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Background Brief:

Vietnam's 13th National Party Congress: What the Experts Have to Say

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February 23, 2021

I took up Bill Hayton's invitation broadcast to Vietnam Old Hacks and the Vietnam Study Group to listen to a Podcast in the Chatham House AsiaMatters series on "goings on [in] Hanoi... [that] examine what happened behind the closed doors of the Communist Party Congress, what it means for Vietnam and what it might mean for the country's international relations."

Hayton interviewed two analysts, Ms. Nguyen Phuong Linh of Control Risks in Singapore and Mr. Nguyen Khac Giang of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

The half hour was well spent. Hayton was his masterful self, posing questions, summarizing points made, and trying to identify convergent views. Linh and Giang were well informed, fluent in English, highly articulate and insightful.

The Podcast lasts for 30 minutes and may be accessed at: <https://asiamatterspod.com/episode-27>

My Take Aways

Party Factionalism

The most interesting aspect of the Podcast was its discussion of factionalism within the Vietnam Communist Party and the influence of public security officials. When Linh referred to factional in-fighting prior to the 13th congress, Hayton queried the term as controversial. Did faction mean a group or a network within the party that shared the same interests or ideology that benefitted from working together?

Linh replied both, they have the same interests and ideology. Hayton pressed his point: were Trong and Vuong hardliners, putting the party first, putting the party before any individual? Giang stated the balance favoured the conservatives. But he also noted that Nguyen Phu Trong had been in office for two-terms did not intervene in foreign policy or economic affairs.

Public Security Influence

Hayton pointed out that of the 18 members of the Politburo, seven worked for the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) or Ministry of National Defence [see below for critical response].

Linh stated the influence of public security officials in the Politburo was unprecedented and was worrying to foreign investors. They were concerned that public security officials would be less open to foreign investment and exert more control over business. The presumptive prime minister, Pham Minh Chinh, and the police were likely to tighten the Law on Cybersecurity. But she cautioned that observers would “need to see what they are going to do first.”

At this point Giang made a significant intervention. He argued that it was incorrect to associate those with public security experience with being conservative and opposed to liberalisation. He gave the example of former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

Giang noted that the Politburo was a big win for the public security sector but this must be balanced by the inclusion on the Ministers of Trade [and Industry] and Finance on the Politburo. Both official brought considerable experience in economic affairs to their new offices.

Hayton opined that the public security provided stability at a time of change.

Giang observed that the public security worked through party organs and were in favour of regime survival.

Linh observed, but why now? This [a large public security presence] created uncertainty.

Giang concluded the discussion on factionalism by noting that the party wing was more powerful after the demise of Nguyen Tan Dung, and therefore reflected conservative views.

Post-Congress Leadership Scenarios

Hayton raised the question of health problems at the top. Linh replied that there was uncertainty about the health of the party leader, Trong. She twice pointed out that Trong appeared shaky on television as he addressed the congress.

Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong was born on 14 April 1944 and will turn 77 in two months. He had a stroke in 2019.

Linh noted that the Trong’s health could be an issue during the second half of his term if there was in-fighting over the economy. Also, as his term draws to a close, in-fighting over his successor was likely to occur.

International Relations

Hayton raised the question whether Vietnam’s post-congress foreign relations would be more friendly to China, and thus exhibit less cosyng up to the United States due to tensions in the South China Sea.

Giang replied that it was not a case of pro-China/pro-West as Vietnam’s conservatives were nationalists and not pro-China and they leaned to the U.S. to balance relations. Giang suggested that with Phuc as president he would push relations with the U.S. to a higher level. But over the next five years foreign policy won’t change substantially. Vietnam will pursue multilateralism, with priority to ASEAN, and seek a balance.

Linh noted that the current Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh had served two terms and was no longer eligible to remain in office. This would create uncertainty in the

short term. She said there were several persons who could be appointed minister but Minh's successor was not confirmed [see comments below].

Linh offered the assessment that rivalry between the two superpowers will become more intense this year and next. The Communist Party of China is due to hold its next national congress in 2022 and would make it more difficult for Vietnam until then.

Critical Observations

Continued Party In-fighting?

First, Linh stated that after the 13th national party congress concluded only the party chief was confirmed, the three other pillars of the leadership were ignored. She said this was in contrast to the 12th party congress in 2016. Linh made the assessment that the failure to identify the other three pillars was a sign of party in-fighting. This is a contentious argument.

After the 13th party congress, party and state media released the names, photographs and biographies of all 18 members of the Politburo, 180 full members of the Central Committee, 20 alternate members of the Central Committee and members of the Secretariat and Inspection Committee.

