resolution provided

scant detail other than to note “defending the nation should start before the country is in danger.” The resolution stressed the importance of a strong economy, a “mighty national defence system” and internal political and social stability.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the eighth plenum decided to establish the following five sub-committees to begin preparations for the twelfth national party congress with responsibility for policy documents, socio-economic policy, revision of party statutes, personnel selection, and congress administration.<sup>21</sup>

On 4 October, in the midst of the eighth plenum, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, passed away at the age of 102. His death led to a massive spontaneous outpouring of national grief. He was given a state funeral and buried in his home province of Quang Binh.<sup>22</sup>

## Political Repression

During 2013 contradictory trends were evident in Vietnam’s handling of political dissent, public protest, human rights and religious freedom. On the one hand, according to Daniel Baer, US Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor in testimony before a Congressional sub-committee, Vietnam undertook positive steps such as the release (albeit with restrictions) of activist Le Cong Dinh, facilitation of a visit by an international human rights organization, and a modest uptick in church registrations in the Highlands ... discussions between the government and the Vatican, and also what appears to be potential positive movement for the human rights of LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender] persons ... [and] the flood of public comments about the draft Constitution ...<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, as noted by Baer, “these [positive] steps are not enough to reverse a year-long trend of deterioration. Nor have the isolated positive steps formed a consistent pattern. In increasing numbers, bloggers continue to be harassed and jailed for peaceful online speech and activists live under a continual cloud ...” In May-June, Vietnam convicted and imposed harsh sentences on two university students (Nguyen Phuong Uyen and Dinh Nguyen Kha) and three well-known bloggers (Dinh Nhat Uy, Truong Duy Nhat and Pham Viet Dao).<sup>24</sup> In October, Catholic blogger and lawyer Le Quoc Quan was sentenced to thirty months imprisonment for tax evasion.<sup>25</sup>

Despite repeated statements by high-level US officials that there must be “demonstrable progress” on human rights before bilateral relations could advance, President Barack Obama received President Truong Tan Sang in

The White House in July (see discussion under External Relations). Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States stated unequivocally prior to President Sang's arrival, "we are ready to discuss the topics of democracy, human rights and religious freedom" with the United States.<sup>26</sup>

On 12 November, Vietnam was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2014–16) despite having arrested and imprisoned fifty non-violent political activists and human rights advocates in 2013.<sup>27</sup> A total of seventy-five prisoners of conscience are currently imprisoned.<sup>28</sup>

### Constitutional Amendments and Leadership Changes

In January, draft amendments to the 1992 State Constitution were released and placed on the Government Portal for public comment.<sup>29</sup> Vietnam also organized public discussions on the amendments. In May, the seventh plenum's final communiqué noted that more than 28,000 conferences, workshops and seminars were held that elicited more than 26 million comments on the draft amendments. Party officials concluded that the consultation process demonstrated Vietnam was a socialist law-governed state "of the people, by the people, and for the people".<sup>30</sup>

The process of public consultations did not all go according to plan. In February, Nguyen Dac Kien, a journalist working for the *Family and Society* newspaper, wrote a blog in which he took issue with a statement by the party Secretary General that the public should not question the role of the party. Kien argued that the Secretary General had no right to address the people of Vietnam in this manner. He argued that corruption was the main problem. Kien's blog "went viral" and he was fired from his job.<sup>31</sup>

A more serious challenge was mounted by a group of seventy-two former high-ranking party officials, intellectuals, veterans and other prominent citizens led by the former Minister of Justice, Nguyen Dinh Loc. Known as the Group of 72, they drafted their own constitution and circulated a petition that called for the end of one-party rule and the separation of powers. An estimated 15,000 citizens signed the petition.<sup>32</sup> In November, 165 former government officials and democracy advocates posted a statement on the Internet calling on National Assembly deputies to reject the draft amendments.<sup>33</sup>

On 28 November, the sixth session of the National Assembly (thirteenth legislature) voted 486 to nil (with two abstentions) to approve amendments to 101 of 120 articles in the 1992 Constitution.<sup>34</sup> Seven articles remained unchanged and twelve new ones were added. Article 4 was amended to give the VCP a

strengthened role as the “leading force in the state and society”, and declared that “the state economic sector assumes the leading role” in Vietnam’s socialist-orientated market economy.<sup>35</sup>

