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Background Brief

Vietnam: From Four Pillars to Three Pillars Leadership

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On Tuesday October 23, Vietnam's National Assembly will elect Nguyen Phu Trong as Vietnam's next state president. When Trong takes the oath of office he will concurrently hold the office of Secretary General of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

We request your analysis of the following issues:

Q1. When Vietnam's party Secretary General concurrently hold the office of state president, Vietnam's political system will change from "four pillars" (party leader, president, prime minister, and chair of the National Assembly) to "three pillars." How will this change affect Vietnam in general and the country's political system in particular?

ANSWER: The immediate effect of one person occupying two posts concurrently, party Secretary General and state President, will be felt in Vietnam's external relations. Vietnam has a wide range of international relations and in the majority of countries there is no counterpart for Vietnam's Secretary General. Now Vietnam's party leader can meet with other heads of states/heads of government on an equal basis in terms of diplomatic protocol. Vietnam's president will now be able to make international commitments with foreign leaders in an official joint statement.

The impact on Vietnam's political system will be marginal. The replacement of "four pillars" with "three pillars" will reduce the number of senior members of the Politburo involved in decision-making. In 1982, the 5th national party congress set the goal of eliminating the chaotic overlap between state and party institutions. There is a risk that concurrently occupying the posts of party leader and state president could create some bureaucratic overlap. But this risk will be mitigated if the prime minister plays a strong leadership role. At the same time, Vietnam could benefit from quicker decision making and policy implementation.

Q2. If the change from "four pillars" to "three pillars" develops shortcomings what should Vietnam do to overcome this problem?

ANSWER: Vietnam will have over two years to evaluate how effective "three pillars" functions in terms of policy making and implementation. If shortcomings emerge they should be studied carefully and addressed by adopting new rules and regulations both within the Vietnam Communist Party and by the National Assembly. When the terms of party leader and state president expire a decision will have to be made whether to

continue with the “three pillars” system or revert back to the “four pillars.” This decision can only be made on the basis of actual experience. Vietnam’s leaders will also have to consider whether to amend the state Constitution. If the decision is made to retain the “three pillars” Vietnam will also have to carefully evaluate the requirements a candidate will need to have to become concurrent head of state and party Secretary General. Vietnam’s leaders might consider raising the status of vice president to better assist the president in state affairs.

Q3. What should Vietnam’s top leaders (the “three pillars”) do to maintain security and social order as well as fostering economic development? For example, should Nguyen Phu Trong keep on implementing or speed up the anti-corruption campaign? Should he step up visits to Vietnam’s major strategic partners?

Answer: Next year, for example, the National Assembly will consider the draft Law on Special Administrative and Economic Zones. This draft legislation led to social unrest this year. The “three pillars” will be called upon to be more responsive to public opinion through greater transparency and consultations.

By occupying two posts concurrently Nguyen Phu Trong will face a very heavy work load and schedule. The office of state president comes with a range of powers enumerated in the state Constitution. The exercise of these powers is largely dependent on the approval of the National Assembly. A decisive president can speed up the pace of policy implementation and economic development by attending meetings of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee and playing a more active role in legislative affairs. At the same time, the demands to travel overseas will increase because there is one less pillar.

It is clear that the anti-corruption campaign has top priority and will be accelerated in tandem with party-building measures to select qualified candidates to serve on the party Central Committee and take leading roles after the next national party congress. At the same time, the president can take on a more proactive role in the selection and appointment of senior state officials in the coming years.

The heavier work load on Nguyen Phu Trong as party Secretary General and state President could be addressed by increasing the workload of senior party officials to assist the Secretary General and by devolving more authority to the vice president to assist the president.

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