

PEOPLE'S OR PARTY'S ARMY IN VIETNAM?

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While the Vietnam Communist Party's grip over the army remains strong, Zachary Abuza examines the growing calls challenging the Vietnam People's Army's duty to defend the ruling party over national interests—calls sharpened by Hanoi's perceived climbdown in the standoff with China in the South China Sea last year.

On December 22, 2014, the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) celebrated its 70th anniversary amidst a time of great change in its structure and capabilities. With Vietnam's security strategy entailing creating a credible deterrent against China, no country in Southeast Asia has brought more sophisticated power projection capabilities on line in as short a time as Vietnam, whose military spending increased by 270 percent between 2004 and 2013. Yet, little analysis has been done on how the VPA's military doctrine or its relationship with the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) has changed. Like the Chinese People's Liberation Army, the VPA is a party-army. But while the VCP leadership insists that it will always maintain total control over the military, there are growing calls to turn it into a more professional and apolitical force rather than one aligned with defending the primacy of the VCP.

People's or Party's Army?

During the drafting of the 2013 Constitution (to replace the 1992 Constitution), a group of activists known as Petition 72 challenged the inclusion of Article 4, which gives the VCP "vanguard" status in the country, as well as calling for a multi-party system. They also challenged the legal relationship between the Party and the VPA: "The armed forces must be loyal to the Homeland and the people, not to any organizations," and that "the duty of the armed forces is to protect the people and defend the homeland, not to defend any political party."

The signatories of Petition 72 were accused of abusing their "democratic freedoms," i.e. Article 258 of the Criminal Code that is usually used against dissidents. Yet, the signatories of Petition 72 were not random dissidents; of the original 72 (it grew to 6,000), 80 percent were VCP members. Not only did the Party reject Petition 72, but Chapter IV, Article 65 of the 2013 Constitution, actually

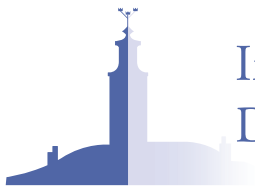
went even further in obligating the VPA to defend the Party.

The VCP has more than the constitution to enshrine its position: the vast majority of the officer corps are Party members and the VCP exerts direct control through the Central Military Commission, headed by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and three other Politburo members. The 18 remaining members are uniformed military. The VCP's own statutes state clearly that the VPA is "under the Party's absolute, direct, comprehensive leadership." The VPA's own oath further states that all uniformed personnel must "Sacrifice everything for the Vietnam Fatherland, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam."

Petition 20

The issue of Party control over the military was revived in mid-2014 due to growing Chinese assertiveness and a standoff over the placement of an oil drilling platform in contested waters. Following anti-Chinese riots, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi made a high-level visit to Hanoi in June 2014 and warned the government not to escalate or internationalize the conflict. Vietnam backed down and didn't file an arbitration suit, parallel to the Philippines.

Vietnam's active blogosphere erupted that the VCP had put its own interests ahead of national interests. The venerated VPA was thrust in an unwelcome spotlight: bowing to Party dictates but seemingly caving in to Chinese pressure and claims over sovereignty. And since then, bloggers have focused on the 1990 secret summit between members of the two Politburos (which paved the way for the restoration of diplomatic ties between China and Vietnam the following year) as the first of many conspiracies in which the VCP has betrayed the national interest. These continued in mid-December 2014, when a senior Chinese



Politburo member visited Hanoi, focusing on party-party relations.

On September 2, 2014, a group of retired officers comprised of six former general officers and 14 senior colonels, sent a letter to President Truong Tan Sang and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung questioning the VPA's responsibility to defend the VCP, not the people. In particular the signatories, known as Petition 20, were vociferous in their criticism of the use of security forces to crack down on demonstrations where citizens were simply exercising their legal rights. As many land leases enacted at the start of the reform program 30-years ago are now expiring, there have been a wave of land and property repossessions by corrupt officials, often resulting in standoffs with security forces. The Petition 20 signatories argued "we need to immediately end the mobilization of this force against the people, such as for land evictions and dispersing peaceful rallies." The signatories were also very critical of the government's handling of the maritime standoff with China. They called on the security forces to focus on real threats: "The objective in battle for the military is to defeat forces which threaten our sovereignty and integrity of the nation at present and in the future."

The Party Counters

The issue of the constitutional separation has become a more salient one for bloggers and cyber dissidents and it led to a very public response from Ministry of National Defense official, Major General Nguyen Ba Duong. Duong rejected the idea of a completely apolitical army and in a rare move in the mainstream media, he even acknowledged the growing chorus of people calling for the delinking of the VCP and VPA; something that is rarely done in public. However, Duong warned that the depoliticization of the military was what led to the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

These themes have all been taken up with increased urgency by senior party leaders. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong used the opportunity of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the VPA, to reinforce the message of party leadership over the armed forces. He, too, warned against efforts to establish an "apolitical army," which he described as a "peaceful evolution" scheme "hatched by hostile forces."

Interestingly, however, General Nguyen Chi Vinh, a deputy minister and one of the senior most uniformed

personnel as well as the leading architect of multilateral military cooperation, barely mentioned the Party in an interview he gave to one of Vietnam's leading (and pro-reformist) dailies *Thanh Nien* on the 70th anniversary, which focused on the urgency of military modernization and national defense: "The first challenge is building a military solid enough to protect the fatherland." While maintenance of social stability was the VPA's second responsibility, he did not explicitly state the defense of the Party.

The VCP continues to equate regime survival with national survival. And the regime cannot survive without a monopoly on coercive powers. Whereas VCP leadership over the VPA remains strong, the regime has been rattled by dissent from within the security forces and faces mounting pressure from citizen activists. And while to date none of the signatories of Petition 20 has been arrested, a crack-down on further dissent is nonetheless likely ahead of the 12th Party Congress in early 2016.

Yet, if the public views the Party as not doing enough to defend the country's sovereignty, particularly as China tries to change the status quo in the South China Sea, then both the Party's legitimacy and control over the VPA will be called into question. Indeed, this is Hanoi's real threat in the South China Sea.

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