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The Military's Resurging Influence in Vietnam

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The Vietnam People's Army (VPA) appears to be gaining leverage in Vietnam's political system. Two generals, Luong Cuong (left) and Phan Van Giang (right), were elected to the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) Politburo at its 13th National Congress. Photo: (Photos: Vanvodich/Thaohuynhnguyet via Wikimedia Commons).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Vietnam People’s Army (VPA) appears to be gaining leverage in Vietnam’s political system. Two generals, Luong Cuong and Phan Van Giang, were elected to the Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) Politburo at its 13th National Congress.
- The number of military representatives in the Party’s Central Committee also increased from 20 to 23, cementing the VPA’s status as the largest voting bloc in the Committee.
- The VPA’s increasing influence reflects the CPV’s security concerns over growing tensions in the South China Sea, which enabled the VPA to gain more leverage in the Party’s top decision-making bodies. Its political position has also benefited from the growing importance of the defence industry and the commercial success of military-run businesses such as Viettel.
- The VPA’s increasing leverage may discourage reforms towards more political freedoms and lead to greater “securitisation” of certain economic policies. It may also harden Vietnam’s stance on the South China Sea, but this does not necessarily mean that Vietnam will take a more adventurous approach to the dispute.
- As the CPV continues to subject the VPA to its tight control, the military’s influence will remain within boundaries set by the Party, and may fall again in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which concluded in early February 2021, resulted in several surprising personnel arrangements.¹ One of them was the election of Colonel General Phan Van Giang, Chief of General Staff of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) and Deputy Minister of Defence, and General Luong Cuong, Head of the VPA General Political Department, into the CPV's Politburo. This is the first time in 20 years that two VPA representatives have been elected into the Politburo. In addition, the number of military representatives in the Party's Central Committee also increased from 20 to 23, cementing the VPA's status as the largest voting bloc in the Committee.

What explains the military's increased representation in the CPV's top echelons, and hence its increasing leverage? What does this trend mean for Vietnam's political, economic and foreign policy prospects?

This paper explores these questions. It starts with a review of the military's traditional role in Vietnamese politics before analysing the factors that have led to the VPA's increasing influence over the past decade. The paper concludes by assessing this trend's implications for Vietnam.

“THE PARTY COMMANDS THE GUN”

Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong famously said in 1938 that “Every Communist must grasp the truth, ‘Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.’ Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.”² The CPV follows the same principle and has always put the VPA under tight control. Party officials and ideologues frequently criticise the idea of depoliticising the VPA and turning it into a “national army” independent of the CPV, something they consider a scheme by “hostile forces” to undermine the Party's rule.³

The CPV's constitution stipulates that the VPA is subject to the Party's “absolute, direct and comprehensive leadership”.⁴ The Party exercises its control over the VPA through different mechanisms, the most important of which is the Central Military Commission (CMC) headed by the CPV general secretary himself. The CMC supervises party affairs within the VPA, and is represented at the central level by the VPA General Political Department. All units of the VPA from the top to the bottom are subject to the Party's control, made possible by the existence of a vertical system of political units headed by political commissars.

The Party needs to maintain tight control over the VPA because the latter plays an essential role in not only national defence but also the regime's security. Although the Party has never faced the level of threat that its Chinese counterpart did in 1989 when it mobilised soldiers and tanks to crush the pro-democracy Tiananmen Square protests, the CPV views the VPA as a critical tool for the Party to deal with imminent threats against itself. Moreover, the VPA also plays an important role in the country's socio-economic development. Apart from running more than 20 major state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the VPA also manages 28 economic-defence zones⁵ located in remote border areas. These zones, run by economic-defence corps, are part and parcel of the Party's strategy to protect national sovereignty and promote socio-economic development in these less-developed areas.

The VPA's importance to the country and the CPV is reflected in its strong representation in state bodies and party governance institutions. It is allocated a significant bloc of seats in the National Assembly as well as the CPV's Central Committee and Politburo, turning it into an influential player in national politics. The VPA's representation in these bodies was markedly strong during war time and periods of heightened national security.

