

Economist  
17 Nov 2020  
The World in 2021

## **Vietnam's Communist Party will have a new leader**

**It is squeezed more than most between China and America**

By Charlie Mccann: South-East Asia Correspondent, The Economist

SINGAPORE

IN JANUARY 2021 the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) will convene its five-yearly meeting, the 13th national congress. The party faithful will rubber-stamp the victor of internal party jockeying to be the new secretary-general. He will then lay out priorities for the coming years.

China will loom large over discussions. Vietnam's relationship with its northern neighbour has always been tricky. In the coming year it will become even more so. China lays claim to a vast swathe of the South China Sea and will encroach upon waters that Vietnam claims as its own—sometimes forcefully, as it did in 2020 when Chinese boats rammed and sank Vietnamese fishing vessels. Such provocations could well bring Vietnamese people out onto the streets, evoking memories of mass protests in 2014 and 2018, when anti-Chinese sentiment produced a spasm of rioting.

Public outrage over Chinese provocations will ensure that the government, on the surface, maintains a frosty attitude towards China. But Vietnam will not want to make an enemy of the superpower, says Carlyle Thayer of the University of New South Wales. There are few remaining communist countries to keep Vietnam company, and ties between the CPV and its Chinese counterpart run deep. More importantly, the economies of the two countries are ever more tightly entwined. China is Vietnam's largest trading partner, its biggest source of imports and the destination of most of its exports. What is more, says Tuong Vu of the University of Oregon, the CPV fears a confrontation with China.

The new leadership will therefore keep on hedging. This will mean deepening trade links with China in order to promote economic development, while also attempting to counter Chinese advances in the South China Sea by cultivating ties with America.

The two favourites for the top spot are Tran Quoc Vuong, head of the party secretariat and a loyalist of the current secretary-general, and Nguyen Xuan Phuc, the prime minister. Though both are dyed-in-the-wool communists, for whom party control will remain the priority, whoever wins will also need to be a dyed-in-the-wool pragmatist.

He will have to talk tough on China to keep domestic anti-Chinese sentiment under control, while resisting the entreaties of a faction within the party that wants to pivot more rapidly towards America. Showing China that this trans-Pacific relationship is growing stronger by, for instance, allowing more port visits by American warships would strengthen his hand. But in the

end, Vietnamese leaders know that China will always be there and, in the long term, America might not.