

Vietnam's 'mediation diplomacy' faces key test in Myanmar crisis

Hanoi has failed to respond meaningfully to military coup and suppression

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BANGKOK -- Vietnam has managed to bring the new coronavirus under control and engineer a respectable 2.9% economic growth for 2020 despite the pandemic. The National Assembly, or parliament, chose the Southeast Asian nation's new leadership for the next five years during a session that ended on April 8.

Vietnam's political leadership has four pillars: Communist Party chief, president, prime minister and chair of the National Assembly.

During the 13th National Party Congress held in Hanoi from Jan. 25 to Feb. 1, the party reelected Nguyen Phu Trong, 76, as general secretary, the nation's top job, for an unprecedented third term.

Former Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 66, has taken on the post of president, which makes him the head of state under the constitution and the country's top diplomat. The parliament elected Pham Minh Chinh, 62, head of the Communist Party's Central Organization Committee, as new prime minister, putting him in charge of economic policy. At the end of March, the National Assembly appointed former Finance Minister Vuong Dinh Hue, 64, as its new chairman.

These leadership appointments include some notable breaks from tradition. Trong has been exempted from the party rule limiting the general secretary's tenure to 10 years in two consecutive five-year terms.

The top quartet includes two officials aged over 65 -- Trong and Phuc -- marking another departure from convention, which suggests there should never be two or more officials aged 65 or older among the four after new appointments or reappointments.

These choices signal that the communist country places a top priority on continuity and stability in government.

Another unusual top personnel move concerns foreign policy. Deputy Foreign Minister and seasoned diplomat Bui Thanh Son has been appointed as foreign minister to replace Pham Binh Minh, who has been serving concurrently as deputy and foreign minister. Minh will retain his deputy prime minister post.

While he was serving as prime minister, President Phuc took charge of the country's diplomacy for a while after Trong, who also held the post of president, suffered from ill health. The de facto leader of the single-party state concurrently served as president after the previous leader, Tran Dai Quang, died in office in 2018.

Minh will also remain involved in the development of Vietnam's foreign policy, which means the country will have three top officials leading its diplomatic maneuvering, according to Shozo

Sakata, Senior Research Fellow at the Bangkok Research Center of the Institute of Developing Economies.

Vietnam's diplomacy has always been based on a complicated calculus of variables related to the country's multifaceted ties with China and the U.S.

Vietnam's diplomacy with China operates on two different levels -- those of party and government.

The relationship between the two countries' communist parties has been traditionally friendly despite tensions between the two governments.

Seven years ago, China's move to deploy a giant oil drilling rig in waters near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, which are claimed by Vietnam as part of its exclusive economic zone, caused bilateral relations between the two nations to deteriorate to their lowest point since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. But the tension was eased through diplomatic efforts by a special envoy of the general secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party sent to Beijing. This indicates the unique nature of their bilateral relations.

Senior Vietnamese officials who have climbed up the party ranks tend to have a pro-China stance, while policymakers who have served mainly in government posts tend to show anti-Chinese sentiment and by extension are sympathetic toward the U.S.

All the three officials of the country's new diplomatic team come from the latter group, having moved up the ladder of government. In particular, Deputy Prime Minister Minh is known as a China hardliner. His father, the late Nguyen Co Thach, was forced to resign as foreign minister after he expressed an objection to Vietnam's move in 1991 to normalize its relations with China.

While maintaining the traditional good relationship between the two communist parties, experts predict, Hanoi will work to build closer ties with Washington as it faces growing pressure from China's increasing aggressiveness, which is breeding public antagonism toward Beijing.

Besides navigating choppy diplomatic waters between the U.S. and China, Vietnam has also been pursuing its own brand of "mediation diplomacy."

In August 2018, the Central Committee of Vietnam's Communist Party issued a strategic document on promoting multilateral diplomacy, pledging to play more leading and mediating roles in the diplomatic arena in addition to attending meetings of international institutions.

After it introduced the so-called "Doi Moi" (renovation) economic reform agenda in 1986, Vietnam started pursuing omni-directional diplomacy while turning the nation into a market economy.

