



Vietnam's Communist Chief Is No Xi Jinping

Misguided comparisons rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of the capabilities and limits of the Vietnamese Communist Party chief.

By David Hutt
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Last month, the general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, was named the country's new president after the incumbent passed away months earlier. Naturally, though somewhat mistakenly, this led to numerous news reports that claimed Trong was becoming a dictatorial figure, following the same path as China's "paramount leader" Xi Jinping.

By taking on both positions, Trong certainly mirrors Xi, but only because in the early 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decided to merge the roles of Party chief and state president. The Vietnamese Communist Party, around the same time, however, decided against such a merger, although there has been talk of doing so since the 1990s. Trong also heads the Party's Central Military Commission; China's party chief heads a similar commission.

It is probably true that almost no political leader has had as much political power as Trong since Le Duan, who was VCP chief from 1958 (officially 1960) until his death in 1986. Some analysts **claim** that Trong is now even more powerful than Le Duan but that's debatable (Le Duan had a prominent rival in Truong Chinh, whereas there isn't a significant opponent to Trong; yet Le Duan was able to change Party policy over full-scale war in South Vietnam, whereas Trong still struggles with curbing corruption.) Importantly, too, there's a major difference between having disproportionate power and using it tyrannically.

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But the state president's actual powers are rather limited. The position has many formal responsibilities (such as serving as head of state and commander-in-chief of the military) but not many day-to-day tasks, except for state visits. The purpose of having a state president separate from the Party general secretary, a tradition accepted in the early 1990s, was partly as a "separation of powers," but it was more to institutionalize a diverse range of opinions. Democratic centralism, as the Party calls it, is intended to ensure that within the VCP there is a myriad of opinions and sectoral interests – but once a decision has been made by consensus, all Party officials are expected to stick to it, regardless of their own opinions. In this fashion, intraparty decision-making is far more plural in Vietnam than in almost any other socialist nation.

Trong doesn't appear to be changing that. Of the other members of the "four pillar" system of political leadership, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc is something of a reformer and technocrat, and National Assembly chair Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan is rather outspoken and is said to have clashed with Trong on several issues. Trong, who rose through the ranks as a Party theoretician and is far more traditional than recent senior leaders in Vietnam, is



Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong is sworn in as the country's president in Hanoi, Vietnam, Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2018. The 74-year-old Trong was elected president by the National Assembly succeeding the late President Tran Dai Quang who died last month after battling a viral illness for more than a year. (Nguyen Phuong Hoa/ Vietnam News Agency via AP)

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thought to have opposed a merger between the Party chief and state president years ago – indeed, his victory at the 2016 Party Congress, when he prevented then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung from becoming Party chief, was seen as a victory for consensus decision-making. At the time, it was Dung who was thought to be the one with more dictatorial ambitions.

China's Xi Jinping clearly dominates the CCP, having become a “paramount leader” and a “core leader.” But the CCP has a much longer history of putting power in the hands of one man than the VCP, which resists cults of personality. Trong is 74, and at the 2016 Party Congress had to have an exemption for him to continue as Party chief because he exceeded age restrictions. He is almost certain to resign as VCP chief in 2021. Xi, by comparison, is 65 years old and doesn't show any signs of wanting to step down – nor is the CCP able to force him to step down. Trong, much like all other Vietnamese Party chiefs, hasn't cultivated a cult of personality. Xi, by comparison, is front and center on a daily basis in Chinese newspapers.

Another difference is their ambitions. Xi Jinping wants to change China, while Nguyen Phu Trong still appears mostly committed to changing the Vietnamese Communist Party. In a sense, Trong is rather “monothematic.” His goals have been to clean up the Party through a monumental **anti-corruption campaign**; purify Party membership through a **morality campaign**; recentralize power from the provinces back to Hanoi; and ensure the Party maintains legitimacy among the public, through economic growth and by upholding a stable status quo. But Trong really doesn't have any novel policy ideas outside of how the Party functions. Economic reform and privatization of state-owned enterprises has continued at the same pace as pre-2016; dissent is more strenuously curbed but this is nothing new in Vietnam.

Trong's assumption of the presidency may also be less of a power grab than some observers are making it out to be. It is useful to consider the alternatives to Trong. Party rules require a state president to be someone who has been in the Politburo for more than one term. There are only five people who fit this bill, including Trong, Prime Minister Phuc, and chair of the National Assembly Ngan. The latter two were unlikely to want the state presidency since it holds less power than their current posts. The other two possibilities, Nguyen Thien Nhan, the Ho Chi Minh City Party chief, and Tong Thi Phong, deputy chair of the National Assembly, aren't very well thought of within the Party, some have claimed.

Moreover, had they been promoted, it would have necessitated another major personnel reshuffle, something the Party has struggled with since 2016. It has dallied on refilling the Politburo, which has now lost two members in recent years (three if you include Dinh The Huynh, who **stepped down** from most of his posts earlier this year due to ill health and rarely turns up for Politburo meetings).

This suggests that his selection as president isn't all about the consolidation of Trong's power but also about inter-Party contestation. If Trong really was all-powerful, he would have been able to easily hand-pick candidates to take the empty spaces on the Politburo, and even the state presidency; indeed, there were suggestions the post could have gone to one of his allies, like Tran Quoc Vuong, chairman of the Central Inspection Commission, or Minister of Defense Ngo Xuan Lich. The fact that the Central Committee didn't nominate one of Trong's allies, and Politburo seats remain unfilled, likely demonstrates there are major sectional disputes over who should occupy them – and the Party as a whole most likely doesn't want to provoke more internal divisions.

Added to that, whoever would have taken the state presidency is likely to have remained in the post after the 2021 Party Congress. It is possible, then, that the Central Committee thought it too early to make such a decision, given that the usual politicking ahead of a Party Congress hasn't really got underway yet. Easier, then, for Trong take over temporarily.

The Central Committee **unanimously agreed** to nominate only Trong for the presidency, but one would be mistaken to think he enjoys the support of all 180-odd people in this body. Many of its members rose up the Party ranks thanks to the patronage of Dung, Trong's rival in 2016. Other Central Committee members are also at odds with Trong's anti-corruption purge; some have been dismissed because of it. Let us not also forget that, in May 2013, the Central Committee rejected Trong's nomination of two Politburo candidates and, instead, nominated its own candidates.

The analyst Le Hong Hiep, writing in March 2015, **put it that** the Communist Party's “power structure now resembles a reverse pyramid with the Central Committee as the most powerful actor, followed by the Politburo and then the General Secretary.” This has, of course, slightly changed since the 2016 Party Congress. Trong has made

efforts to make the Politburo more powerful within the Party, but it would be wrong to think of the Central Committee as a rubber-stamp, sycophantic body that Trong can easily manipulate like a puppet.

It's also unreasonable to assume that the Central Committee would unanimously nominate Trong for the state presidency if it felt he was going to significantly alter how power has operated within the VCP for decades. Indeed, if all politics within the Party is only about personal power, as some analysts wrongly think, then why would the Central Committee hand over complete power to Trong if his ambition is dictatorial rule? More likely, the Central Committee agreed that Trong was the easiest and quickest option – and the nomination least likely to ramp up intra-Party tensions.

Trong is likely to step down as Party chief in 2021. However he could remain as state president afterwards. This would ensure he maintains guidance over the Party – though retired Party chiefs still wield considerable influence after they leave office. So far, there is no indication the Party will change its constitution to formally merge the state presidency and Party chief – so it would appear to be a temporary measure.

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