THE 2016 LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN VIETNAM AND ITS LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

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On 27 January 2016, the 12th Central Committee of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party (VCP) re-elected the seventy-two-year-old Nguyen Phu Trong as its General Secretary, breaking the rule that limits the age of candidates for this position to sixty-five. More strikingly, Trong's rival in the race to this top post was Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who has been perhaps, as a country expert has noted, "Vietnam's most powerful politician over the past thirty years, since the demise of General Secretary Le Duan."[1] Unlike any previous contenders to this job, Dung fought until the last minute, reportedly gathering nomination votes from nearly twenty per cent of the delegates of the 12th VCP Congress, which elected the Central Committee on 26 January.[2] However, the fate of this contest was substantially sealed five weeks earlier, at the 13th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee (14–21 December 2015).[3] Following this momentous event, the 14th Plenum, held one week before the 12th Congress, finalized the 11th Central Committee's recommendations for the top posts in the party-state: General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong would stay party chief, Minister of Public Security Tran Dai Quang was named the next state president, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc the next prime minister, and Vice-chair of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan the next National Assembly chair. A few months later the National Assembly would formally appoint the three individuals to these posts for the next five years.

The 11th Central Committee also prepared the lists of nominees from which the 12th Congress and the 12th Central Committee respectively would select a

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two-hundred-strong new Central Committee (which is the 12th CC) and a nineteen-strong new Politburo.[4] In Vietnam's party-state, the VCP Central Committee is the country's highest decision-making body between the Party Congresses, while the Politburo takes on this role when the Central Committee, which meets about twice a year, is not in session. As "the Party leads and the State manages" (*Đảng lãnh đạo, Nhà nước quản lý*) in this party-state, the Party General Secretary is the supreme leader of the country and the Commander-in-Chief of the military, even though the titular head of state is the State President, who is empowered by the Constitution to have the highest command (*thống lĩnh*) over the armed forces.

What are the long-term implications of the leadership changes ushered in at the 12th VCP Congress for Vietnam's economic reforms, political developments, and relations with major powers and regional states? How to make sense of the stunning outcome of the race for the country's top job? What characterizes the new constellation and what does it mean for Vietnam's domestic and foreign policies in the years to come? To answer these questions, this chapter first investigates plausible explanations for the downfall of the powerful Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, whose defeat in an unusually vigorous bid for the top job paved the way for General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to stay in power. Next, the chapter examines the new leadership constellation with regard to its policy tendencies. Finally, and based on this appraisal, the chapter explores major long-term implications of the new leadership arrangements for Vietnam's domestic politics, economic reforms, and foreign policy, especially its policy regarding China, the United States, and the South China Sea.

Explaining the Outcomes of a Power Contest

Although every VCP congress is a time of intense power struggles, the 12th Congress was especially partisan. Never before has politics in Vietnam been so reduced to a stark choice between two individuals. These two leaders were General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. Trong's and Dung's personalities are polar opposites. At their core, Trong is a Confucian, who is loyal to his principles, while Dung is a capitalist, who is loyal to his profits. Although personality might play a part in their conflict, it was politics that was the main cause.

A few months into his first term as VCP General Secretary, Trong realized that, in his own words, "corruption is threatening the survival of the Party". At the 4th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 2011, he launched a major campaign to "rectify the Party". Learning from the failure of the previous

anti-graft measures, which were lambasted as "beating from the knee down" and "bathing without washing the head", Trong applied a top-down approach to his fight against corruption. Sitting at the apex of a massive network of rent-seeking interests, Dung soon became the main target of Trong's campaign.[5] But Dung was far from an ordinary Prime Minister. More than any of his predecessors, Dung harboured strong ambitions to become the country's supreme leader. The conflict between the two men represented a larger battle in which political campaigns were inseparable from election campaigns. The tide of the battle seesawed throughout four full years, from 2012 through 2015, until a decisive blow struck in December 2015 resulted in Dung's ouster and Trong's re-election at the 12th Congress.

