

## Vietnam's Fifth Party Congress

### NO MAJOR POLICY CHANGES

Delayed for nearly a year, the Vietnamese Fifth Party Congress was finally held from 27 to 31 March this year. As in past party congresses, this one had its share of surprises. But if political analysts had hoped for indications of major shifts in policy orientation, they were to be disappointed. There had been no indication of any possible change in its foreign policy orientation, especially with regard to Kampuchea and alignment with the Soviet Union and the Comecon countries.

### CHINA AS ENEMY NUMBER ONE

Prospects for the improvement of relations with China remained dim, judging from the vituperative language used against this former ally in all the major speeches at the congress. China was still very much regarded and identified as enemy number one which, according to the Vietnamese leaders, still considered "an independent, unified and socialist Vietnam a major obstacle to their expansionist and hegemonic designs in Southeast Asia". And to fight off this "perfidious and cruel *new enemy*", Vietnam was determined to muster all its "spiritual and material forces in the vigilant defence of the Vietnamese fatherland".

### PRAISE FOR SOVIET UNION

In contrast to the bile which was directed almost entirely against the Chinese, the warmest praise was reserved for the Russians. LE DUAN in his keynote address to the congress claimed that the Soviet Union had been Vietnam's "most powerful and firmest ally" which had not only been giving Vietnam "timely and generous response to our requirements in the consolidation of national defence and defence of the fatherland" but also "supplied our economy with the technical materials and goods most vital for our people's production and livelihood". Thus, according to Le Duan, it was "in the interests of the two peoples" that they should "in future strive on for an even *more vigorous* development of the Vietnam-Soviet Union military solidarity and all-round cooperation".

### SOLIDARITY WITH LAOS AND KAMPUCHEA

The same determination was also expressed regarding relations between Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea. Le Duan emphasised at the congress that "the militant solidarity between Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea has entered a new stage of development" and that this "special relations" was no less than "a law of development of the revolution of the three countries". From this, it is clear that it would be very unlikely that Vietnam will soften its position on the Kampuchea issue despite international pressure and efforts from ASEAN. Neither carrot nor stick could win anything but minor concessions at most from the Vietnamese who still feel that their security is threatened as long as the Chinese continue to support the return of the Khmer Rouge in Kampuchea.

### PARTY SHAKE-UP

On the home front, the Fifth Party Congress had again brought to light the dilemma of generational transition of power in Vietnam—a problem which at the end of the congress appeared to be only partially solved.

There were some major personnel changes from the level of the Politburo down to the grassroots, indicating that some attempts were made to promote younger people into positions of power to replace some of the older and more inept members. But by and large, this process of transition of power was still largely confined to the middle and lower levels of the party structure.

## **POWER AT THE TOP**

Despite six out of fourteen Politburo members losing their positions, the power structure at the very top remained largely intact. The five leaders, LE DUAN, TRUONG CHINH, PHAM VAN DONG, PHAM HUNG, and LE DUC THO, are still firmly in control, and from all indications they will not be replaced soon despite the fact that all five are more than seventy and a few are not even in good health.

## **DEMOTION OF GIAP**

Of the six Politburo members who lost their positions, the departure of Gen. VO NGUYEN GIAP, the colourful and often controversial hero of Dien Bien Phu fame, attracted the greatest attention. Explanations of Giap's apparent demotion are varied. They range from rumours of ill-health to stories of disagreement over key policy issues. But whatever the reason, to long-time observers Giap's departure should not be interpreted by a facile explanation of a power struggle within the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). Giap, it should be noted, had been slowly relinquishing power since 1975. From that time on, he had been handing more and more responsibility to his long-time comrade-in-arms and protege, Gen. VAN TIEN DUNG. In fact by 1980, Dung had taken over the Defence Portfolio from Giap in a major cabinet reshuffle.

Although Giap is no longer in the Politburo, he has not lost his ranking within the VCP hierarchy, an indication that he has not fallen from grace. Ranked still in the sixth position in the Party Central Committee, Giap will continue to have some voice in the affairs of the party. Moreover, being still in charge of the important Science and Technology Commission, his role in the government may still be significant.

