

Conference on Prospects for the Constituencies of Vietnam in Changing Times
Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., November 16, 2001

The Vietnam People's Army as a Constituency in the Political System of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Carlyle A Thayer
Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
Honolulu, Hawaii
thayerc@apcss.org
thayerz001@hawaii.rr.com

Conference on
Prospects for the Constituencies of Vietnam in Changing Times
Organized by
The Vietnamese Professionals of America, Inc.

Caldwell Hall
Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.
November 16, 2001

Vietnamese Professionals of America, Inc.
Url: www.vpa-inc.org, email: vpausa@attglobal.net, ph: (703) 256 4145

ABSTRACT

The Vietnam People's Army as a Constituency in the
Political System of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

By Carlyle A. Thayer

This paper examines the changing nature of civil-military relations in Vietnam since unification in 1975. During the last quarter century the Vietnam People's Army has emerged as a more autonomous actor in Vietnam's political system. The army now plays a greater role in economic and commercial activities, nation-building and internal security. The military's increasing prominence was epitomized by the election of former army political officer General Le Kha Phieu to the post of party Secretary General in 1997. Despite Phieu's lackluster performance that led to his retirement in 2001, the military has not suffered a loss of political influence. Military representation actually increased on the party's Central Committee elected by the 9th congress.

The VPA is one of the four main organizations supporting Vietnam's socialist political system. The other three pillars are the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP), the state apparatus and the Vietnam Fatherland Front.

According to party statutes the VPA is placed "under the absolute, direct leadership of the party in all respects... The Party leads and builds the VPA and Vietnam People's Public Security Force to make them firm and strong politically, ideologically and organizationally. They are absolutely loyal to the fatherland..." In 1992 the state Constitution was amended and the VPA was given the additional duty of defending "the socialist regime." At the recent 9th party congress the VCP reaffirmed that the VPA was charged with the responsibility for carrying out two broad strategic tasks: defense of the nation and socialist construction. In terms of classical civil-military relations theory, Vietnam represents a case of "subjective control" of the armed forces.

The VPA is required to participate in Vietnam's political process. At the elite level, VPA leaders simultaneously occupy high-level party and state posts. Senior VPA officers serve on the party's Central Committee, Secretariat and Politburo. The VPA is guaranteed bloc membership on the party Central Committee. At the most recent party congress in April, for example, the military's representation on the Central Committee rose from 8.3% (eighth congress) to 9.3%. According to some estimates over two-thirds of the officer corps and nearly all commanders above company level are members of the VCP. The VPA has long served as a manpower pool for the Vietnam Communist Party. In brief, VPA officers are dual-role elites.

Military personnel are permitted to stand for election to the National Assembly. Approximately ten percent of deputies come from the VPA. They serve on the National Assembly's policy committees and executive organs. The portfolio of Minister of National Defense is always held by a serving military officer.

The VPA has enormous influence in society at large. As a result of universal conscription, which has been in force since 1960, an estimated one out of every three adult males serves in a military organization either in the regular forces and reserves or in various paramilitary groups. Demobilized soldiers are appointed to leadership posts in their local communities; they serve on cooperative boards and on people's committees. Vietnam's four million strong community of veterans is represented by a mass organization that is a constituent member of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. The Vietnam War Veterans' Association plays an active role in vetting military candidates for election to the National Assembly.

The VPA has been involved in economic roles since it was founded. This role has expanded with the passage of time from production for its own needs to reconstruction and development activities and finally to commercial operations. In recent years the VPA's role has been expanded to include defense-economic zones in remote areas. Vietnam's situation may be contrasted with that of China. In 1998 party leader Jiang Zemin was able to successfully order the People's Liberation Army to divest itself of its commercial enterprises. In contrast, there has been no attempt in Vietnam to curtail the VPA's involvement in commercial activities.

As noted above, as a result of the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in 1992 the VPA's role was expanded to include ensuring the maintenance of internal order and security. These processes – increased involvement in commercial activities and socialist construction and internal security duties – have led to an alteration of civil-military relations. Party control over the military has weakened and the VPA is now playing a more autonomous role in the national political system.

The Vietnam People's Army as a Constituency in the Political System of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Carlyle A. Thayer

“The Vietnam Communist Party has absolute, direct, and comprehensive leadership over the Vietnam People’s Army.”