Under Article 65, the Vietnam People’s Army was required “to be absolutely loyal to the party”.<sup>36</sup> Its role was expanded to include contributing “to the maintenance of peace in the region and the world”, a legal prerequisite for Vietnam’s participation in United Nations peacekeeping.<sup>37</sup> An analysis of new human rights and religious freedom provisions in the constitution by Human Rights Watch concluded, “the authorities can override human rights guarantees in other passages if they deem it necessary for national defence, national security, public order, the security of society, or social morality.” Similarly, “reaffirmation of rights like freedom of religion ... and freedom of speech ... are accompanied by qualifications allowing vague and broad legal restrictions.”<sup>38</sup>

On 9 December, President Sang issued an order promulgating the amended Constitution.<sup>39</sup> The National Assembly’s sixth session also approved leadership changes and a new Law on Land. Prime Minister Dung successfully nominated Vu Duc Dam (head of the Government Office) and Pham Binh Minh (Foreign Minister) as deputy prime ministers. Dam was given responsibility for culture and society, science, education and training, while Binh will continue to oversee foreign policy. The National Assembly appointed Nguyen Van Nen to head the Government Office.<sup>40</sup>

Vietnam now has five deputy prime ministers, three of whom were educated in the West — Hoang Trung Hai in Ireland, Vu Duc Dam in Belgium and Pham Binh Minh in the United States. All three are young enough to serve for a decade in high-office following the next party congress scheduled for 2016.

## External Relations

During 2013, Vietnam pursued a deft multilateral foreign policy strategy with the major powers.<sup>41</sup> President Sang made official state visits to China and the United States, while Prime Minister Dung journeyed to Russia, France and Japan. He also addressed the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore and the UN General Assembly in New York. Secretary General Trong travelled to Brussels (to meet the presidents of the European Commission and European Council), the United Kingdom, and India. Vietnam hosted visits by government leaders from Japan, South Korea, China, Russia and Cambodia. Vietnam upgraded its relations with Italy, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and France to strategic partners.

On 1 April, the VCP Politburo unanimously adopted a resolution on international integration.<sup>42</sup> Although this resolution gave priority to economic integration it also stressed the importance of all other forms of integration including security, defence and membership in key multilateral institutions. Prime Minister Dung was put in charge of overseeing the implementation of the resolution and reporting annually to the Politburo. In 2013, Vietnam was elected to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

The sub-sections below review Vietnam's relations with major regional powers Japan, China, United States, Russia and India.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Vietnam from 16–17 January. This was his first overseas trip after being elected. In 2006 Japan and Vietnam became strategic partners. Japan is Vietnam's biggest investor and Vietnam's third largest trade partner. Japan also ranks first among countries that provide overseas development assistance. During Abe's visit he announced new loans valued at US\$500 million for three infrastructure projects.<sup>43</sup> The unstated purpose of Abe's visit was to lobby Vietnam for support on a number of regional security issues including maritime disputes. Officially the two prime ministers agreed to coordinate policies to ensure the success of the end-of-year East Asia Summit.

Prime Minister Dung made an official visit to Japan from 12–15 December primarily to attend the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit and the 5th Mekong-Japan Summit. At their official meeting Prime Minister Abe announced a further development assistance package of US\$1 billion to fund five major infrastructure projects.<sup>44</sup>

Vietnam's relations with China notably improved during the year as a result of high-level visits and a decline in the number of publicly reported incidents in the South China Sea.<sup>45</sup> For example, China and Vietnam held the sixth session of their Joint Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation in Beijing on 11 May.<sup>46</sup> The Chinese Communist Party and the VCP held their ninth theoretical seminar in Dalian city on 27 July.<sup>47</sup> Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid an official visit to Hanoi from 3–6 August.<sup>48</sup> And Premier Li Keqiang and Prime Minister Dung met in Nanning on the sidelines of the tenth annual China-ASEAN Expo on 2 September.<sup>49</sup>

However, the two most important events were the visits by President Sang to China and Premier Li to Vietnam. President Sang made his first official visit to Beijing from 19–21 June, following the leadership transition in China.<sup>50</sup> The two leaders conducted a comprehensive review of bilateral relations and endorsed progress being made by specialist committees and working groups. Specifically,

they reached consensus on the five-year development plan (2012–16) to promote economic cooperation, approved the revised border defence cooperation agreement, and agreed to double the size of their joint development area in the Gulf of Tonkin, intensify joint cooperative activities and extend cooperation between their national oil companies until 2016.<sup>51</sup>

With respect to the South China Sea dispute, the two leaders agreed “to stay calm and restrain themselves so as not to complicate and expand disputes” and to use the hotline between their foreign ministries in the event of an incident at sea.<sup>52</sup>

Premier Li paid an official visit to Hanoi from 13–15 October. Li and Dung agreed to set up three sub-committees with responsibility for on-shore cooperation (economic relations, transport and communications connectivity, and border management), financial cooperation and maritime cooperation.<sup>53</sup> The two leaders also agreed to establish cross-border economic cooperation zones and raise two-way trade to US\$60 billion by 2015.

