

On 25 January, the 13th Vietnamese National Party Congress will commence in Hanoi.

Vietnamese party congresses, which take place every five years, are, as with their Chinese counterparts, the forums both for electing the new leadership and for establishing main policy settings for the forthcoming half decade.

The 13th Congress is arguably the most important since the 1986 Congress which opened up the Vietnamese economy. This is because of heightened Sino/American competition, increased pressures on Vietnam from China, and the economic consequences of COVID19.

Vietnam puts greater emphasis on collective leadership than does China, or arguably than, in its day, did the Soviet Union. While the Secretary-General of the Party is the *primus inter pares*, the President, the Prime Minister and the Chairperson of the National Assembly collectively make up the "four pillar" collective leadership.

The membership of the 19 member Politburo and that of the 12 member Central committee secretariat (which acts for the politburo between sessions) will also undergo significant change.

There are three vacancies in the Politburo but a number of the 16 remaining members will have reached the age limit of 65. It is unclear how many exceptions will be made to this limit.

The current Secretary-General, Nguyen Phu Trong, has since the death of the then President Tran Dai Quang in 2018, also occupied the latter's post despite his ill health. The Prime Minister is Nguyen Xuan Phuc. Both are exceptions to the 65 age limit rule.

According to recent articles by Vietnam scholars, Hai Hong Nguyen (University of Queensland) and Huong Le Thu (Australian Strategic Policy Institute), Trong will have an important influence on who is chosen as his successor. He has consistently advocated for Marxist Leninist doctrinal and socialist values as being central to the party's mission, and has been the central force behind the highly visible anti-corruption drive which has had a major impact on the party.

Indeed, a commitment to that campaign appears likely to be a *sine qua non* for Trong's support. Candidates mooted to be favoured by Trong played central roles in the campaign. Names mentioned frequently are Tran Quoc Vuong, an executive member of the Central Committee Secretariat and the current Minister of Defence, Ngo Xuan Lich.

The other strong candidate is Prime Minister Phuc (who could also take over as President if the position is restored and if he fails to get the top job of Secretary-General). Phuc's record as an administrator, including in dealing with COVID19, has been excellent.

The (female) President of the National assembly, Ngo Thi Kim Hgan is also a candidate but would be a long shot in an essentially male political class.

Some pundits speculate that if one Trung's favoured candidates does not get up, he may seek re-election, for, say, half a term.

Dragoman

If there is a division in the names being mooted for Politburo positions, it is between those with strong party and ideological records and those whose credentials stem from policy, administrative and economic management skills such as Phuc or the deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Pham Binh Minh.

Indeed, the Vietnamese government has much to be satisfied about. Vietnam has avoided economic contraction and should register 2% GDP growth in 2020 and up to 6% in 2021. Foreign investment – partly assisted by relocation from China as a result of the US/China trade war – has been only marginally lower than in 2019.

Phuc has pushed in particular a “Fourth Industrial Revolution” policy, preparing the economy for a major role in telecommunications, including 5G.

At the same time, the next government will have to work assiduously to iron out some of the challenges posed by both unwieldy state-controlled enterprises and oligarchic private enterprises.

In terms of its external dealings, there are a few indications of change. Vietnam’s challenge remains China, in particular relating to territorial disputes within the South China Sea. This challenge has resulted in a closer security relationship with the United States.

In 2019, Vietnam released its first defence White Paper in ten years. While much of the tenor had a non-aligned ring it also left open the option, “depending on circumstances and specific conditions” of developing appropriate “defence and military relations with other countries” – an indication that if threatened, closer security relations with the United States could be on the cards.

For the Biden administration, one challenge will be managing differences with Vietnam on governance and human rights issues while maintaining high levels of security engagement. Vietnam will also be conscious of the United States’ concerns about its authoritarianism.

Vietnam proved an active regional and global player in 2020 – particularly given COVID19 – as ASEAN Chair and as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It has also pursued an outward looking trade policy – recently concluding FTAs with the EU and the UK. It is also a party to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).



John McCarthy AO

John McCarthy AO formerly served as Australia’s Ambassador to the US, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and High Commissioner to India. He is currently Chair of the Advisory Board of the Griffith Institute and Senior Advisor to Mitsubishi Materials Corporation. Between 2009 and 2015, John was co-convenor of the Australian Indonesian dialogue, Chair of the Australian-India Council and National President of the Australian Institute for International Affairs.