Chapter VI, Article 25, 2001 Party Statutes

Introduction

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is an authoritarian Leninist one-party state. The principal components of its political system include four main pillars: the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP), the state apparatus, the Vietnam People’s Army (VPA) and the web of officially sanctioned mass organizations and associations affiliated with the Vietnam Father Front (VFF). Vietnam’s Leninist political system is an example of “mono-organizational socialism.”¹ By this is meant a system in which the communist party controls the leadership of the state and all organized groups, including the military, and uses this control to fashion and shape their policies and activities.

Under *doi moi* there has been a gradual breakdown of the “mono-organizational” structures of Vietnam’s political system in the face of socio-economic change. This has resulted in a considerable loosening of the state’s grip on Vietnamese society. Party-military relations are also undergoing a process of transformation, as the Vietnam People’s Army becomes a more modern and professional force. This process may be less observable than the dramatic changes taking place in society at large.

The argument of this paper is that the Vietnam People’s Army is a constituency within Vietnam’s political system in the normal meaning of this term. The VPA is an essential part of the political system; as a group it is entitled to representation on the VCP’s Central Committee. The military also provides candidates for election to the National Assembly. In other words, the Vietnamese military represents a distinct electorate, with its own interests, that are given representation within the larger political system.

Because of the closed nature of Vietnam’s political system, it is difficult to determine how the military articulates its special interests and influences the decision-making process.² For purposes of analysis the Vietnam People’s Army

¹Carlyle A. Thayer, “Mono-Organizational Socialism and the State,” in Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Doug J. Porter, eds., *Vietnam’s Rural Transformation*. Transitions: Asia and Asian America Series, Boulder: Westview, 1995, 39-64.

²For a recent assessment see Thaveeporn Vasavakul, “Vietnam: From Revolutionary Heroes to Red Entrepreneurs,” in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 336-356.

includes not only active duty personnel and reserves, but those employed in military-owned enterprises (*doanh nghiệp trong quân đội*) and national defense industries, veterans and the families of soldiers who died while performing national service. Active duty personnel include the main forces, local forces, and militia and self-defense forces.

The Army and the Political System

The military in Vietnam ranks as one of the four main centers of power, that include the party, state bureaucracy and mass organizations. At the elite level, VPA leaders simultaneously occupy high-level party and state posts. Senior VPA officers also serve on the party's Central Committee, Secretariat and Politburo. It is estimated that seventy per cent of all VPA officers concurrently hold party membership³ and that "almost all of the officers in... [the VPA] from company level upward have been party members."⁴ For this reason, Vietnam's military leaders may be termed "dual role elites."

From its very beginnings the VPA has been led by what might be called, "political generals".⁵ These men were first and foremost party activists and political revolutionaries who began their careers as teenagers. They engaged in a decade or more of anti-colonial agitation, during a period when the party had no regular armed forces. It was these revolutionaries who emerged from the underground or from French prisons to assume command over the VPA in its formative years.

The influence of these political generals has been indelibly stamped on the Vietnamese military. The VPA is quite literally a "people's army", as its name suggests, rooted in the peasantry of rural Vietnam. This facet is reflected in the structure of the army that is organized on three levels: militia and self-defense forces at village and city ward level, local forces which serve at provincial and inter-provincial level, and the main forces which are assigned to military regions within Vietnam (or which once saw service abroad in neighboring Laos and Cambodia).⁶ The former are less well armed and trained and constitute a current link with Vietnam's guerrilla heritage. The main forces, backed by a large ready reserve, form the professional core of the military.

³General Nguyen Dinh Uoc, deputy director of the Institute of Military History, quoted by Jari Lindholm, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 26 September 1991.

⁴Senior Lt. Gen. Hoang Minh Thao, "On the Party's Role Vis-a-Vis the Army," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 4 February 1991.

⁵William S. Turley, "Origins and Development of Communist Military Leadership in Vietnam," *Armed Forces and Society* 3(2), Winter 1977, 218-247.

⁶Bui Hong Thai writing in *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, January 1991.

In society at large the influence of the military is quite extensive. Universal conscription has been in force since 1960. Vietnam's military establishment – including main forces, reserves, and paramilitary – total approximately 4.5 million. This represents 40% of the male population aged between 18 and 32. Demobilized soldiers are appointed to leadership posts in their local communities. For example, they serve on cooperative boards and on people's committees. Vietnam's four-million strong veteran community has also been organized into a mass organization to lobby for their needs.

