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Is the Communist Party of Vietnam Set to Establish a ‘Core Leadership’ Position?

The consolidation of power under communist party chief Nguyen Phu Trong has some striking parallels to past patterns in Chinese politics.

By Hai Hong Nguyen

On February 2, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) awarded a medal to its General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, marking the fiftieth anniversary of his joining the party. In his speech at the award ceremony, Vo Van Thuong, a member of the CPV Politburo and standing member of the party Secretariat, praised Trong as embodying the virtue of “core leadership.”

In his speech, Thuong borrowed a range of phrases used by Trong in the past, such as “the back-runners follow the fore-runner, one voice is echoed by others,” to describe Trong’s “core leadership” role, which he said had helped build “solidarity” and “unity in thinking” within the party. He also praised Trong for leading “the entire party, the populace, and the armed forces to overcome difficulties and challenges to gain paramount achievements in all fields.”

Adulatory words applied to Trong have frequently appeared in the state media since 2016, and particularly since he was elected to an unprecedented third term at the 13th Party Congress in 2021. However, this was the first time that Trong, who has also been leading the Central Steering Committee for Anti-Corruption and Negative Practices (CSCAN) for more than 10 years, was described as a leader “at the core.” Is this a sign that the CPV will be following the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in formally establishing a “core leadership” role for Trong amid the current turbulence in Vietnamese politics and the uncertainty about whether he will step down at the mid-term plenary this year, or remain in the job until the end of the term in 2026? Does this have further implications for the leadership of the CPV in general and the position of the general secretary in particular?

The term “core leadership” has been used by the CCP since the Mao Zedong era to designate one position as the highest authority within the collective leadership of the Central Committee and the party. Though the CCP has always vowed to uphold Marxism-Leninism and the tenets of democratic centralism, Deng Xiaoping once said that “a collective leadership must have a core; without a core, no leadership can be strong enough.”

Mao was established as the “core” of the first generation of the CCP’s collective leadership, and was better known as “Chairman Mao” among the Chinese people. Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin were designated as the cores of the second and third generations of collective leadership, respectively. Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang to become the CCP general secretary in 2002, but was not designated a “core” leader during his two terms in power.

Xi Jinping took power from Hu in 2012 and quickly re-instated the core leadership position for himself, a move that was formalized at the sixth plenary session of the 18th Central Committee in 2016. He then successfully raised himself to equal footing with Mao and Deng by having his core leadership and thought established in the CCP’s key documents, including

the CCP's amended constitution in 2017, the third historic resolution adopted at the sixth plenary session of the 19th Central Committee in 2021, and in the materials of the 19th and 20th CCP congresses.

The CCP's core leader more often than not holds three key positions that reflect his authority. These positions include those of CCP general secretary, state president, and chairman of the Central Military Commission. Chinese communists are encouraged to take up their great leader Mao Zedong's Thought which includes a famous comment on power, suggesting that "every communist must grasp the truth, political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

In Vietnam, the term "core leadership" is not new in the CPV's lexicology. However, it has been basically used to describe and emphasize the role of a party organization as a leading force in implementing party policies and programs. This is because the CPV has historically upheld the tenet of collective leadership and rejected personality cults. However, political turmoil resulting from corruption by local officials since the launch of the *Doi Moi* economic reforms in 1986, and the implementation of a system of grassroots democracy to address this malfeasance, have required the party chief to present himself as a model at the grassroots level. Hence, there is more emphasis on the notion of "core leadership" at the commune level, but the idea is rarely attached to the party secretary at the provincial level, let alone at the central level.

Since its founding in 1930, the CPV has never designated an individual as a "core" leader. Ho Chi Minh, the founding father of the CPV, was venerated as the party chairman but, unlike Mao, he was never established as the core leader in or by a party document. Nor have any other CPV general secretaries in the years since.

By a common understanding, the term "core leadership" implies that the individual bearing the title has the highest authority to make political decisions and that these must be executed faithfully by other members of the central committee. However, the Vietnamese political culture under the rule of the CPV has never previously accepted such concentration of power in one person, due to the fear that this power could be abused. This culture was built by Ho Chi Minh and has been observed for decades.

Since 2003, the CPV has called its members to study and follow Ho Chi Minh Thought, which rejects the cult of the individual leader and emphasizes the importance of collective leadership. Ho was the party chairman but acted like the spiritual father of those who followed him in the cause of national liberation. He never wielded absolute power in the manner of Mao. Similarly, none of the CPV's leaders has held the three key positions that their Chinese counterparts have. The one exception is Nguyen Phu Trong, who did so between October 2018 and April 2021, following the sudden death of President Tran Dai Quang.

It is true that since being able to secure his third term in 2021, Trong has been the most powerful general secretary since the late 1980s, holding most of the key leadership positions. Since he was first elected as the CPV general secretary in 2011, he has also been the chairperson of the Central Military Commission (since 2011), the chairperson of the CSCAN (since 2012), and a member of the Central Public Security Party Committee's Caucus (since 2016, being the first CPV chief to have done so). Notably, Trong was the first ever CPV general secretary to concurrently occupy the state presidency from 2018 to 2021, an interim appointment that made him at least theoretically as powerful as China's Xi.

Trong's authority has been proven by the progress of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, in which thousands of government and party officials have been arrested and disciplined. This campaign culminated in the removal of the state president and two deputy prime ministers last month, after they took "political responsibility" for their junior staff being involved in grand corruption cases during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before Xi was established as China's "core" leader in 2016, he had all necessary arrangements made, including informal messages delivered by his supporters, to clear the way for him to move forward. Trong is now in a similar position. However, it was Trong who once warned that "it is necessary to be cautious when power concentration is vested in one person," and that "authority without being controlled will lead to corruption and negative practices."

The CPV under Trong's leadership might look to be following in the footsteps of its Chinese counterpart but has historically tended to follow its own political course. Many political reforms conducted by the CPV during Trong's reign, such as the holding of confidence votes on elected officials and members of the Politburo, the Secretariat and the Central Committee, go much further than the CCP. Change may come, though to the end of this term and in the near future, it would seem unlikely that the CPV will follow the CCP in establishing a "core leadership" position for Trong or any other party chiefs.

GUEST AUTHOR

Hai Hong Nguyen

Hai Hong Nguyen is an honorary research fellow at the Centre for Policy Futures, the University of Queensland.