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Vietnam's Peacekeeping Contributions: Drivers and Prospects

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Vietnamese forces taking part in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in South Sudan march with flags before their departure in Hanoi on 27 April 2022. Nhac NGUYEN/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Despite being a newcomer, Vietnam has emerged as an active contributor to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKO).
- In the past, Vietnam was sceptical of such peacekeeping operations, but its quest for international integration under the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy gradually socialised Vietnam into these peacekeeping norms.
- Vietnam's growing peacekeeping commitments are also motivated by perceived gains from joining UN PKO, namely strengthened national defence capabilities and enhanced international reputation.
- Vietnam aims to scale up peacekeeping participation but will abstain from coercive or combat activities.
- Championing women's participation in peacekeeping could be a niche diplomacy area for Vietnam, given the country's success in this regard and its efforts in advancing the UN agenda on women, peace and security.

INTRODUCTION

Participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations (UN PKO) has been a major item in Vietnam's foreign policy and defence diplomacy over the past decade. In 2013, the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) ratified the Master Plan on Vietnam's Participation in UN PKO,¹ and the Vietnamese National Assembly subsequently amended the Constitution to allow armed soldiers to be deployed overseas.² In 2014, Vietnam established the Vietnam Peacekeeping Centre—which was later upgraded to the Vietnam Department of Peacekeeping Operations (VDPO)—and began sending officers to peacekeeping missions. In November 2020, the National Assembly unanimously passed Resolution 130/2020/QH14, providing a comprehensive legal framework for Vietnamese troops to engage in peacekeeping activities.³

Despite being a newcomer, Vietnam has emerged as an active contributor to UN PKO. Since 2014, Vietnam has deployed 512 personnel to UN headquarters and peacekeeping missions in South Sudan and Central Africa.⁴ These include 76 military officers (military advisors, observers and liaison officers), 252 medical personnel of level-2 field hospitals, and 184 sappers.

This paper analyses the rationale behind Vietnam's peacekeeping contributions. We posit two drivers behind this trend: Vietnam's socialisation into peacekeeping norms and its expectation to strengthen its national defence capabilities and enhance its international reputation. The paper will also assess Vietnam's future peacekeeping contributions.

VIETNAM'S SOCIALISATION INTO PEACEKEEPING NORMS

Vietnam's recent enthusiasm with regard to peacekeeping contributions was a complete departure from its previous position. In 1993, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali raised the idea of Vietnam participating in UN PKO, but Hanoi was not fond of the suggestion.⁵ From 1975 until 1994, Vietnam even eschewed paying its annual peacekeeping levy as a UN member.⁶ One apparent reason behind Vietnam's indifference to UN PKO for such a long time was the lack of resources for external commitments. Facing several challenges to its post-war economic management, Vietnam was preoccupied with domestic issues and thus could not afford to pursue what it saw as expensive policy objectives. But even if Vietnam had managed to overcome the problem of insufficient resources, it would still have been reluctant to support UN PKO for other reasons. In a piece published on the website of VDPO, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Hoai Trung lists three considerations that informed Vietnam's former unfavourable view of UN PKO.⁷ First, due to the country's historical experience of foreign invasions, Vietnam was averse to sending troops overseas and perceived peacekeeping activities as a tool for the United States and Western nations to infringe upon other countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, Vietnam was concerned about several risks associated with UN PKO such as potential political complications, risks to human lives, and risks of great power manipulation. Third, Vietnam was new to this field and lacked relevant knowledge, experience and participation capacity.

However, these reservations gradually dissipated as Vietnam opened up and embarked on international integration under its market-based economic reforms since the late 1980s. Back then, in order to ensure its survival, Vietnam aimed at creating a stable and peaceful external environment conducive to its internal socio-economic development. Thus, improving its external relations toward peace and cooperation became a foreign policy priority. At its 7th National Congress in 1991, the CPV stated that Vietnam “wants to become friends with all countries in the world community.”⁸ The once-pariah state then embarked on a quest to mend ties with neighbouring and Western countries. This culminated in Vietnam’s accession to ASEAN in 1995 and its diplomatic normalisation with the United States in the same year. Subsequently, the Political Report of the 9th CPV National Congress in 2001 stated that Vietnam would multilateralise and diversify its relations and be “ready to become a reliable friend and partner to countries in the world community, striving for peace, independence, and development.”⁹