For example, at the second National Congress of the Party in 1951, General Vo Nguyen Giap (Minister of National Defence) and General Nguyen Chi Thanh (Head of VPA General Political Department) were elected into the seven-man-strong Politburo.⁶ They retained their seats at the third Party Congress in 1960. In addition, General Van Tien Dung (VPA Chief of General Staff) was elected as an alternate member before being promoted to full member in 1972, replacing General Thanh, who passed away in 1967. The fourth CPV Congress in 1976, held a year after the country was unified, witnessed the increased influence of the VPA with three out of 14 members of the Politburo coming from the military. They were General Vo Nguyen Giap (Minister of Defence), General Van Tien Dung (VPA Chief of General Staff), and General Chu Huy Man (Head of VPA General Political Department). The VPA continued to maintain strong influence at the fifth CPV Congress held in 1982. Specifically, General Van Tien Dung (Minister of Defence), General Chu Huy Man (Head of VPA General Political Department) and Colonel General Le Duc Anh (Deputy Minister of Defence) were elected full members of the new Politburo. In addition, Dong Sy Nguyen, who was formerly a lieutenant general and deputy minister of defence, was elected as an alternate member. The strong representation of the military can be explained by the fact that since 1979, Vietnam had been involved in prolonged armed conflicts along its border with China and in Cambodia, rendering national defence once again a top priority for the country.

After adopting economic reforms under the *Doi Moi* policy in 1986, withdrawing from Cambodia in 1989 and normalising relations with China in 1991, Vietnam entered into a phase of peace and development. Economic development became the top priority for the country and national defence became less of a concern. This gradually led to the declining role of the VPA in national politics, reflected in its reduced representation in the Politburo. At the CPV's ninth National Congress in 2001, Minister of Defence Pham Van Tra was the only military figure elected into the Politburo, setting a new norm for the next twenty years.

THE LARGEST VOTING BLOC

At the 13th CPV National Congress, the norm of electing only one VPA representative into the Politburo was broken when both Colonel General Phan Van Giang and General Luong Cuong won their seats. In addition, the VPA's representation in the Party's Central Committee also steadily increased over the past 10 years. In 2011, 18 out of 175 full members of the Committee (10.3 per cent) came from the VPA. In 2016, when the number of the Committee's full members expanded to 180, the number of VPA representatives also increased to 20 (11.1 per cent). At the 13th Congress, a total of 23 VPA representatives were elected into the Committee, accounting for 12.8 per cent of its membership. As a result, the VPA currently forms the largest voting bloc in the Central Committee, the Party's paramount executive body between its national congresses. Two major factors may account for this trend.

First, rising tensions in the South China Sea tend to enhance the VPA's bargaining power. Defending national security and sovereignty has been central to the CPV's political legitimacy, meaning that the VPA has a bigger say whenever the country's security and sovereignty are

threatened. As discussed in the previous section, this pattern was well established in the past with the VPA gaining more influence during the Vietnam War and in the 1980s when the country faced serious security threats from China and the Khmer Rouge. China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea over the past decade⁷ has deepened the CPV's security concerns, enabling the VPA to gain not only more leverage in the Party's top decision-making bodies but also more budgetary resources. For example, between 2010 and 2018, Vietnam's military spending on average was equal to 2.62 per cent of its GDP.⁸ In 2018, Vietnam was the 35th largest military spender in the world with a defence budget of around US\$5.5 billion.⁹