Dung and Li agreed to pursue maritime cooperation following the principles of the “easy-first, difficult-later” and “step by step”.<sup>54</sup> To further this goal they set up a joint Working Group on Cooperation for Mutual Development at Sea under the existing government-level mechanism on boundary and territory negotiations. The Working Group was tasked with two cooperative projects, a scientific survey and an environmental protection project. Both leaders pledged to make use of hot lines established between their ministries of foreign affairs and ministries of agriculture.

Vietnam’s relations with the United States reached a new high with the state visit by President Sang from 24–26 July when Sang met President Obama at The White House. The Joint Statement issued after their discussions stated that they “decided to form a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership to provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship.”<sup>55</sup> The Joint Statement spelled out nine areas of cooperation: political and diplomatic relations; trade and economic ties; science and technology; education and training; environment and health; war legacy issues; defence and security; protection and promotion of human rights; and culture, sports and tourism.

Specifically, the Joint Statement contained three important commitments. First, the United States and Vietnam endeavored to complete negotiations on the (TPP) Partnership Agreement by the end of the year (this deadline was missed). Second, both sides agreed to set up a ministerial level political mechanism to coordinate the comprehensive partnership. Third, the US Export-Import Bank agreed to support trade and investment in Vietnam’s oil and gas sectors and

cooperation between US companies Exxon Mobile and Murphy Oil with PetroVietnam. This commitment increases US interest in maintaining a stable and secure environment in the South China Sea. In private discussions with Sang, Obama promised to do his best to visit Vietnam before the expiration of his term in office.

US-Vietnam defence and security cooperation continued at a measured pace. In June, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff hosted the first visit by the Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnam People's Army General Lt. Gen. Do Ba Ty.<sup>56</sup> Ty's delegation included the commander of the Air Force and the deputy commanders of the Navy and General Intelligence Department. In late August, on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus in Brunei, Vietnam's Defense Minister invited Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to visit in 2014.<sup>57</sup>

In October 2013 the United States and Vietnam held the sixth Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue and the fourth Defense Policy Dialogue.<sup>58</sup> At the later meeting the US agreed to provide assistance for Vietnam's first commitment to UN peacekeeping, announced by Prime Minister Dung at the Shangri-la Dialogue and endorsed by President Obama at his meeting with Sang.<sup>59</sup> A Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation between the US and Vietnamese Coast Guards was signed. Also in October, the US and Vietnam signed an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation (or 123 Agreement).<sup>60</sup> In December the Commander of the US Pacific Command paid a brief visit to Hanoi.<sup>61</sup>

Secretary of State John Kerry visited Vietnam from 14–16 December for discussions with his counterpart, Pham Binh Minh, on a range of issues including education, the TPP, South China Sea, and global climate change. At a joint press conference Kerry announced that the United States would provide US\$18 million to Vietnam to help fund the acquisition of five patrol boats. Kerry also stated that the US Congress was unlikely to support any step up in bilateral relations unless Vietnam improved its human rights record.<sup>62</sup>

In 2012 Vietnam and the Russian Federation raised their bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Its two mainstays are Russian arms and military equipment sales to Vietnam and joint cooperation in the energy sector. Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Vietnam in March to discuss "military-technical cooperation", further arms sales, and Russian access to Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>63</sup>

Prime Minister Dung visited Russia from 12–15 May for talks with his counterpart Dmitry Medvedev. Their discussions touched on six major issues: bilateral trade (with a target of US\$7 billion by 2015); bilateral comprehensive

free trade agreement; Free Trade Agreement between Vietnam and the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan; nuclear power; oil and gas joint ventures; and collaboration in national defence.<sup>64</sup>

President Vladimir Putin paid a whirlwind one-day visit to Hanoi on 12 November.<sup>65</sup> On the eve of his arrival, the first of six Kilo-class submarines that Vietnam had ordered was loaded on a transporter for delivery to Vietnam. Putin met Prime Minister Dung, President Sang and Secretary General Trong. A Joint Statement issued on his departure noted that seventeen agreements had been reached, including five in the oil, gas and energy sectors, and one on defence cooperation covering servicing and the transfer of military technology.<sup>66</sup>

In parallel with Vietnam's relations with Russia, Vietnam's relations with India in 2013 were focused on military cooperation.<sup>67</sup> Lt. Gen. Do Ba Ty, Deputy Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff, visited India in September 2013. He held discussions on enhancing military cooperation with the Defense Secretary and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. General Ty paid visits to the Eastern and Western Naval Command.