With the economic benefits and diplomatic success attained under the new foreign policy, Vietnam gained the confidence to deepen engagement with the broader international community. By the latter half of the 2000s, Vietnam had entered a phase of “proactive international integration”, moving beyond economic cooperation and venturing into other areas. The 10th CPV National Congress in 2006 reiterated the principles of multilateralisation and diversification of foreign relations but further stressed that Vietnam ought to “participate proactively in regional and international mechanisms” and conduct “defence and security diplomacy.”¹⁰ Subsequent party congresses continued to reaffirm these foreign policy directions, which provided the conditions for Vietnam to be socialised into peacekeeping norms.

Hanoi began seriously considering the possibility of participating in UN PKO in 2003 when Indonesia, the ASEAN Chair that year, suggested the formation of a regional peacekeeping force.¹¹ By that time, ASEAN’s five original members—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore—had all contributed to peacekeeping missions. While remaining hesitant, in 2004 and 2005, Vietnamese officials frequently alluded to the possibility of Vietnam contributing to UN PKO in response to ASEAN discussions on the topic and as a way to strengthen the country’s bid for non-permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).¹² From 2005, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) began organising interagency groups on UN PKO, which comprised of representatives from various bodies, such as MOFA, Ministry of National Defence, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Finance, Government Office, Office of the National Assembly, and Office of the Central Committee of the CPV.¹³ These groups conducted field trips and joined international conferences to study UN peacekeeping missions and the experiences of other countries, thereafter advising MOFA and the Politburo on Vietnam’s participation in peacekeeping activities. Also from 2005, Vietnam People’s Army (VPA) officers started to be sent to overseas training courses on peacekeeping, which exposed them to international and regional peacekeeping norms.¹⁴

Vietnam’s non-permanent membership in the UNSC (2008-09) also deepened its interest in UN PKO. Having gained a better understanding of the critical role of blue-helmet soldiers in providing security and protecting civilians in conflict zones, Vietnamese representatives

to the UN frequently voiced their country's support for peacekeeping activities.¹⁵ A concomitant perception shift occurred at home. Vietnam's 2009 Defence White Paper became the country's first defence white paper that mentioned peacekeeping, noting that "Vietnam greatly appreciates the role of the UN and regards the peacekeeping operations as an important function of the UN."¹⁶

Through deepened interactions with the international community, Vietnam was convinced that peacekeeping participation would not be at odds but compatible with its overarching foreign policy goals of peace, diversification, multilateralisation, and proactive international integration. Today, Vietnam has fully reckoned that if it wants to be seen as "a responsible member of the international community," it needs to become a peacekeeper donor country and internalise peacekeeping norms. This thinking is reflected in Vietnam's 2019 Defence White Paper, which notes that:

*As a responsible member of the international community, Viet Nam is keen on fulfilling its duties while actively cooperating with other nations to address emerging security issues, contributing to the protection of peace and stability in the region and the world. Viet Nam appreciates the role of the UN in peacekeeping operations and prevention of conflict and war. Viet Nam upholds standards and norms of international relations set forth in the Charter of the United Nations [emphasis added].*¹⁷

PERCEIVED BENEFITS FROM PEACEKEEPING PARTICIPATION

Two perceived benefits are behind Hanoi's peacekeeping commitments: Enhanced national defence capabilities and increased international reputation.

