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## **Background Brief:**

### **Vietnam People's Army's 'Double Duty' (nhiệm vụ kép)**

**November 8, 2021**

The mobilisation of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) to combat the coronavirus pandemic does not represent the "securitization" of Vietnam's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as implied by the title of a recent commentary, "Double-Edge Sword: The Securitization of COVID Response in Vietnam" [see Appendix].

In the social sciences the term securitization refers to reclassifying a particular issue as a threat to national security in order to justify the allocation of more resources – including the military – to deal with the threat.

The outbreak of COVID-19 was no ordinary event. The World Health Organization declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic was viewed by virtually every nation on the planet as a major non-traditional security threat in its own right from the very beginning. In Vietnam's case, the response to COVID-19 was securitized long before the VPA was mobilised in large numbers in August 2021.

The mobilisation of the VPA to combat COVID-19 did not result in the displacement civilian authorities. The Ministry of Health and the National Steering Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control remain the lead agencies in the fight against COVID-19, not the Vietnam People's Army.

#### **Civil-Military Relations**

According to Abuza, "This [mobilisation of the VPA] was a stunning change in policy, and reflects just how nervous the leaders in Hanoi are right now, as the pandemic deepens, and the death toll continues to rise. It is a stark change in civil-military relations."

The mobilisation of the VPA to deal with the coronavirus represented a major change of policy from Zero-COVID to giving priority to boosting the number of people inoculated with the COVID vaccine. This policy change was not made out of apprehension but represented a rational policy response to an emerging public health emergency. This decision to mobilise the VPA to address this national emergency reflected continuity in civil-military relations in Vietnam not a "stark change."

Abuza also underscored the VPA's expanding role as "the lead agency for the provision of food... We should expect additional troops to be deployed, especially to some of the surrounding cities. The Ministry of National Defense is activating 35,000 militia."

The VPA was mobilised on 20 August to assist in combatting and controlling the outbreak of the Delta variant of the COVID-19 pandemic because it spread so quickly and was much more lethal than previous variants. A large pool of manpower was necessary to ensure that stringent lockdown measures and limitations on movement in Ho Chi Minh City and southern provinces were enforced. Because people were confined to home, the VPA was enlisted to assist with population control and deliver food.

[It should be noted, parenthetically, that Australian Defence Force personnel were mobilised to assist civil authorities in the states of Victoria and New South Wales in population control (cross border travel, restrictions on movement in hot spots, and assisting in monitoring arrivals from overseas who were placed in quarantine, etc.) during an upsurge in the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021.]



Xe thồ của Bộ đội thời bình, cover photo  
*Tạp chí Quốc phòng toàn dân*, 10/2021

Abuza then went on to make two contestable assertions. First, "State media made very clear the VPA would be used to help put down any threat that emerges to take advantage of the current situation, fears heightened by the arrival this week of US Vice President Kamala Harris." There is no evidence that the imposition of stringent public health measures (confinement to home, restrictions on movement and travel)

generated a hostile response from the general public, let alone the threat of an insurrection as Abuza alludes.<sup>1</sup>

Second, Abuza opined that the donation of 200,000 vaccines by China's People's Liberation Army to the VPA reflects "the regime's fear... [and] says a lot about the regime's expectation that more troops will be deployed as more of the country goes into extended lockdown."

#### Nervous Nellies?

Abuza's argument that Hanoi's leaders were "nervous" because of the rising death toll and feared an eruption of public anger because of severe lockdowns and therefore needed to inoculate VPA troops with Chinese vaccines is specious. In early 2020, Vietnamese Border Guard troops and VPA units along the northern border donated face masks and medical supplies to their Chinese counterparts. Later, when China donated vaccines to Vietnam, it requested that priority be given to Chinese citizens in Vietnam, communities along the northern border, and students and other persons who planned to travel to China. By the time China donated 200,000 vaccines to the VPA, Vietnam had acquired 55 million doses (see below).

#### The VPA's "Double Duty"

According to LT GEN Vũ Hải Sản, the VPA responded to a directive from the Central Military Committee (chaired by the party Secretary General) and Ministry of National Defence that designated "prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic is the army's combat mission in peacetime."<sup>2</sup>

LT GEN Sản also stressed that the VPA "strictly implements the directives of the Party, Government, Central Military Commission, the Ministry of National Defence, and the National Steering Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control, as well as regulations and guidelines of the Ministry of Health... The units closely coordinate with the Party Committees and local authorities where they are stationed."