Dung's failure to secure the top job surprised many observers. A May 2015 analysis predicted that "a key factor that is likely to shape the outcome of the next leadership transition is the growing power and influence of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung".[6] By early November 2015, China's Vietnam hands apparently maintained a similar view, as visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping extended an invitation to Premier Dung to visit China in the future but did not similarly invite party chief Trong or State President Truong Tan Sang.[7]

Explaining Dung's defeat, an Associated Press analysis noted, "[the] successful leader in Vietnam needs to be faceless". The report argued that Dung was ousted "because he was seen by party bosses to have become too big for his boots".[8] Similarly, a study by two Vietnam scholars, written before the 12th Congress, contended that "past support for Dung may not translate into support for his general secretary candidacy".[9] The reason is that when the Central Committee cast its confidence vote for Dung in June 2013, it had quite different motives and calculations than when it decided who should be the next party chief. Although Trong was generally able to secure the Politburo's support, the Central Committee sided with Dung against Trong at more than one major juncture. At the 6th Plenum (1–15 October 2012), the Central Committee dismissed the Politburo's proposal to censure Dung. The 7th Plenum (2–11 May 2013) rejected Trong's recommendations that two reformers in his camp, VCP Internal Affairs Department head Nguyen Ba Thanh and VCP Economics Department head Vuong Dinh Hue, be promoted to the Politburo. Instead, the Central Committee elected National Assembly Vice-chair Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan and Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Thien Nhan to the Politburo. Neither Ngan nor Nhan was a rent-seeker, but they were thought to maintain friendly relations with Dung. At the 10th Plenum (5–12 January 2015), Trong's hope that the Central Committee would cast a no-confidence vote on Dung backfired, with Dung reportedly winning the lion's share of the votes.[10] As the hypothesis goes, the Central Committee rescued Dung from attacks by

the Trong camp because it wanted to preserve a division of power at the top, but selecting a strong General Secretary would undermine the Central Committee itself. Dung's ambition to centralize the leadership would mean a diminished role for the provincial officials, government ministers, and party functionaries who made up most of the Central Committee.

This hypothesis may or may not take into account the fact that about 40–45 per cent of the Central Committee were slated to retire at the 12th Congress.[11] In an ideal world, the 55–60 per cent of the Central Committee members who would stay would be united by their collective interest in a strong Central Committee, making the views of the retiring 40–45 per cent irrelevant. But in the real world, Central Committee members act on the basis of a more diverse pool of interests. Many of the retiring members might have wanted a strong leader to lead the country, while many of the staying members might have believed that the pragmatic Dung, rather than the moralistic Trong, would deliver more resources for them. Why these motives did not prevail over others remains unclear.

Another puzzle with the "weak leader" hypothesis is that the Central Committee failed to support a third candidate who would have been weaker than both Dung and Trong. In fact, Trong was not the first choice of his camp for the next General Secretary post. Already two years above the age limit when first elected in 2011, he was supposed to serve only one term — until 2016. In 2013 he endorsed party boss of Hanoi City Pham Quang Nghi as his successor. After Nghi was defeated in 2014, Trong turned his attention to Public Security Minister Tran Dai Quang and head of the Party Central Propaganda Department Dinh The Huynh. However, neither of the two was able to amass sufficient support in the Central Committee for candidacy to the top post. Re-electing Trong required breaking the rule on the age limits. With Dung gone and Trong victorious, the General Secretary would be stronger than ever before. It remains puzzling why a Central Committee that preferred a weak leader favoured these risks over the easier case of supporting an even more faceless leader.