## **RETIRING THE OLD**

The dropping of the other five members from the Politburo was less of a surprise and was in fact expected since some were in semi-retirement and others had already lost their positions within the government. Three of the five, including former Foreign Minister NGUYEN DUY TRINH, former Chairman of the State Planning Commission LE THANH NGHI, and former Minister of Interior TRAN QUOC HOAN, had all lost their ministerial posts since 1980. The fourth, LE VAN LUONG, is an old party stalwart and, at the age of 72, is probably due for retirement. The last of the five, NGUYEN VAN LINH, although still relatively young, was promoted to the Politburo only in 1976. The fact that he was not retained probably indicates that he did not quite make the grade. In any case, both Linh and Luong, though no longer Politburo members, have continued to hold their positions as Secretary of the Party Committee in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi respectively.

## **SLOW SUCCESSION**

The changes in the Politburo at the Fifth Party Congress therefore suggests that the top VCP leaders still preferred the succession of power to be a gradual process so as to preserve the image of cohesiveness and unity at the top—a characteristic which had undoubtedly served the Vietnamese leadership very well since the founding of the VCP and throughout the period of revolutionary struggle. But, in the context of present-day Vietnam, it is perhaps time that power be handed over to the younger generation, with the older leaders playing advisory roles if necessary.

It is evident, especially in the past few years, that some of the older leaders, including Pham Van Dong, do have this intention. The fact that there has been no leadership change at the very top strongly suggests how difficult it is for the party to arrive at a consensus as to who the successors should be.

## **LIKELY SUCCESSORS**

The successors will no doubt have to emerge from the crop of second-echelon leaders, some of whom will probably be among the newly promoted Politburo members, who are all in their late fifties and early sixties.

Of the five new full members, three (VO VAN KIET, DO MUOI, and TO HUU) were promoted from their former alternate status to full membership. The other two, LE DUC ANH and NGUYEN DUC TAM, are new but not unknown. Col.-Gen. Anh, commander of the Vietnamese forces in the Seventh Military Region bordering Kampuchea, was one of the key figures in the 1978 military campaign which resulted in the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge. Tam has worked for years in the organisation department of the Party Central Committee, and is said to be a close associate of Le Duc Tho.

## **PROMOTION OF THACH**

The two new alternative members are NGUYEN CO THACH and DONG SI NGUYEN. The promotion of Thach, the suave Foreign Minister, is to be expected.

Thach has in recent years gained international stature as a shrewd but tough negotiator, a skill he obviously learnt well when he was aide to Le Duc Tho at the Paris Peace Talks in the early seventies.

## **RISING STARS**

From among the ranks of these seven men, To Huu and Vo Van Kiet have been most strongly tipped for possible promotion again in the near future. True enough, Vo Van Kiet has already been made chairman of the State Planning Commission, a post held until recently by NGUYEN LAM. As for To Huu, who was made first Vice-Premier since July last year, speculations are that he may take over from Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, who has since last year publicly expressed his desire to retire.

Le Duan, the VCP chief himself, too has been rumoured to be due for retirement within the next two years. It is no secret that Duan is in poor health, a condition which was further confirmed by the fact that he could read only part of his speech during the congress. Duan's likely successor will still have to be among the small handful of top leaders. A likely contender may be Le Duc Tho whose position of dominance in the party has often been overlooked in the past.

## **CHANGES IN THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE**

Political observers of Vietnam have often pointed to the fact that while transfer of power is slow at the top, personnel changes are rapid in the middle and at the bottom. This is again verified at the Fifth Party Congress.

Of the 101 full members and 32 alternates of the Party Central Committee elected at the Fourth Party Congress in 1976, 40 full members and 10 alternates were dropped. In their place 70 new full and alternate members (mainly technocrats) were elected at this congress to swell the ranks of the Party Central Committee to 116 full members and 36 alternates.

While the Party Central Committee was enlarged, the membership of the Central Control Commission, by contrast, was trimmed from 10 to 7, and membership of the Party Secretariat, the administrative organ of the VCP, remained at 10. Personnel changes in these two bodies were drastic, with most of the old members replaced by new ones.

## **SHAKE-UP AT THE BOTTOM**

The party shake-up extended right down to the very bottom of the party structure. The VCP, especially since the end of the Indochina war in 1975, has been known to face serious problems in terms of both recruitment of cadres of calibre as well as the maintenance of party discipline. The Vietnamese leaders themselves at the congress and also in the past year had openly criticised the party for much of the economic mismanagement in Vietnam over the past few years.

In his speech to the congress, Le Duan stressed this weakness by saying that "the work of party building has been marked by prolonged slackness ... cadre work has suffered from slowness and conservatism in all links of training, assignment, employment and remuneration". That the party has to build strong grassroot support especially among its corps of cadres is obvious, but the task has not been easy.

