

Vietnam Sees a Shared Future with China

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*The resignation of Vietnam's **President Nguyen Xuan Phuc** a fortnight ago had an [inevitability about it](#). The media was rife with speculation for weeks implicating Phuc's close family members in corruption scandals.*

Several dozen officials, including two deputy prime ministers, were earlier removed from their positions in major scandals of price fixing and kickbacks for Covid-19 test kits, as well as bribes for seats on charter flights returning Vietnamese citizens to the country during the pandemic.

The decade-old anti-corruption drive by Vietnamese Communist Party (CPV) **General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong** gained momentum in recent years and seems motivated by concerns strikingly similar to those voiced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and **Xi Jinping**. Fundamentally, the impetus behind it is the CPV's legitimacy as the ruling party.

The CPV's priorities have changed following decades of impressive economic growth. Vietnam is second only to Hong Kong and Singapore in economic dynamism in the region. Being an economy heavily dependent on trade and foreign investment, promoting a healthy environment for businesses by curbing rampant corruption is an urgent necessity in order to attract foreign investors at a time when global manufacturers have sought to diversify their supply chains away from China.

Again, problems in economic development can lead to dissatisfaction among the people and affect social stability, slowing down economic growth and ultimately lead to loss of people's trust in the CPV's legitimacy. The 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, the Berlin-based think tank, ranked China as 66th among 180 countries and Vietnam 87th, but in scores, China secured only 45 points out of 100 and Vietnam 39.

Curiously, the [joint statement](#) issued after Trong's visit to Beijing in November — the first foreign dignitary to visit China after the CCP Congress in October — listed "prevention and

control of corruption and negative phenomena” among areas of cooperation between Vietnam and China. The CPV is adopting China’s anti-corruption campaigns, and reportedly requested China to train its cadres to conduct anti-corruption investigations.

Chinese-style governance practices are present in Vietnam too —growing control over the internet, strengthening of the party’s power, greater state presence in the economy and rollback of the widespread influence of business sector. Last year, 539 party members were prosecuted or “disciplined” for corruption and “deliberate wrongdoings”, including ministers, top officials and diplomats, while police investigated 453 corruption cases, up 50 per cent from 2021.

In their [Lunar New Year letters](#) two weeks ago, Xi Jinping wrote to Trong, “China and Vietnam are a community with a shared future that bears strategic significance.” Trong in turn stated that he is “ready to work with General Secretary Comrade Xi Jinping to... carry out strategic communication on theories and practices of both countries’ respective socialist development, and chart the course and make strategic plans to ensure that the relations between the two parties and two countries continuously develop and reach new heights.”

The motivation behind the anti-corruption drive in both China and Vietnam is basically to ensure that the communist party continues to have the people’s support, and thereby consolidate the party’s centrality in the country’s politics. The CPV looks to its “big brother” CCP for direction in the next stage of economic progress as a “modern and developed socialist power” (the goal set at the party congress in 2021.)

It cannot be a coincidence that the party leaders who have been ousted mainly represented the “Westernist” faction or the so-called technocratic wing, which suggests that Trong is concerned about the party’s ideological and moral integrity as well. Trong reportedly has a strong distaste for the political patronage networks within the party.

Phuc as former prime minister (2016-2021) is widely credited with accelerating pro-business reforms. A [commentary](#) in Deutsche Welle described Phuc as a “Western-oriented leader.” It said, “He is seen as one of the main technocrats within the ruling Communist party, and he had developed close connections with Western capitals during his time in office. The reshuffle is expected to cement the power of the country’s security elite.”

This view is commonly shared by western analysts. The Deutsche Welle analysis lamented:

“Vietnam’s business and political relations with Western states have massively improved in recent years... But Vietnamese Communist apparatchiks remain skeptical of Western intentions. Many of them fear that Western democracies are aiming for regime change in the one-party state and they rankle at foreign organisations lecturing the government over human rights...

“The ascendant public security apparatus is arguably most wary of interactions with Western democracies. At the same time, foreign diplomats are quickly losing their most trusted conduits within the party, the sort of officials who informally provide information and support.”

Some western analysts compare Trong’s assertion of authority to the consolidation of power in China under Xi Jinping. Bill Hayton, the well-known Vietnam-watcher and author (*Vietnam: The Rising Dragon*) at Chatham House, sardonically noted that Vietnam’s leaders regard the

CCP “as a friend in their struggle to maintain control of Vietnam.”

Hayton hit hard:

“I think it’s a warning that actually these people are not rushing to embrace the United States as an ally or anything like that, that they are very guarded of their own autonomy, their own ways of doing things, and that actually they see China more as an ideological partner than the US. And so China – Vietnam is going to try and balance its relations forever. It’s not going to be rushing towards the US.”

Such paranoia probably stems from the frustration that Vietnam is set to drift away from the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy at a juncture when in the power dynamic of Asia-Pacific region, it could be a “swing state” to contain China. The West was confident of its deepening networking with factions within the ruling elite in the country.

Phuc had overseen a push to improve relations with the US, frequently met top executives and was a regular presence at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Yet, the paradox is that Vietnam’s economic policy is unlikely to fundamentally change under party chief Trong’s leadership. The real apprehension of westerners is that the power equilibrium within the CPV and the government may now work more to the advantage of China and Russia.

Suffice to say, the removal of Phuc can have a rational explanation: The CPV leadership distrusts leaders who are more directly involved in business, and corruption poses an existential threat to the party’s integrity and legitimacy.

The CPV Central Committee [announcement](#) on Phuc’s exit paid fulsome praise to Phuc. But it insisted that “he bears the political responsibility of the head in letting many officials, including two Deputy Prime Ministers; three ministers commit wrongdoings and mistakes, causing very serious consequences... Clearly aware of his responsibility before the Party and people, Phuc has submitted his application to cease holding the positions assigned, stop working, and retire...”

Notably, the US government-funded Radio Free Asia featured a critical [commentary](#) which concluded that “the reshuffle sets the stage for more infighting in the run up to the 2026 party leadership contest... Phuc was seen as a reassuring presence for Vietnamese business and foreign investors, and his ouster reveals cracks at the top of the communist leadership.” It betrays annoyance that the best-laid plans to incite a regime change may have been thwarted. The [BBC also took a similar line](#):

“Reading Vietnamese politics is always difficult — the Communist Party makes its decisions behind closed doors. But hard-line General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who was given an unprecedented third term at last year’s party congress, appears to be consolidating his authority by ousting senior officials seen as more pro-Western and pro-business. Officially this is all happening in the name of fighting corruption,... but it’s indicative of a power struggle at the top of the party... the likely rise now of more security-focused officials to the top of the party will be bad news.”

Trong has upturned the apple cart of the West. Significantly, he did this after returning from a [successful visit to Beijing](#) in October-November, during which Trong and Xi Jinping resolved to enhance and deepen the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership in the new era.

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Featured image: Chinese President Xi Jinping (R) presents China's Friendship Order to General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee Nguyen Phu Trong, Beijing, October 31, 2022 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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