Dung's downfall may be explained by his aggressiveness and the resourcefulness of his opponents. As a Vietnam scholar put it, "the Prime Minister's aggressive politics have turned many party members against him.… He made almost everyone his enemy."[12] Indeed, in addition to party chief Trong, State President Sang was also Dung's arch-rival. It is worth noting that the party chief, the State President, the Prime Minister, and the National Assembly chair are dubbed as the "four pillars" (*tứ trụ*) of the top tier in Vietnam's political hierarchy. By late 2014 Dung's relationship with National Assembly Chair Nguyen Sinh Hung had been a mixture of temporary rivalry and temporary alliance. But in late October 2014 the

police arrested the boss of OceanBank, Ha Van Tham, a private tycoon close to Hung. Like Dung, Hung was a rent-seeker who was financially and operationally backed by business bosses under his patronage. Tham's arrest would kill two birds with one stone. It would help the Dung camp to expand its control of the banking sector, and it would provide evidence about Hung's possible corruption, which would hold Hung hostage to the possessor of the evidence. The negotiation between the Dung camp and the Hung camp appeared to last several months, but eventually Dung's hard line put Hung into a corner, pushing him firmly over to the Trong camp. How critical Hung's pivot to the Trong camp was for the overall balance of power remains, however, unclear. What is more certain is that Dung was relatively isolated in the Politburo. In 2012 Trong was able to convince the Politburo to reprimand Dung, and in 2015 Dung failed to gain the Politburo's support for his General Secretary candidacy. It was reported that among the sixteen members of the Politburo, only Nguyen Thien Nhan sided openly with Dung.

While the Trong camp was able to maintain some sort of hegemony in the Politburo, it failed several times to steer the Central Committee in its preferred direction. Some tricks may have helped the Trong camp eventually keep the Central Committee in line. On 9 June 2014 the Central Committee issued Decision No. 244 on intra-party elections.[13] The decision severely restricts the delegates' rights to nominate and self-nominate. Specific to the race for the top post, Decision 244 forbids all Politburo members to nominate candidates outside the list that has been approved collectively by the Politburo. In Central Committee sessions, Politburo members are not allowed to self-nominate or accept nomination from other Central Committee members. With this regulation in place, anyone who is not endorsed by the Politburo would be ousted from the contest, even if he or she obtained some support from the Central Committee. Of course, the Politburo does not work in isolation from the Central Committee. It might feel the need to change its nomination in response to new developments in or pressure from the Central Committee.

One possibility that might explain shifts in the balance of power is the emergence of new information. Although it eventually backfired, the arrest of OceanBank boss Tham was an attempt to obtain information about Nguyen Sinh Hung and then use it to blackmail Hung into siding with Dung. New information has been a critical factor affecting leadership changes. In the run-up to the 8th VCP Congress in 1996, the conservatives' candidate for Prime Minister, Nguyen Ha Phan, was foiled at the last minute due to new information about his alleged treason in the war period. New information about Dung might have been introduced in the last months prior to the 12th Congress, helping to turn the tide of the battle,

not least by turning some of his supporters into his detractors. Chairwoman of the National Assembly Social Affairs Committee Truong Thi Mai, who would later gain a seat on the 12th Politburo, reportedly reversed her support for Dung after finding out something new about him.

The New Constellation

The ascent and eventual downfall of Nguyen Tan Dung neatly illustrates the evolution of the communist state in the reform era. The single most important feature of Vietnamese politics in the post-1986 period is the rise and crisis of a rent-seeking state.[14] Underlying this development is an evolving mixture of four policy currents that characterize contemporary Vietnamese politics.[15] The first current is driven by the conservatives, who advocate regime preservation and tend to embrace an anti-Western worldview. The second is represented by the modernizers, who champion national development, which leads them to promote domestic reforms and integration into the Western-led international system. The cohabitation of the conservatives and the modernizers has led to the emergence of the moderates and the rent-seekers as two major policy currents. Moderates take a position in the middle between the conservatives and the modernizers, trying to bridge the diametric differences between regime preservation and national modernization. Rent-seekers blend elements of communism and capitalism in an extractive way, promoting crony capitalism and nurturing authoritarian politics while pursuing a money-first foreign policy.