Enhanced National Defence Capabilities

Vietnamese defence officials believe that peacekeeping participation can help strengthen the country's defence capabilities. An article on the website of VDPO suggests that Vietnam's venture into peacekeeping contributes to "the building of [a] revolutionary, formal, elite and increasingly modern People's Army."¹⁸ One reason is that Vietnam's peacekeeping cooperation with other countries attracts foreign defence-related resources and assistance for the VPA. At a conference reviewing Vietnam's involvement in peacekeeping operations from 2012 to 2020, Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh, then-Deputy Defence Minister, asserted that participating in UN PKO had become a pillar in the VPA's defence diplomacy and a spotlight in its multilateral cooperation.¹⁹ So far, Vietnam has signed memorandums of understanding on peacekeeping cooperation with nine countries, the UN and the European Union.²⁰ Some partners, such as the United States, France, Japan and Australia, have supported Vietnam with training, facilities, equipment, vehicles and transportation of peacekeepers to UN PKO.²¹ Vietnamese personnel can therefore acquire defence-related experiences and foreign-language skills necessary for their missions from foreign partners. Peacekeeping partnerships also serve as confidence-

building measures between the VPA and other armies, laying the ground for future cooperation and interoperability in other areas.

Participation in UN PKO also facilitates Vietnam's exchange of best practices and critical information with other countries on a wide range of civil and defence matters, especially in the context of modern warfare and traditional and non-traditional security threats. As Senior Lieutenant General Vinh noted, Vietnam's greater involvement in international security affairs through UN PKO complements the national strategy of "preventing the risks of war and conflict from afar."²² The strategy entails proactively identifying and neutralising potential threats to Vietnam's national interests at an early stage, during peacetime, and with the long-term goal of preserving a stable and peaceful environment for internal socio-economic development. By gaining insights on the ground and through UN discussions on peacekeeping missions, Vietnamese policymakers can better grasp the causes of conflict and ways to manage them, thereby refining national defence strategy. In other words, Vietnam sees peacekeeping participation as a means to shape external conditions in its favour.

Increased International Reputation

Vietnam's contribution to UN PKO can also help the country gain credibility as a responsible UN member, augmenting its overall global diplomatic standing. Notably, Vietnam's growing peacekeeping profile was a factor behind its successful bid for the UNSC non-permanent membership for the 2020-21 term. According to Dang Dinh Quy, Permanent Representative of Vietnam to the UN, Vietnam's peacekeeping activities elevate its image and relations with the UN while providing critical information for the country to fulfil its UNSC duties effectively.²³ Vietnam has also been recognised for promoting women's empowerment in peacekeeping. A 2020 background paper by the Vietnam office of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) notes that the country is a successful case regarding increasing the proportion of women in deployed troops, at 16 per cent.²⁴ This figure is higher than the UN's recommended proportion of 15 per cent—a fact frequently cited by Vietnamese media and officials. The UN has chosen Vietnam as the venue to organise several training programmes for peacekeepers from regional countries. This decision reflects the organisation's high regard for Hanoi's growing peacekeeping profile.

In addition to peacekeeping duties, the VPA tasks its peacekeepers with an auxiliary mission of acting as "peace messengers" to promote the virtues of "Uncle Ho's soldiers",²⁵ the VPA's "tradition of heroism", and positive aspects of the Vietnamese nation and people.²⁶ Outside of their official missions, Vietnamese blue helmets often volunteer to help the host countries' people with daily tasks, provide education for local children, and organise programmes to introduce Vietnamese culture and cuisine to the local population. These activities help burnish Vietnam's image as a reliable, friendly and peace-loving nation.

Since improving international prestige is an objective of its peacekeeping contributions, Vietnam is attuned to how its peacekeepers have been lauded for their dedication and professionalism. According to President Nguyen Xuan Phuc, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told him that Vietnamese personnel had fulfilled their duties in an

excellent manner and acted as exemplars for peacekeepers from other countries.²⁷ In an international symposium, Deputy Defense Minister Hoang Xuan Chien remarked that Vietnamese female soldiers had been “highly appreciated by the United Nations for their professionalism, ability to fulfil missions and becoming a highlight in many UN activities in field missions.”²⁸ Meanwhile, Major General Hoang Kim Phung, Director of VDPO, claimed that the UN’s and international friends’ recognition of Vietnam’s contributions was his department’s “biggest success.”²⁹ These statements highlight how attentive leaders in Hanoi are to international perception of Vietnam as a peacekeeping contributor.