Second, the VPA's political position appears to have benefited from its expanding economic role. Apart from helping to develop the local economy in remote areas, the VPA's economic role also extends to a wide range of activities, including manufacturing, telecommunications, information technology, banking, transportation and construction. There are two main groups of military-run businesses. The first is defence companies which mostly produce weapons and defence equipment for the VPA. They are managed by the General Department of Defence Industry under the Ministry of Defence. The second includes businesses which serve both the VPA and civilian clients. Vietnam's 2009 Defence White Paper listed ten such major businesses,¹⁰ the most notable of which include Viettel, a telecommunications and industrial conglomerate; Military Bank; and Sai Gon New Port, the biggest container terminal operator in Vietnam. In recent years, these companies' commercial success and their increasing contribution to national economic development have helped enhance the VPA's reputation and influence. Viettel, for example, has been considered a national champion in developing Vietnam's defence industry and high-tech capabilities, especially 5G technologies. In 2016, Major General Nguyen Manh Hung, then general director of Viettel and currently minister of information and communications, was elected into the CPV Central Committee, the first time for a military business leader. At the 13th CPV Congress, Lieutenant General Tran Hong Minh, Head of the General Department of Defence Industry, also won a seat in the Central Committee.

In addition, internal competition between Luong Cuong and Phan Van Giang for the Politburo membership and the defence minister position was another important factor that led to the election of both men into the Politburo. Cuong initially had more advantage over Giang because he held a more senior rank and was elected into the Party's Secretariat in 2016, while Giang was only a Central Committee member. Moreover, Giang, born in October 1960, was overaged and originally ineligible for Politburo membership. As such, Cuong was in a better position to become the only Politburo member representing the military, which should have paved the way for him to become the new defence minister. However, there was growing consensus within the VPA leadership that the minister position should be given to a commander rather than a political general, especially given that the outgoing minister, Ngo Xuan Lich, was himself a political general. There was reportedly fierce competition between the two men in the run-up to the 13th CPV Congress. In the end, to accommodate both sides, the Party decided to extend an age limit exemption to Giang, which enabled him to become a Politburo member and later minister of defence. Cuong, meanwhile, remains as head of the VPA General Political Department.

In 2016, there was also competition between Ngo Xuan Lich, then head of the VPA General Political Department, and Do Ba Ty, then Chief of General Staff, for the Politburo membership and defence minister position. However, only Lich was eventually elected into the Politburo. This time around, the Party's decision to grant Politburo membership to both Cuong and Giang is therefore an indication of the VPA's growing leverage.

GREATER IMPLICATIONS

It remains to be seen if the election of two military representatives into the CPV Politburo is just a one-off development or a new norm to be repeated in subsequent party congresses. Similarly, it is unclear if the VPA will be able to maintain its current all-time strong representation in the Party's Central Committee in the future. However, if the South China Sea dispute intensifies and military-run businesses continue to contribute substantially to Vietnam's economic development, VPA generals will likely be able to maintain their current level of leverage.

There is little evidence that the military's increasing influence will lead to major changes in Vietnam's political, economic and foreign policies. However, minor or gradual shifts may be possible. Politically, despite its increasing leverage, the VPA will remain subject to the CPV's total control. However, normally seen as more conservative and security-minded, VPA generals, with their stronger say in both the Politburo and Central Committee, will endorse prudent approaches to political issues, which may eventually slow down certain reforms, especially those towards more political freedoms.

Economically, there are indications that the "securitisation" of certain economic policies may slow down Vietnam's economic growth. For example, the 2020 Law on Investment mentioned the word "national defence" 12 times compared to six times in the 2014 version. In particular, the 2020 law introduced new provisions¹¹ to subject certain investment projects and share acquisitions, especially those by foreign investors, to the approval of the Ministry of Defence. Consequently, there have been complaints from some investors about delays in the licensing process. If the Vietnamese government does not introduce timely bylaws to provide clearer guidance and simplify the approval process, such regulations will likely worsen Vietnam's business environment and hurt its economic growth in the long run. At the same time, while military-run businesses contribute to Vietnam's overall economic development, their growth may crowd out private investors in certain sectors and contribute to an unlevel playing field. This is because defence companies, through their strong connections with the military and government authorities, normally enjoy an unparalleled advantage in getting access to capital, land and other policy incentives.