A popular narrative depicts Vietnam's high politics as a power struggle between a faction of pro-China conservatives led by Trong and VCP Executive Secretary Le Hong Anh and a faction of pro-Western reformists and technocrats led by Dung, buffered by a reform-oriented moderate group led by State President Sang and National Assembly Chair Hung.[16] This characterization does not match the evidence and is misleading at best. An examination of these leaders' behaviour throughout the years demonstrates that Trong is a conservative with moderate tendencies; Anh a moderate; Sang a former moderate who turned rent-seeker but eventually became a modernizer, probably an effect of his rivalry with Dung; Dung a modernizer turned rent-seeker; and Hung a moderate modernizer turned rent-seeker.

Neither Dung nor Trong fit the pro-China/anti-U.S. vs. pro-U.S./anti-China framework. Dung's approach to China combines nationalist rhetoric and dramatic action with economic engagement. The former part of his approach boosted his image as a nationalist hero, while the latter part tightened Vietnam's dependence

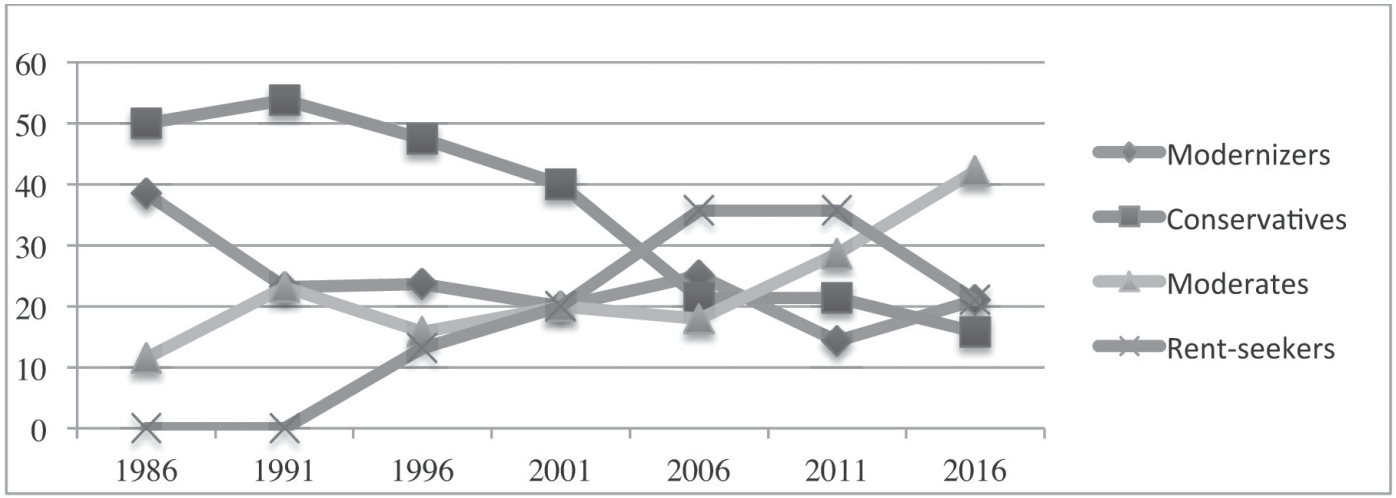
on China.[17] Several signs indicate that Dung might have been Beijing's choice for Vietnam's next leader. When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Vietnam in early November 2015, he invited Dung but not Trong or Sang to visit China in the future. China deployed the giant HYSY-981 oil rig near Vietnamese waters the week after the 13th Plenum of the VCP Central Committee (14–21 December 2015), which saw Trong defeat Dung in the race for the top job. Beijing moved the platform closer to Vietnam a few days after the 14th Plenum (11–13 January 2016), which reinforced Dung's downfall. But even if Dung was Beijing's choice, he remained friendly to the West and was a strong supporter of Vietnam's international openness.