Vietnam's decision to deploy the VPA to assist civilian authorities in combatting the fourth wave of COVID-19 did not represent a "stark change in civil-military relations." The VPA and associated militia have long been involved in assisting civilian authorities mitigate natural and environmental disasters, such as floods and tropical storms, and other emergencies.

According to the 2019 Defence White Paper (p. 79):

The VPA's units are to... actively take part in disaster preparedness and response, search and rescue, and contribute to the protection of the environment. The VPA units must continue to closely coordinate with local authorities, and actively participate in hunger elimination and poverty

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<sup>1</sup> Zachary Abuza claims that in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Vietnam Communist Party passed an emergency decree (CP-89) "authorizing the VPA to put down peasant uprisings in the Red River Delta and in the Central Highlands. It was a role and function that the VPA was clearly uncomfortable with and has eschewed since, leaving most domestic security matters to the Ministry of Public Security." This assertion is questionable and needs further research. CP-89 is likely a fragment meaning Chinh Phu (Government or Cabinet) 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Vũ Hải Sản, "Toàn quân triển khai thực hiện thắng lợi 'nhiệm vụ kép'," *Tạp chí Quốc phòng toàn dân*, 10/2021, pp. 4-7.

reduction, contributing to the improvement of the people's material and spiritual life.

In addition, VPA Economic-Defence Corps (and other military Corps and companies) are in charge of twenty-eight Economic-Defence Zones in remote areas.

In August when the military was mobilised, the Government took the decision to end its policy of Zero-Covid and to give priority to speeding up vaccinations. As a result of an international diplomatic offensive Vietnam acquired 55 million vaccine doses. This led to high vaccination rates in Ho Chi Minh City and the lifting of strict lockdown public health measures.

The VPA was mobilised on 20 August 2021. COVID restrictions in Ho Chi Minh City were lifted on 1 October (and then other southern provinces) and the VPA returned to barracks. In sum, the mobilisation of the VPA to support civilian-led efforts to combat COVID-19 represented continuity in civil-military relations to deal with a national emergency and did not represent the securitization of Vietnam's COVID response.

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## Appendix

### Double-Edged Sword: The Securitization of COVID Response in Vietnam

The stunning change in civil-military relations reflects how nervous the leaders in Hanoi are right now, as the pandemic deepens and the death toll continues to climb.

A commentary by Zachary Abuza, Radio Free Asia, August 24, 2021,



A Vietnamese soldier stands guard on a deserted road in Ho Chi Minh City, after the government imposed a stricter lockdown until Sept. 16 to stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, August 23, 2021. AFP

On Aug. 20, the Vietnamese government announced that it would start deploying troops to assist in the response to the COVID-19 Delta variant in Ho Chi Minh City and adjacent provinces.

This was a stunning change in policy, and reflects just how nervous the leaders in Hanoi are right now, as the [pandemic deepens](#), and the death toll continues to climb. It is a stark change in civil-military relations.

In 2020, Vietnam was the gold standard of the response to COVID-19. The country had limited medical facilities, but superlative public health capabilities, with a long history of responding to SARS-type viruses and other avian influenzas. The government did everything right: strict quarantines, thorough contact tracing, consistent and straightforward public health messaging, with appeals to patriotism.

And unlike the Philippines or Indonesia that had very securitized responses to the pandemic from the start, Vietnam's response was led by public health officials. Vietnam's generals were not put in charge of a medical health crisis, policy formulation, resource allocation, or enforcing quarantines through coercive

measures. Indonesia and the Philippines did all of those things, and, as a result, had the highest case rates and fatality rates in the [region](#).

While the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) opened up its bases as quarantine centers, and played a limited role in the distribution of aid to remote communities, the VPA was clearly in a supporting role. This only bolstered their already high standing in the public eye.

As a result, Vietnam weathered the first year of the pandemic exceptionally well. Until April 2021, Vietnam had only 2,900 total cases and a mere [35 deaths](#). The country remained largely open, and as such, Vietnam was the only country in Southeast Asia to see positive economic growth in 2020.

That bred complacency. Vietnam was surprisingly slow to shore up purchase contracts, get regulatory approval (even emergency-use authorizations) for vaccines, and invested too much in developing [four separate vaccines](#) indigenously, rather than working to license foreign mRNA vaccines, which it now has done.