## **CADRE PURGES**

In the past three years, a series of campaigns had been carried out to purge the party of "incompetent", "corrupt", and "degenerate" cadres in the hope of rejuvenating the party with young blood. In all, it has been estimated that between 85,000 and 100,000 cadres have been expelled from the party in a series of purges which started about three years ago. But the fact still remains that a significant proportion of the cadres are old but had served the party well during the war. Means will have to be found to retire this group of cadres soon so as to make way for younger and better trained people who are needed for the difficult tasks of reconstruction.

## **ECONOMIC DIRECTIONS**

In the final analysis, it will still be in the economic sphere that the present Vietnamese leadership and the social system would be put to the greatest test. Experience in the past years has shown that the economic system under the socialist government had failed miserably in delivering even the basic requirements of life for ordinary Vietnamese. True the damages of war, the continuing conflict with China, and the international boycott against Vietnam over Kampuchea had all aggravated the economic situation of the country. But, putting aside all the external factors, it was still clear that many of the economic woes were created by internal infrastructural weaknesses, mismanagement, bureaucratic inefficiency, and a naive view of human psychology and economic laws.

## LEADERS ADMIT MISTAKES

In the Fifth Party Congress, the Vietnamese leaders, in a surprising act of humility, made one of the most severe criticisms of their economic failures in recent times. Le Duan candidly admitted that much of the economic difficulties stemmed from "shortcomings and mistakes of the party and state agencies from national down to grassroot levels". So serious were these "mistakes" that Pham Van Dong in his economic report to the congress had to state that "the living conditions of the people, of workers and public servants, in particular, are beset with many difficulties; the sources of energy, materials supply and transport facilities are unable to ensure the development of existing productive capacities; exports cannot pay for imports; market and prices fluctuate in complicated ways...."

And in acknowledgement that past plans had been totally unrealistic, the economic plan (spanning the period 1981-85 and into the 1990s) presented to the congress had a more sober note in which the greatest priority stated was "to meet the most pressing and essential needs; gradually stabilise and eventually improve to some extent the people's material and cultural life; bring about a steady solution of the foodgrain and foodstuffs problem; better meet the requirements in clothing, study, medical care, housing, travelling, childcare, and other essential consumption needs". These are indeed very basic and modest aims.

## PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO CONTINUE

The policy directions in the economic sphere also pointed to continuing the more pragmatic approach in economic planning, an approach which was initiated first after the Sixth VCP Central Committee Plenum in late 1979 in which incentives and bonuses were allowed to reward productivity.

Reiterating this, Pham Van Dong openly credited the "system of contractual delivery quotas" as the "motive force" to boost agricultural production and that the "system of job-rate and piece-rate wages and bonuses" was responsible for an increase in industrial output in 1981. "These new factors", added Dong, "should be studied in a scientific and profound manner with a view of drawing useful conclusions and promoting application".

## SOCIALIST COMPROMISE

For the time being, therefore, the Vietnamese leadership is prepared to accept the pragmatic option with further reliance on the profit motive to garner the productive forces of the country. But this does not mean that they have abandoned the ultimate goal of creating a socialist economy, a point which was made clear in the same speech by Pham Van Dong when he said that in the field of socialist transformation "we advocate the use of a multi-faceted economic structure in which the socialist economy plays the leading role".

Most analysts are in agreement that this is but indication that a compromise has been struck between the pragmatists and the hardliners of the party. The question still remains—how long can such a phase last?

### Leadership Line-up at a Glance

Politburo of 1976			Alternate Members
1. Le Duan	6. Vo Nguyen Giap	11. Le Van Luong	1. To Huu
2. Truong Chinh	7. Nguyen Duy Trinh	12. Nguyen Van Linh	2. Vo Van Kiet
3. Pham Van Dong	8. Le Thanh Nghi	13. Vo Chi Cong	3. Do Muoi
4. Pham Hung	9. Tran Quoc Hoan	14. Chu Huy Man	
5. Le Duc Tho	10. Van Tien Dung		
Politburo of 1982			Alternate Members
1. Le Duan	6. Van Tien Dung	11. Do Muoi	1. Nguyen Co Thach
2. Truong Chinh	7. Vo Chi Cong	12. Le Duc Anh	2. Dong Si Nguyen
3. Pham Van Dong	8. Chu Huy Man	13. Nguyen Duc Tam	
4. Pham Hung	9. To Huu		
5. Le Duc Tho	10. Vo Van Kiet		

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