Trong's general approach to foreign policy is "soft outside but firmer inside". He had some naive hope towards China, even after the cable-cutting incident of 2011 when China's vessels cut the cables of a Vietnamese survey ship within Vietnam's EEZ. But the oil rig crisis of 2014 changed his perceptions and convinced Trong that he had to reach out to the United States. In early 2015 he yielded to U.S. pressure and made a major concession to allow independent labour unions, paving the way for Vietnam to sign the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a U.S.-led economic bloc designed to counterbalance China's influence.[18]

Although the key choice at the 12th Congress was between two individuals, the key contest was between two broad coalitions. Dung's allies included mostly rent-seekers, modernizers, and moderates. Trong was backed by an even more heterogeneous coalition that comprised conservatives, modernizers, and moderates, with some rent-seekers in the mix. Illustrative of the Trong camp's ideological diversity are the three individuals who ventured out to the public in support of Trong at the 12th Congress. They included two modernizers (Vice-chair of the VCP Propaganda Department Vu Ngoc Hoang and General Secretary of the Fatherland Front Vu Trong Kim) and a conservative (Senior Lieutenant General Vo Tien Trung, Director of the National Defense Academy).

The end of the Trong–Dung rivalry ushered in a new era. Vietnamese politics remains a mixture of four policy currents represented by party conservatives, nationalist modernizers, moderates, and rent-seekers, but the mixture has changed shape. Compared to the previous configuration, the influence of rent-seekers has decreased while that of modernizers has edged higher. Conservatives are also less strongly represented in the new leadership. Moderates have overtaken rent-seekers as the most influential policy group. Estimates by several keen watchers consulted by the author put the number of moderates in the 16-strong 11th Politburo between 4 and 7, the number of rent-seekers also between 4 and 7, the number of conservatives between 2 and 5, and the number of modernizers

FIGURE 1
Trajectories of Vietnam's Policy Currents, 1986–2016



Note: This chart features the percentages of four policy currents as represented in the VCP Politburo.
Source: Author's estimates

between 1 and 3. In the 19-strong 12th Politburo, the estimated number of moderates ranges between 4 and 11, the number of rent-seekers between 3 and 6, the number of modernizers between 2 and 8, and the number of conservatives between 2 and 5. Averaged and translated into percentages, these estimates see the influence of moderates in the Politburo grow steadily from nearly 30 per cent in 2011 to around one third in 2013 to over 40 per cent in 2016. From 2011 to 2015 the influence of rent-seekers remained around the 35 per cent level, but it plunged sharply to just over 20 per cent as a result of the 12th Congress. During the same period, the influence of modernizers dropped marginally from 14.3 per cent in 2011–13 to 12.5 per cent in 2013–15, but the 12th Congress boosted it to over 20 per cent. Finally, the influence of conservatives declined steadily from over 20 per cent in 2011 to a little below 20 per cent in 2013 to about 16 per cent in 2016, making conservatives the least influential policy group in the Politburo. Thus, if moderates and rent-seekers shared the pride of place in the previous Politburo, moderates are now clearly the dominant force in the current Politburo.

Dung's defeat in his bid for power has swept rent-seekers away from the top ranks in the cabinet. The government is now headed by a modernizer — Prime Minister Phuc — and five Deputy Prime Ministers (Truong Hoa Binh, Vuong Dinh Hue, Pham Binh Minh, Vu Duc Dam, and Trinh Dinh Dung) who are believed to be modernizers and moderates. However, Dung's last-minute defeat ensured that the purge of rent-seekers did not reach below the top echelons. As a result of their dominance in the previous period, rent-seekers are still a powerful force at the ministerial level and in the bureaucracy that manages the day-to-day work of the government.

All this creates a constellation where the chief of the party is a conservative with moderate tendencies, the head of the government is a modernizer, the country's collective leadership is dominated by moderates, but these leaders have to rely on a structure heavily influenced by rent-seekers for policy recommendations and implementation.

Long-term Implications for Domestic and Foreign Policy

The rearrangement of Vietnam's ruling elite will impact the way the party-state exerts and maintains power. The survival and resilience of Vietnam's communist regime relies on a varying combination of repression, co-optation, legitimacy, and external factors. The recent power struggle in the leadership suggests that the ruling elite will continue to be characterized by diverse identities and interests.