The military has long served as a manpower pool for the Vietnam Communist Party. Between 1976 and 1982, fifty-nine percent of all new party members were recruited from the VPA. An estimated one-quarter of all VPA personnel (officers and other ranks) are members of the VCP, accounting for six percent of total party membership. The overlapping nature of army-party relations exists at grassroots levels. In mid-1991 the percentage of party members in the militia and self-defense force was 12.7%.⁷ Data for Military Region 9 reveals, for example, that almost all of the village and sub-ward military unit leaders were concurrently party members. All one hundred and five of the village and sub-ward secretaries also served as village and sub-ward military unit political officers.⁸

The VPA is guaranteed bloc membership on the party Central Committee. Since the third national party congress in 1960, military representation has fallen at each successive national congress from 16% (1976 fourth congress), to 13% (1982 fifth congress) to 7% (1986 sixth congress) before rising to 10.2% (1991 seventh congress). VPA representation then dropped to 8.3% (eighth congress 1996), before rising slightly upwards to 9.3% at present (ninth congress 2001). Military personnel are also elected to the National Assembly where they serve on its executive organs and policy-making committees. Military representation has hovered at just under ten percent for four of the legislatures elected since unification: 54 deputies or 11% sixth legislature (elected 1976), 49 deputies or 9.9% seventh legislature elected in 1981), 49 deputies or 9.9% eighth legislature (elected in 1987) and 38 deputies or 9.6% ninth legislature (elected in 1992).

From the very beginning, Vietnam's political generals placed control and policy direction over the military firmly in the hands of the Vietnam Communist Party. Policy for the military is set unequivocally by the party's national congress (which meets every five years), and Central Committee (which meets at a

⁷"Report of the Party Central Committee's Military Commission on the Implementation of the 1986–90 National Defense Tasks and Guidelines and the Tasks for the 1991–95 Five-Year Period", *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, June 1991, 40-51. Hereafter: "National Defense Tasks and Guidelines, 1991–95".

⁸Luu Thang, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 20 December 1990.

minimum of twice a year). On a day-to-day basis, a Central Military Party Committee (*Dang uy Quan su Trung uong* or CMPC), composed of civilian and military members of the party Central Committee, exercises leadership over the army. The CMPC prepares policy recommendations to the VCP Central Committee “for decisions on military and national defense line and tasks.” According to current party statutes, the CMPC is placed under the leadership of the party Central Committee and on a regular basis the Politburo.⁹

The VPA’s subordination to the Vietnam Communist Party is maintained organizationally by a chain of command, headed by the General Political Department (GPD). The GPD has responsibility for party work and political work in the entire military and operates under the direction of the Politburo and direct authority of the CMPC. Party committees (*cap uy dang*) are organized vertically through the army down to company level.¹⁰ At each echelon, these committees are composed of party members serving in the military.

For most of its existence, the army’s political officer was superior to the military commander. Beginning in 1976, at the VCP’s fourth national congress and continuing for several years, the issues of party control arrangements over the military sparked spirited debate and cautious experimentation. At the fifth Party Congress in 1982, article twelve of the party statutes governing control over the military was amended. After further in-house discussion, the matter was settled in 1983 when the Politburo issued a landmark resolution entitled, “On Renovating and Perfecting the Party’s Leadership Mechanism in the Vietnam People’s Army and in National Defense Work and On Implementing the One Commander System in the Armed Forces.”

The introduction of the “one commander system” altered the existing structure of party control in significant ways, giving the unit military commander more decision-making authority. Party committees organized vertically at each level of command from the Central Military Party Committee, through the Political General Department, to basic level were abolished. The position of political officer was done away with also. The executive functions of the party committee at each echelon were assigned to the unit commander, and a new body, the military council created in its place. In 1991 the seventh party congress modified these arrangements yet again.

In sum, the VPA has been given greater autonomy to conduct its operations and training programs than before. Party control over the military continues to be

⁹ “Dieu Le Dang Cong San Viet Nam (Bo sung, sua doi),” *Tap chi Cong san*, 9, May 2001, 39.

¹⁰D. M. FitzGerald, *The Vietnam People’s Army: Regularization of Command, 1975–1988*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 48. Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 1989.

exercised at the top, via the Politburo and Secretariat. The Central Military Party Committee is now composed of military officers and civilian party members who are also members of the party Central Committee. The VCP Secretary General also serves as secretary of the CMPC.