Finally, the VPA's influence on Vietnam's overall foreign policy will remain strong, but its increased leverage in domestic politics is unlikely to lead to major shifts in Vietnam's foreign relations. The VPA's stronger say in the CPV's top policy-making bodies may harden Vietnam's stance on the South China Sea, but this does not necessarily mean that Vietnam will take a more adventurous approach to the dispute. Although Vietnam is determined to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity, VPA leaders, who have gone through multiple costly wars in the past, tend to favour the peaceful resolution of disputes and avoid armed conflicts where possible. This is in line with Vietnam's focus on domestic development, which depends on its ability to maintain peace and stability. Therefore, although Vietnam fiercely opposed China's planting of the *Haiyang Shiyou 981* oil rig in its exclusive economic zone in 2014, which Vietnam saw as a serious infringement, it has since adopted a more restrained approach to China's other provocations in its South China Sea waters.

In sum, the VPA's increasing leverage in the CPV's top policy-making bodies may have some impact on Vietnam's political, economic and foreign policy outlook. However, such impact will likely be moderate and limited. As the CPV continues to "command the gun", the VPA's

influence, though increasing in recent years, will remain within boundaries set by the Party. In the future, the generals' influence may fall again if the South China Sea dispute cools down, or if the Party's top leadership sees potential problems arising from the VPA's growing clout.

¹ For an analysis of these unconventional arrangements, see Le Hong Hiep, "The CPV's 15th Plenum: "The Art of the Possible" in Vietnamese Politics", *Fulcrum*, 18 January 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-cpvs-15th-plenum-the-art-of-the-possible-in-vietnamese-politics/>

² "Problems of War and Strategy", *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. II, pp. 224-225, available at *Marxists Internet Archive* (transcription by the Maoist Documentation Project): https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_12.htm

³ See, for example, "'Phi chính trị hóa' Quân đội - một thủ đoạn không mới, nhưng phải luôn cảnh giác", *Tap chí Quốc phòng Toàn dân*, 13 April 2018, <http://tapchiquptd.vn/vi/phong-chong-dbhb-tu-dien-bien-tu-chuyen-hoa/phi-chinh-tri-hoa-quan-doi-mot-thu-doan-khong-moi-nhung-phai-luon-canhh-giac/11528.html>; CPV, "Nâng cao cảnh giác, đập tan âm mưu 'phi chính trị hóa' Quân đội, 15 March 2021, <https://dangcongsan.vn/bao-ve-nen-tang-tu-tuong-cua-dang/nang-cao-canhh-giac-dap-tan-am-muu-phi-chinh-tri-hoa-quan-doi-576303.html>.

⁴ Article 25 of the CPV constitution (in Vietnamese) available at <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/van-kien-tu-lieu-ve-dang/dieu-le-dang/dieu-le-dang-do-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-xi-cua-dang-thong-qua-3431>

⁵ For a list of these economic-defence zones, see Ministry of Defence, *2019 Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2019), pp. 125–27.

⁶ Six more members were added to the Politburo in 1955-1956.

⁷ Some examples of China's growing assertiveness include its decision to plant giant oil rig *Haiyang Shiyou 981* in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in 2014, its construction and militarisation of seven artificial islands in the Spratlys, and its threat to attack Vietnamese outposts in the Spratlys in 2017.

⁸ According to Vietnam's 2019 defence white paper, Vietnam's defence budget as share of GDP in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 was 2.23, 2.82, 2.88, 2.69, 2.69, 2.72, 2.64, 2.51, and 2.36 per cent, respectively.

⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Trends In World Military Expenditure, 2018*, April 2019.

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence, *Quốc Phòng Việt Nam [Vietnam's National Defence]* (Ha Noi: Ministry of Defence, 2009), p. 114.

¹¹ These provisions are found in articles 24, 26, 32 of the law, which is available (in Vietnamese) at <http://datafile.chinhphu.vn/file-remote-v2/DownloadServlet?filePath=vbpq/2020/07/61.signed.pdf>

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