Coupled with the dominance of the moderates, this will moderately reduce repression and increase co-optation and legitimacy as major tools of the state in its interaction with society. More specifically, the party-state will have to rely more on legitimacy to stay in power. This will push the government to be more responsive to popular demands.

The new constellation suggests that the party and government leadership is now more united in fighting corruption and promoting economic reforms. But how this will work out will depend a great deal on the response from the rent-seekers who have pervaded the party-state. Rent-seekers can now choose from among three major strategies: sabotage and resistance, co-optation, and transformation. Thus, some rent-seekers may sabotage reforms and resist efforts aimed at uprooting corruption, others may entice moderates and modernizers into adopting rent-seeking behaviour, and still others may try to turn themselves into moderates or modernizers. The central fault line of Vietnamese politics in the coming years is likely to be drawn between the rent-seekers and the modernizers.

The dominance of modernizers at the top echelons of the government bodes well for economic and institutional reforms. But the extent to which the Cabinet leadership can advance reform remains a big question mark. Two major factors may interfere to put a break on reform. First, with the party chief remaining a conservative with moderate tendencies, reform is likely to progress step by step rather than by leaps and bounds. Secondly, the pervasive nature of rent-seeking in the government means that reform efforts will meet with strong resistance and be sabotaged to a significant extent by the very people whose job it is to implement them.

On the foreign policy front, Vietnam will likely veer farther, but not too far, from China and closer, but not too close, to the United States. The declining power of party conservatives and rent-seekers and the rising influence of nationalist modernizers suggest that Vietnam will try harder to reduce its economic dependence on China. As U.S.–China rivalry intensifies, Hanoi will strengthen efforts to avoid choosing between the two great powers. This would mean that much of Vietnam's energy and attention would be directed to relations with major regional powers, including Japan, India, Russia, and ASEAN to a large extent, and South Korea and Australia to a lesser extent.

Vietnam's approach to China and the United States is a combination of cooperation and competition (*vừa hợp tác vừa đấu tranh*). But it is a changing, not a constant, combination, with a shifting emphasis that evolves with the changes in the mix of influential groups in the leadership. This combination of cooperation and competition spans six distinct strategies. Ranging from hard to soft approaches,

these strategies include hard balancing, soft balancing, enmeshment, engagement, accommodation/deference, and solidarity.

Vietnam's approach to China since the renormalization of relations in 1991 has gone through four major phases. In the 1990s, accommodation and soft balancing, followed by solidarity and enmeshment, were the most salient components of Hanoi's strategy. In the 2000s, engagement was increasingly added to the mix, becoming the strongest component by the second half of the decade. During the same period, solidarity morphed into deference, and enmeshment faded relative to the other components. Starting in the late 2000s, China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea increasingly strengthened both hard and soft balancing while discrediting solidarity and enmeshment.[19] Sino–Vietnamese relations passed a point of no return with the HYSY-981 oil rig crisis of 2014.[20] This crisis shifted the emphasis of Vietnam's strategy towards the balancing end, hollowing solidarity and making engagement highly suspicious. The dominance of moderates in the top leadership suggests that Vietnam will retain all six strategies, regardless of their mutual contradiction. On the other hand, the rising influence of modernizers and the declining impact of conservatives and rent-seekers in foreign policy making will reinforce the shift towards the balancing end, edging away from solidarity, deference, and engagement. This shift will be gradual, barring major events that dictate otherwise.

The evolution of Vietnam's relations with the United States since renormalization in 1995 has undergone two turning points. Until mid 2003, Hanoi emphasized soft balancing, but the perception of U.S. superior power, demonstrated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, caused a re-evaluation of Vietnam's international outlook. Following the 8th Plenum of the 9th Central Committee in July 2003, Vietnam pursued a dualist policy, emphasizing both soft balancing and engagement in relations with the United States.[21] The other turning point in Vietnam–U.S. relations was triggered by the 2014 oil rig crisis with China. Following this crisis, Hanoi accelerated its rapprochement with Washington, culminating in the protocol-breaking visit by VCP chief Trong to the White House in July 2015.[22] As Washington proved to be a valuable partner in the South China Sea dispute, the emphasis of Vietnam's U.S. policy shifted decisively to engagement, illustrated by Hanoi's embrace of the TPP and its unusually warm reception of U.S. President Barack Obama's visit in May 2016. With the moderates dominating and the nationalist modernizers rising, Vietnam is poised to continue the trend set by the recent U.S.–Vietnam rapprochement.

