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## Background Brief

### The Man Who Would Be Vietnam's Xi Jinping

October 2, 2018

There are rumours circulating in the Hanoi that Communist Party of Vietnam Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong may take over as President, thus occupying the two top spots.

Do you know if this would require a constitutional change (or just of Politburo and/or National Assembly?) Any idea what it would mean for Vietnam?

ANSWER: My sources report that since Tran Dai Quang was diagnosed with a terminal illness, Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong began lobbying for the two offices to be merged. It was unclear if this meant he would become president and secretary general simultaneously until the next party congress, or that he wanted to merge the two offices permanently along the China model. Since the adoption of the 1992 State Constitution Vietnamese leaders repeatedly have declined to merge these two offices. It would require a change in the state Constitution to become permanent.

What is at issue is Trong's role as first among equals in Vietnam's collective leadership, and the possibility Trong may seek a third term in office at the next party congress in 2021.

The immediate impact on Vietnamese politics would be to reduce the number of top leadership position from four to three and enhance the powers of the party Secretary General. Trong's grab for power is likely to encounter a pushback from some members of the Central Committee. If they are successful, Trong may attempt to elevate his protégé Tran Quoc Vuong to president. This move might signal one of two things. First, that Trong is trying to promote loyalists to control policy-making and leadership selection in the run up to the 13<sup>th</sup> national congress. Or, second, that Trong will step down and is giving Vuong a platform to become party secretary general in 2010.

Trong's gambit is unprecedented. If he is successful it is likely that this shift in the locus of political power will dog preparations for the next party congress.

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