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Background Brief:

Leadership Change in Vietnam

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In nine days Vietnam will convene the thirteenth national congress of the Vietnam Communist Party. One of the key responsibilities of a national party congress is to elect Vietnam's leadership for the next five years.

Over the course of the last year four executive – or plenary – sessions of the Central Committee were held, numbered eleventh to fourteenth. A major agenda item at each plenum concerned “personnel work,” or the selection of candidates for election to the party's Central Committee, Politburo, Secretariat, and Inspection Committee

Under present rules, party officials must retire when they reach 65 years of age. And no person can hold office for more than two five-year terms. The rules provide for exemptions in “exceptional cases.” The current party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong has served two terms and was given an exemption at the last national congress in 2016.

In October 2018, Trong assumed the concurrent post of state president after the death in office of Tran Dai Quang. In April 2019, Trong suffered a stroke but resumed public duties a month later. As preparations for the thirteenth congress got underway, it was widely assumed that Trong, aged 76, would retire. This assumption was given credence when Trong began to quietly lobby for his protégé, Tran Quoc Vuong, to replace him.

At the thirteenth plenum in October, it became apparent that Vuong did not attract commanding support from his peers on the Central Committee. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc emerged as a strong contender for party leader. Both persons were over 65 and would need exemptions in order to qualify as a candidate.

At the fourteenth plenum in December, members of the Central Committee were given a list of twenty-two names drawn up by the Politburo as potential candidates for the Central Committee to be elected by the delegates to the thirteenth national congress. Each name was followed by the putative post or office for which they were nominated.

The first name on the list was Tran Quoc Vuong, candidate for Secretary General. Nguyen Xuan Phuc was listed second as candidate for state president. Truong Hoa Binh was listed third as candidate for prime minister; and Pham Binh Minh was listed seventh as candidate for the Chair of the National Assembly. Once again it became clear that the Central Committee was divided and that Vuong did not command majority support.

Since December, a number of lists have been in circulation speculating on who will occupy the “four pillars” (tứ trụ) or the top leadership positions. In a major development, there is intense speculation that Nguyen Phu Trong will stand for an unprecedented third term. This would mean one of two things. First, Trong will serve a full five-year term. Second, Trong will step down when consensus is reached in the new Central Committee on who should replace him.

Nguyen Xuan Phuc appears odds on favourite to assume the post of state president.

Sources in Hanoi have reported privately that the Central Committee’s fifteenth plenum met on 16 January and voted to approve the nominations of Nguyen Phu Trong as Secretary General, Nguyen Xuan Phuc as President, Pham Minh Chinh as Prime Minister and Vuong Dinh Hue as Chair of the National Assembly. If officially confirmed, this means that Tran Quoc Vuong, Truong Hoa Binh and Pham Binh Minh are no longer in contention for one of the four pillars. The fifteenth plenum is scheduled to end on 18 January and the thirteenth national congress will convene on 25 January.

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