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## **Background Brief:**

# **China-Vietnam Party-to-Party Relations Under Xi Jinping**

**October 27, 2022**

At the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping clinched an unprecedented third term. He immediately invited Nguyen Phu Trong to Beijing as the first foreign dignitary he will meet following his re-election.

Q1. What are the implications of Xi's third term on the South China Sea dispute, given rising tensions and repeated incursions into Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone during Xi's rule over the last decade? What should we expect to see in the South China Sea in the near future? How can Vietnam prepare for potential confrontations?

ANSWER: The re-election of Xi Jinping for a third term as General Secretary of Communist Party of China coincides with claims by senior Chinese officials that negotiations with ASEAN members on the second of three readings of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea Single Draft Negotiating Text have speeded up.

General Secretary Xi's re-elections mean there will be no uncertainty in Southeast Asia about the course he will take over his five-year term. Under Xi, China will continue to use diplomatic, political, economic and coercive inducements to press its claims to sovereignty over the "four shas" or island groupings in the South China Sea and their adjacent waters. The four island groupings comprise the Pratas, Macclesfield Bank, Paracel islands and Spratly islands.

With respect to Vietnam, it is a case of "all quiet on the East Sea front" since 2019 when the stand-off at Vanguard Bank ended. Vietnam unilaterally cancelled the contracts with foreign oil exploration ships in 2017 and 2018 to placate China. A relatively peaceful status quo has ensued when compared to China's continual pressures on the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Vietnam will try to avoid future confrontations with China by maintaining the status quo and continuing discussions by three specialist maritime working groups.

Q2. Why did Xi Jinping invite Nguyen Phu Trong to Beijing right after he secured a third term? What will Sino-Vietnamese ties look like under Trong's and Xi's leadership?

ANSWER: The timing of General Secretary Xi's invitation to his Vietnamese counterpart, so soon after Xi was re-elected, suggests that the two sides had already discussed and approved the timing of this visit. It is not beyond the realm of speculation that Vietnam may have suggested a meeting between the two leaders.

The structure of bilateral relations has been in place for a long time and is tried and tested. Bilateral relations will continue to be conducted through the Joint Steering Committee that meets annually on an alternating basis. The two leaders will give their support to continuing high-level exchanges among party, government and defence officials. For example, the annual friendly border exchanges and meetings between defence ministers will continue. Also, there are a number of hot lines in place to confer should circumstances dictate.

Q3. What do you expect to be on the agenda of Xi-Trong's talks in Beijing?

ANSWER: At this juncture, both China and Vietnam must reassure each other of their policies on a number of pressing international issues such as Russia's war in Ukraine, rising tensions between China and the United States over Taiwan, North Korean missile tests, the slowdown of the global economy, and the United States after mid-term elections.

However, this is primarily a meeting between party general secretaries and party-to-party relations will feature. Both will compare notes on their versions of socialist ideology and the threat of regime change (peaceful evolution) posed by the Biden Administration's stress on "autocracies versus democracies."

Q4. Has Trong followed in Xi's footsteps, from the anti-graft campaign to breaching the age norms?

ANSWER: These comparisons are superficial. Xi eliminated the rule setting a two-term limit in office to allow him to continue for at least a third term. Vietnam already had provision for exemptions on mandatory retirement age in exceptional cases.

While Trong's re-election to a third term was unprecedented, the rule limiting an officer bearer to two terms remains on the books. General Secretary Trong backed Tran Quoc Vuong as his successor and would have retired at the 13<sup>th</sup> congress had Vuong been elected. However, late in 2020 the Central Committee refused to endorse Vuong. Trong's re-election was a compromise to maintain party stability.

Both Xi and Trong are true believers in ideology and party-building. They have both chosen to tackle corruption based on their national situations. No doubt both leaders studied how the other was faring but their actions were independent.

Q5. What lessons can Trong learn from Xi's domination at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress?

ANSWER: Secretary General Trong can reflect on his success at the 12<sup>th</sup> national congress of the Vietnam Communist Party when Nguyen Tan Dung was unsuccessful in his bid to become party leader. Trong succeeded because he carefully revised party rules to box Dung in.

Trong has spent his entire life promoting party-building to ensure that a stream of qualified and clean (non-corrupt) cadres can take office in an orderly process of generational change. Xi's control of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress only highlights differences between the two communist parties.

If Trong draws any lesson, it will be that Vietnam cannot afford to follow Xi's example and vest so much power in any one individual in the future. In Vietnam, the party general secretary is *primus inter pares* not a dictator. Otherwise how do we account for the fact that Trong was unsuccessful in advancing his successor? Vietnam's

Politburo operates as a collective leadership. Vietnam's party leader is not able to hand pick the Politburo.

In sum, Trong will accept Xi's re-election pragmatically. Privately, he is likely to be thinking "not in Vietnam" because one-man rule could well lead to instability in the future.

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