Nationalist modernizers owe their growing influence in part to China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea. At the same time, the South

China Sea dispute remains a key issue in Vietnam's regional and international outlook. In recent years, Vietnam's security strategy to address the China threat has been based on three major prongs. The first of these is to develop minimal deterrence through force modernization and defence posturing. This is paralleled by continuous attempts to maintain peaceful relations with China, including maintaining bridges of communication when relations are in crisis. These two prongs are buttressed by efforts to reach out to the outside world for international support and assistance.[23] This security strategy has provided a broad framework for Vietnam to deal with China, but it needs major elaboration. Dominated by moderates, Vietnam's leadership will have a hard time determining the right priorities and the right balance among the possible elements of this framework. On the other hand, the declining influence of conservatives and rent-seekers will provide a positive atmosphere for consensus building. If the modernizers continue to grow in influence, the coming years may witness the emergence of "middle power politics", which will proactively seek to redress the worsening balance of power in the region by reducing Vietnam's dependence on China, strengthening Hanoi's ties with regional powers such as Japan and India, working with fellow ASEAN states to unite the group, and creating some new elements in the regional architecture.

Conclusion

Every VCP Congress produces some leadership changes, but the 12th Congress represented a turning point in the trajectory of Vietnamese politics. It marked a dramatic downturn of the rent-seekers and a reinvigoration of the modernizers. It also established the dominance of the moderates and furthered the conservatives' decline. The 12th Congress put an end to the rent-seekers' dominance, but it did not herald the end of the rent-seeking state. What it ushered in is the twilight of a form of governance that has dominated Vietnam over the last twenty years.

The leadership changes at the 12th Congress suggest that economic and institutional reform will move forward, but it will advance incrementally rather than at full speed. The regime will have to rely more on legitimacy to maintain power, and the government will have to be more responsive to popular demands. If the current trends continue, Vietnam may enter a second reform era in the coming decade. Vietnam will further integrate into the outside world. With respect to relations with the major powers in the region, Vietnam will continue to edge away from China, while moving closer to the United States, Japan, and India, but it will aim for a position of complex balances, not one of partisanship.

These trends are not irreversible, however. They can be accelerated, disrupted, or reversed by major changes in the international and domestic environment. If developments such as the Philippines' pivot to China under President Rodrigo Duterte and the United States' withdrawal from the TPP under President Donald Trump are part of a larger trend, this will cause the Vietnamese to seriously rethink their regional and international outlook and will significantly impact Vietnam's strategic trajectory. On the other hand, an escalation of tensions in the South China Sea and increased rivalry between China and the United States in the future will also leave its mark on Vietnam's political development. A possible big event that may occur in the next decade is a financial crisis in China that plunges the country into a prolonged slowdown or recession. The effects of such a crisis are too complex to forecast, but in any event such a development will likely throw Vietnam into a whirlwind with unforeseeable consequences. Finally, domestic events such as a banking crisis, an environmental disaster, or political turmoil triggered by such a development will also have the potential to change the course of Vietnamese politics.