The three pillars that Linh referred to are all government – as distinct from the party – positions: state President, Prime Minister and Chair of the National Assembly. It is the responsibility of the new Politburo, elected on the last day of the congress, to determine future work assignments, that is who will be nominated to fill these three leadership positions. Nevertheless, when the names and party ranking of members of the Politburo was released the first four names were: Nguyen Phu Trong, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Pham Minh Chinh and Vuong Dinh Hue. But proprieties must be observed...

All three presumptive candidates first must be elected to the National Assembly in May when national elections are held. Next, the deputies to the new National Assembly will convene in June/July. At their first session they will elect their Chair. The Chair will nominate the President who must be approved by a majority vote of the deputies.

The President will nominate the Prime Minister who must be approved by a majority vote of the deputies.

The Prime Minister will then nominate his Cabinet for approval by a majority vote of the deputies. The Prime Minister's nominees will have been vetted by the Politburo but they will not take office officially until they are duly elected by the National Assembly.

This is why the three pillars were not officially named after the twelfth and thirteenth national party congresses.

Age Exemptions

Second, Hayton asked Linh to explain who was in contention for the position of party Secretary General. When Linh finished, Hayton summarised her presentation that of the three contenders (Nguyen Phu Trong, Tran Quoc Vuong and Nguyen Xuan Phuc), Trong and Vuong were over the mandatory retirement age and Trong had had a stroke

while the third candidate, Phuc, not too old to be unqualified. When asked, Linh confirmed “yes you are right.”

In fact ,Nguyen Xuan Phuc was also over the mandatory retirement age of 65 and like Nguyen Phu Trong he too was given an exemption.

Public Security Influence

Third, a distinction needs to be made between members of the Politburo (and Central Committee) whose background includes some affiliation with the Ministry of Public Security (e.g. Pham Minh Chinh) and those party members holding official positions in the MPS bureaucracy (Minister To Lam). Also, the Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of National Defence should not be grouped together as Hayton did. They represent separate sectors.

When these distinctions are made the facts suggest that the 13th congress did not witness a major win for the public security sector. To Lam, continued to represent the Ministry of Public Security on the Politburo. No other full time MPS officials were appointed to the Polibuto. This is in contrast to the Ministry of National Defence which was awarded a second seat.

There are only five full members of the Ministry of Public Security on the 180-member Central Committee, the same number as elected at the 12th national congress. There are no MPS members among the 20 alternate members of the Central Committee. In other words, there was no unprecedented increase in their numbers. And as a point of fact, four of the MPS members fell into the bottom ranks of Central Committee members. See Table 1 below.

Table 1

Ministry of Public Security Representation on Central Committee (2021)

Rank out of 180	Name	Current Position
8	To Lam	Member of the Politburo, Minister of Public Security
95	Tran Quoc To	Lt. General, Deputy Minister of Public Security
153	Nguyen Duy Ngoc	Deputy Minister of Public Security, Age exemption
158	Luong Tam Quang	Lt. General, Deputy Minister of Public Security
174	Le Tan Toi	Major General, Deputy Minister of Public Security

Le Duan – The First Three-Term Party Leader

In the course of discussion, Hayton noted that Nguyen Phu Trong was the second party leader to be elected for three terms and he violated party norms and party rules to do so. The first party leader to serve three terms was Le Duan.

Hayton is technically correct. Le Duan was elected First Secretary (later renamed Secretary General) of the Vietnam Workers' Party (renamed Vietnam Communist Party) at the Third National Congress in September 1960. He was re-elected at the Fourth National Congress in December 1976, and again at the Fifth National Congress in March 1982. He died in July 1986 prior to the Sixth National Congress at the end of the year.

It must be pointed out, however, that there was no mandatory retirement age or limits on terms in office at that time.

While present party rules set a mandatory retirement age, these same rules provide for an exemption. Party statutes (which Giang referred to as the party's constitution) set a two-term limit on the Secretary General. But the delegates to the 13th national congress passed a special resolution making an exception in Trong's case. This was an unprecedented decision but arguably did not constitute breaking the party's rules.

International Relations

Discussants in the Podcast failed to make the point that the Foreign Minister will no longer be a member of the Politburo after the new Cabinet is approved. It will take another four to five months before the National Assembly officially approves the next foreign minister. After that date the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will not have a representative on that body.

Who will be the next foreign minister? I differ with Linh's assessment that there are a number of candidates and that agreement has not yet been reached.

A look at the list of officials elected to the current Central Committee, reveals that there are two officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who are full members, and a third Foreign Ministry official who is an alternate member.

In my assessment, it is likely that Bui Thanh Son, Standing Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, ranked 82nd out of 180 members, will be the next Minister. Son will be the second Foreign Minister educated in the United States. He received his M.A. degree from Columbia University, while the current Foreign Minister obtained his M.A. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam's 13th National Party Congress: What the Experts Have to Say," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, February 23, 2021. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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