PROSPECTS OF VIETNAM’S PEACEKEEPING CONTRIBUTIONS

In the coming years, boosting peacekeeping contributions will remain a major diplomatic and defence task for Vietnam. The Political Report of the 13th CPV National Congress in 2021 reaffirms the Party’s vision for national defence and foreign policy priorities, which emphasises a peaceful external environment, protection of the Homeland from afar, enhanced defence diplomacy, and effective and proactive participation in multilateral organisations, including the UN.³⁰ It specifically notes that Vietnam should step up international cooperation and integration on defence and security, and contribute positively and effectively to UN PKO. President Phuc, who is also Chairman of the National Defence and Security Council, has asked the VPA to study and participate in more peacekeeping fields, enlarge the number of peacekeepers, and explore more operating geographical areas.³¹

In terms of future personnel deployments, Vietnam is considering foot soldiers, police officers, and helicopter troops.³² Hanoi is keen on enhancing the effectiveness of its peacekeeping contributions by focusing on capacity-building, aiming to be a leading nation in the region in the field. Notably, Vietnam has sought support from the UN to upgrade its peacekeeping training centre into an Asia-Pacific regional facility, focusing on engineering, medical, foreign language and legal training.³³ Going forward, Vietnam should conduct more policy research, increase budget for VDPO, and expand international collaboration on peacekeeping to realise these objectives and further enhance the performance of its blue helmets.

At the same time, Vietnam will abstain from coercive and combat activities, limiting its participation to consulting, humanitarian and logistical tasks. The country is cautious about appearing to side with a coalition against another country, which would contravene its key defence principles and hamper its endeavour to befriend all nations. Hanoi has therefore reached an agreement with the UN to allow Vietnamese personnel to retain the right to forgo missions that would affect Vietnam’s bilateral relationships or go against Vietnamese soldiers’ mannerisms.³⁴

Acknowledging the vital role of women in different stages of peacebuilding and post-war reconstruction,³⁵ Vietnam has actively advanced the UN agenda on women, peace and security (WPS). From November 2020 to March 2022, Vietnam and UN agencies co-

organised four international conferences on WPS, three of which took place during Vietnam's tenures as non-permanent member of the UNSC (2020-21) and ASEAN Chair (2020).³⁶ As a co-chair of the Expert Working Group on UN Peacekeeping under the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (2021-23), Hanoi has also been working to ensure that the topic of women in peacekeeping is high on the group's agenda.³⁷ Building upon its success in increasing the proportion of female personnel in the peacekeeping force, Vietnam now aims to bring the percentage of women working at level-2 field hospitals from the current 21 per cent to 25 per cent.³⁸ Given its experience and efforts in implementing WPS, Vietnam should designate the promotion of women's role in peacekeeping as a niche area within its multilateral and defence diplomacy. Doing so will reinforce Vietnam's image as a responsible member of the UN while making a meaningful impact toward the betterment of global security governance.

ENDNOTES

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³⁵ Anh Sơn, “Liên Hợp Quốc Cần Quan Tâm Thúc Đẩy Thực Hiện Chương Trình Nghị Sự về Phụ Nữ, Hòa Bình và an Ninh,” *Báo Thế Giới và Việt Nam*, July 12, 2021, <https://baoquocte.vn/lien-hop-quoc-can-quan-tam-thuc-day-thuc-hien-chuong-trinh-nghi-su-ve-phu-nu-hoa-binh-va-an-ninh-167168.html>; Margaret, “Women and Peacekeeping in ASEAN Countries,” 25.

³⁶ These are *International Symposium on ‘The Role of Women and Prevention of COVID-19 Pandemic in Peacekeeping Operations’* (November 2020), *International Conference on ‘Strengthening Women’s Role in Building and Sustaining Peace: From Commitments to Results’* (December 2020), *International Conference on ‘Accelerating Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: The Role of National Action Plans’* (December 2021), and

International Workshop on 'Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans: International Experiences and Recommendations for Vietnam' (March 2022).

³⁷ Margaret, "Women and Peacekeeping in ASEAN Countries," 25.

³⁸ Hoàng Thùy, "Tăng Tỷ Lệ Nữ Tham Gia Giữ Hòa Bình," September 22, 2021, <https://vnexpress.net/tang-ty-le-nu-tham-gia-gin-giu-hoa-binh-4360562.html>.

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