In December 2013, Secretary General Trong travelled to India. Trong's visit signalled that Vietnam sought to leverage India's expertise and long-term experience with Soviet/Russian military technology to its advantage and mitigate the risk of dependency on a sole supplier. During the visit India made the unprecedented offer of a US\$100 million line of credit for the purchase of four Offshore Patrol Vessels. Another agreement was signed relating to the protection of defense-related information.<sup>68</sup> Shortly after Trong returned to Vietnam it was announced that India would train up to 500 Vietnamese sailors in "comprehensive underwater combat operations".<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

As a result of Vietnam's high economic growth prior to the global financial crisis, the office of the prime minister and government apparatus acquired control over more resources and therefore became more powerful than the VCP itself. The Prime Minister came under attack for not controlling high inflation and for rampant corruption in state conglomerates and state-enterprises.

In 2013 the political struggle between the Prime Minister and the party Secretary General and his backers intensified. The Central Committee responded by asserting its authority as the party's national executive. The Secretary General was rebuffed on several occasions to the benefit of Prime Minister Dung. Yet, as the National Assembly's first vote of confidence demonstrated, there is widespread

disenchantment with the Prime Minister and his Cabinet over the handling of economic issues. In sum, internal party factionalism can be expected to intensify over the next two years as the deadline for the next national party congress approaches.

Vietnamese society is also changing rapidly due to economic growth and the penetration of the Internet. Vietnamese intellectuals, retired officials (party, state and military), and a new generation of bloggers and electronic journalists have pushed the envelope of public discourse. In particular, they have been critical of the VCP's monopoly on power. As public contestation over the future political agenda intensifies it is likely to lead to greater repression by the security apparatus because it is in the interests of the current political elite to stifle public dissent, especially if it reveals nepotism, corruption and influence peddling.

Internal party bickering has on occasion spilled over and impacted on Vietnam's relations with China and the United States. Party conservatives do not want to antagonize China by moving too close to the United States in defence and security relations. Party nationalists want to defend Vietnamese sovereignty in the East Sea against Chinese encroachment and bullying. An integrationist group favours across the board international engagement as a way to overcome Vietnam's economic malaise.

Vietnam's foreign policy community has shown itself to be quite adept at pursuing a multilateral balancing strategy among the major powers (not just China and the US). Vietnam and China have been able to compartmentalize the South China Sea dispute and prevent it from spilling over and damaging a range of common interests. Likewise, Vietnam and the United States have been able to advance their bilateral relationship despite differences over human rights. These dynamics serve to heighten the importance of Japan, India and Russia as Vietnam's strategic partners.

## Notes

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3. Confidential source, e-mail to author, 19 August 2013.
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  8. Vietnam News Agency, "Thong bao Hoi nghi lan thu bay Ban Chap hanh Truong uong Dang khoa XI".
  9. Ha Hoang Hop, "The Seventh Plenum of the Communist Party of Vietnam: The Gains of the Central Committee", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 45 (12 July 2013): 3.
  10. Vietnam News Agency, "Thong bao Hoi nghi lan thu bay Ban Chap hanh Truong uong Dang khoa XI".
  11. "Deputy PM heads Fatherland Front", *Viet Nam News*, 6 September 2013.
  12. Ha Hoang Hop, "The Seventh Plenum of the Communist Party of Vietnam: The Gains of the Central Committee".
  13. "Ket qua bo phieu tin nhien 47 lanh dao cao cap" [Results of Confidence Vote on 47 High-level Leaders], *Tuoi Tre Online*, 11 June 2013.
  14. "Ket qua bo phieu tin nhien 47 lanh dao cao cap". For an analysis of the voting results see Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Confidence Vote by National Assembly Deputies", *Thayer Consultancy Background Briefing*, 11 June 2013, available at <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/147726554/Thayer-Vietnam-Confidence-Vote-by-National-Assembly-Deputies>>.
  15. "Khai mac trong the Hoi nghi lan thu tam Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang khoa XI" [Official Opening of the Eighth Plenum of the Party Central Executive

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