It is not hard to imagine that Vietnam, which has grown into a leading emerging country due to strong economic expansion in recent years, has become confident about raising its diplomatic profile.

Government and party leaders have come to use frequently the Vietnamese phrase "Hoa giai," which means "reconciliation" and "mediation," in their speeches, according to Hoang Oanh, researcher at the Institute of Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

Culturally, Vietnamese prefer resolving disputes via reconciliation and mediation methods rather than legal settlements, Hoang points out.

This may explain why Vietnam, unlike the Philippines, did not bring its territorial dispute with China to an international arbitration tribunal.

Vietnam's history after the end of World War II is marked by two landmark diplomatic achievements through mediation -- the 1954 Geneva Accords, which ended the First Indochina War, an armed conflict between Vietnam and its colonial ruler, France, and the 1973 Paris peace accords, which led to the American military withdrawal from Vietnam two years before Hanoi's final victory in the Vietnam war.

The country has participated in U.N. peacekeeping operations in South Sudan since 2014. It has also been actively involved in diplomatic efforts to solve the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the Rohingya refugee crisis caused by Myanmar's persecution of the Muslim ethnic minority group.

The most high-profile achievement in Vietnam's mediation diplomacy is its successful bid to host the historic summit meeting in February 2019 between then U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, which took place in Hanoi.

Vietnam is also keen to score diplomatic points to boost its international stature and thus its economy.

Its national brand value grew 29% to \$319 billion in 2020 due mainly to its success in containing COVID-19, according to Brand Finance, a British consultancy. The country claimed 33rd position in the Brand Finance Nation Brands 2020 ranking, up from the 42nd slot the previous year.

Vietnam has also been engaged in its own "mask diplomacy" by exporting large amounts of face masks to the rest of the world even though not as aggressively as China. Vietnam is betting that burnishing its international image will help it expand its trade and attract more investment and tourists.

By building stronger relations with other countries through steadier and more measured diplomatic efforts than have been sent with China's now notorious "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure investment initiative, Hanoi is hoping to enhance its national security as well.

But Vietnam's diplomatic strategy has faced awkward challenges since the military coup in Myanmar on Feb. 1.

So far, Vietnam has responded to the military's violent power grab in a fellow member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in a way that is not in line with its commitment to being an important international actor.

Among ASEAN members, Indonesia and Singapore have taken a flurry of diplomatic actions to try to stop the Myanmar military's killings of citizens who have protested against the coup. But Vietnam, which held the rotating ASEAN presidency last year, has done nothing to help end the bloodshed. As a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, Vietnam seems to have objected to a resolution to denounce and punish Myanmar's military junta.

Myanmar's military held a parade in the capital Naypyitaw to celebrate the annual Armed Forces Day on March 27. The event is usually attended by military attaches from around 30 countries, but this year only eight nations sent officials to the ceremony -- one of which was Vietnam.

Countries that share borders with Myanmar, such as China, Thailand and Bangladesh, had reason to send military attaches to the event, which offers an opportunity to maintain the relationship with Myanmar's national army and observe its display of weapons.

Of countries that do not share borders with Myanmar, only three were present -- Russia, Pakistan and Vietnam.

Vietnam's military has been able to maintain a good relationship with Myanmar's army partly because the two countries do not share a border.

In a sign of the friendly ties between the two nations' military, Viettel, Vietnam's largest telecom firm operated by the Ministry of Defense, was allowed to enter Myanmar's burgeoning mobile services market in 2018 through a partnership with a local company affiliated with the national army.

Vietnam's response to the military coup in Myanmar has reminded the world of the fact that it is one of only five nations under single-party communist rule, along with China, Cuba, North Korea and Laos.

Since it enforced a new cyber security law two years ago, the Vietnamese government has been tightening its control of the internet. This is a darker side of the country which has been working hard to cultivate an image as a vibrant emerging economy.

Meanwhile, the increasingly acrimonious confrontation between the U.S. and China is developing into an ideological battle between democracy and authoritarianism.

There is no doubt that Vietnam belongs in the authoritarian camp. This fact poses big obstacles to the country's aspirations of playing a more important role in the international community.

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar is shaping up as a key test of Vietnam's mediation diplomacy.