A Vietnamese military personnel (R) checks the travel documents of a motorist at a checkpoint in Ho Chi Minh City, Aug. 23, 2021, Credit: AFP

To date, Vietnam continues to have the lowest percentage of their population fully vaccinated in all of Southeast Asia.

Then the delta variant hit and case rates soared. Vietnam has had over 355,000 cases since May, and is currently averaging between 10,000-12,000 a day. The death toll has increased to 9,014 deaths.

The outbreak is concentrated in the south, with over half of the infections and 80 percent of fatalities in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), alone, overwhelming the medical system.

Thus the government's surprise announcement of the deployment of 10,000 troops to the city and outlying regions.

Military Regions 7 (HCMC) and 9 (Mekong Delta) have combined field hospitals with some 2,300 military personnel. And 500 soldiers from Military Region 7 began enforcing lockdown on Aug. 23.

The HCMC government had already requested 6,000 men from the local Military Region 7, including troops to be deployed to enforce the city's lockdown and deliver food to needy communities.

Additional troops are being deployed from other regions: Military Region 5 (Da Nang-south central Vietnam), sent some 500 doctors and personnel. The VPA announced that it would deploy [1,000 VPA medical personnel](#) from the north (they did not specify from which particular Military Region), including 120 doctors from the VPA's medical university and 180 of their students. By Aug. 23, they doubled the number of medics to be deployed to the south, along with 30 VPA ambulances.

In addition, Military Region 7 is increasing its deployment of personnel (both medical and infantry) to neighboring provinces as the virus spreads, including 500 personnel to Binh Duong province, 300 to Tay Ninh province, and 12 military doctors to Long An province, the gateway to the Mekong Delta region.

VPA's storied reputation

Within days, more details emerged of the military's expanding role, including the announcement that the VPA became the [lead agency](#) for the provision of food. VPA units are now assisting the city's overwhelmed crematoriums. We should expect additional troops to be deployed, especially to some of the surrounding cities. The Ministry of National Defense is [activating 35,000 militia](#).

The ViPA has a storied reputation in Vietnam and is clearly one of the most trusted political institutions in the country. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in the public eye.

It could bolster the VPA's image and standing. They've been nothing but professional so far. Their distribution of food, especially to the neediest communities, has been well documented in [state media](#); reinforcing the connection between the Army and the people.

But this is not preordained and entails a degree of risk to the VPA's standing.

First, the VPA has had constabulary functions in the past. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Communist Party passed an emergency decree (CP-89) authorizing the VPA to put down peasant uprisings in the Red River Delta and in the Central Highlands. It was a role and function that the VPA was clearly uncomfortable with and has eschewed since, leaving most domestic security matters to the Ministry of Public Security.

Images of the VPA deploying armored personnel carriers and armed soldiers at checkpoints quickly made the rounds on social media, provoking public response. So it will be very important to see how the VPA handles its constabulary functions.

Second, while the VPA enjoys broad popular support, it is legally bound to defend the Communist Party first and foremost. The VPA tries to cultivate an independent image of itself, but it is a party army. Indeed, this has sparked fierce public debates, especially ahead of the 12th Party Congress in 2016, after the VCP appeared to bow to Chinese pressure in the South China Sea.

If [public anger](#) towards the government grows as the [lockdowns are extended](#), will the VPA be blamed for their association regardless of their provision of aid? If nothing else, the VPA's deployment serves as a reminder of the government's failings.

The national leadership is clearly feeling insecure. Hanoi's [constant interference](#) in the political leadership of HCMC over the past few years, in a bid to wrest control over the independent-minded megacity that subsidizes the rest of the country, rankles many. The government has concurrently primed the propaganda machine with [clearly fictitious](#) stories of model workers and stepped up the [persecution](#) of critics of the government's response. State media made very clear the VPA would be used to help put down any threat that emerges to take advantage of the current situation, fears heightened by the arrival this week of [US Vice President Kamala Harris](#).

But if one wants really to see the regime's fear, look only to the VPA's receipt of [200,000 vaccines](#) from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The first military-to-military transfer from an age-old foe, toward whom there is substantial public mistrust, says a lot about the regime's expectation that more troops will be deployed as more of the country goes into extended lockdown.

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<https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/vietnam-covid-army-08242021145453.html>.