Notes

1. Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Leadership Transition in 2016: A Preliminary Analysis", *ISEAS Perspective 2015*, no. 24, 18 May 2015, p. 6.
2. It was reported that Dung was nominated by 270 delegates out of a total of 1,510. Người Đưa Tin, "Thủ tướng Nguyễn Tấn Dũng là người được giới thiệu nhiều nhất với 270 phiếu" [Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was nominated with 270 votes, the highest vote], *Ba Sàm*, 24 January 2016 <https://anhbasam.wordpress.com/2016/01/24/6712-thu-tuong-nguyen-tan-dung-la-nguoi-duoc-gioi-thieu-nhieu-nhat-voi-270-phieu/>.
3. Alexander L. Vuving, "Who Will Lead Vietnam?", *The Diplomat*, 16 January 2016.
4. The 12th Central Committee has 180 regular members with voting rights and 20 alternate members without voting rights. The 180 regular members would populate key leadership positions in the country's governance structure, which includes the central party institutions, the provincial party organizations, the central and provincial governments, the military at the national and regional levels, the security forces, and key mass organizations such as the Fatherland Front, the Youth League, the Women's Union, the Labour Union, and the Peasants' Union.
5. Alexander L. Vuving, "Vietnam in 2012: A Rent-Seeking State on the Verge of a Crisis", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2013*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), pp. 330–35.
6. Hiep, "Vietnam's Leadership Transition in 2016", p. 12.
7. Vuving, "Who Will Lead Vietnam?"

8. Vijay Joshi, "Analysis: Successful Leader in Vietnam Needs to Be Faceless", Associated Press, 29 January 2016.
9. Paul Schuler and Kai Ostwald, "Delayed Transition: The End of Consensus Leadership in Vietnam?" *ISEAS Perspective* 2016, no. 2, 14 January 2016.
10. The only publicly available numbers of confidence votes at the 10th Plenum are from the blog *Chan dung Quyen luc* (Portraits of Power), which is clearly pro-Dung and anti-Trong. According to this blog, Dung received the highest number of votes for high confidence, followed by State President Truong Tan Sang, while Trong ranked 8th among the 20 members of the Politburo and Secretariat. See Chân dung Quyền lực, "Kết quả bỏ phiếu tín nhiệm Bộ Chính trị, Ban Bí thư tại Hội nghị Trung ương 10" [Results of the Politburo Secretariat confidence vote of the 10th Party Central Committee], 16 January 2015. Some well-informed sources dispute the credibility of these numbers, however.
11. "Tiêu chuẩn nhân sự Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khóa XII" [HR standards of the 12th Party Central Committee], Zing.vn, 19 January 2016 <http://news.zing.vn/tieu-chuan-nhan-su-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xii-post620434.html>.
12. Alexander Vuving, quoted in John Boudreau, "Vietnam Signals Leadership Shift as Premier's Prospects Fade", Bloomberg, 24 January 2016.
13. See Quyết định số 244-QĐ/TW ngày 9/6/2014 của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương về việc ban hành Quy chế bầu cử trong Đảng [Decision 244-QD TW dated 9/6/2014 of the Central Committee on the issue of voting regulations in the Party], 9 June 2014 <http://moj.gov.vn/qt/cacchuyenmuc/daihoidaibieu/Pages/van-ban-cua-dang-cap-tren.aspx?ItemID=15>.
14. Vuving, "Vietnam in 2012."
15. Alexander L. Vuving, "Vietnam's Search for Stability", *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2012; Vuving, "Vietnam: The Tale of Four Players", *Southeast Asian Affairs 2010*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), pp. 367–91.
16. Chanh Cong Phan, "Vietnam after 2016: Who Will Lead?", *The Diplomat*, 10 July 2015.
17. Vuving, "Who Will Lead Vietnam?"
18. Ibid.
19. Alexander L. Vuving, "Power Rivalry, Party Crisis and Patriotism: New Dynamics in the Vietnam-China-U.S. Triangle", in *New Dynamics in U.S.-China Relations: Contending for the Asia-Pacific*, edited by Li Mingjiang and Kalyan M. Kemburi (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 273–78.
20. Alexander L. Vuving, "A Tipping Point in the U.S.-China-Vietnam Triangle", *The Diplomat*, 6 July 2015.
21. Alexander L. Vuving, "How Experience and Identity Shape Vietnam's Relations with China and the United States", in *Asia's Middle Powers? The Identity and Regional*

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