Demobilization and Lack of Budgetary Support

In 1987 Vietnam adopted a new national defense policy that led to the withdrawal of military forces from Cambodia and Laos and to massive cuts in the size of main forces.¹¹ In return for agreeing to massive manpower cuts, the Politburo promised the VPA that it would receive a fixed ratio of the central budget. According to Minister of National Defense General Le Duc Anh, speaking to a plenary meeting of the sixth session of the National Assembly (eighth legislature):

In 1987, the Politburo issued a resolution on the national defense and army question, including the issues of reductions in troop strength and fixing the ratio of the defense budget to the state's total expenditures through 1990, to enhance the provision of technical support for the army, to improve soldiers' living conditions and to help stabilize the national economic situation.¹²

In 1989, however, the Ministry of Finance could only come up with two-thirds of the amount of money that had been allocated for the military's budget. This resulted in a generalized shortage of all manner of goods and a marked deterioration in the standard of living for military personnel and their families, and in the storage and maintenance of weapons and other equipment. The Rear Service General Department had neither the cash nor goods and supplies to meet the essential demands of military units. This led General Le Duc Anh to observe:

Last year, due to the lack of funds for building storage facilities and for maintaining and repairing weapons and equipment, a lot of technical equipment of various types — including rare and valuable items — were left in a state of disrepair. In 1990, unless they are promptly repaired and regularly serviced, some of them — worth billions of dollars, and which are not easy to buy even if money is now available — will have to be discarded...

Even with the 1989 defense budget, our troops have met many difficulties in their life and other activities. If this budget is cut back in 1990, difficulties will increase further. The current situation allows us to reduce the numerical strength of the

¹¹Carlyle A. Thayer, *The Vietnam People's Army Under Doi Moi*, Pacific Strategic Paper no. 7, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994. 14-41, and Thayer, "Demobilization but not Disarmament—Personnel Reduction and Force Modernization in Vietnam," in Natalie Pauwels, ed., *War Force to Work Force: Global Perspectives on Demobilization and Reintegration*. BICC Schriften zu Abrüstung und Konversion. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000. 199-219.

¹²Hanoi Home Service, 26 December 1989.

standing army and the defense budget. Nevertheless, such a reduction should not be made abruptly, but step by step and in a gradual manner.¹³

Conditions were very grim indeed. According to Lt. Gen. Nguyen Trong Xuyen, units stationed in remote areas along the China border, in the Central Highlands and along the Cambodian frontier

have not been able to practically secure the troops' food rations and are still encountering many problems. Their clothing equipment is still poor, their mess and billeting facilities and their recreational instruments are still lacking, and medicines for combatants in primary units are still in short supply.¹⁴

In another graphic account General Xuyen noted:

The living conditions of soldiers and cadres are difficult. Soldiers' diet is below the rations determined by the chairman of the Council of Ministers; the quality of their clothes is poor; drugs for specialized therapeutic purposes are in short supply, in particular malaria medicines; the medical corps' equipment is obsolete and insufficient; housing and barracks are old and lacking. Company officers' salaries are not enough to cover their food expenses.¹⁵

A major review of rear service policy in 1989 noted that efforts at reform had failed because the basic regulations were thirty years out of date and they had not been modified to suit the new situation.¹⁶ This was particularly true of the system of salaries, wages, incentives, special allowances and long service benefits. The review also noted the general failure of the system to deliver supplies in sufficient quantity and quality, at a set price, on the date agreed upon.

In sum, military service became less and less attractive when compared with civilian life. Young officers sought transfers or early discharge. The VPA found it difficult to recruit candidates for its officer training schools. For example, the Army Infantry Academy in Son Tay witnessed a drop in enrolment from 3,500 to 1,000. The elite military-run Institute for Science and Technology had difficulty filling its entry quota of one hundred. The quality of the new students was lower than before and 20-30% were dismissed because they lacked the desire to study.¹⁷ Indeed, concern over their future careers was a "burning social issue" for VPA officers who were slated for discharge or who had been passed over for promotion.¹⁸

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 7 January 1991.

¹⁵*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 20 December 20, 1991.

¹⁶*Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, July 1989.

¹⁷*Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, January 1991, 66-70.

¹⁸Hanoi Home Service, 21 September 1990.

The VPA responded to these developments in three ways. First, the VPA commercialized its logistics system.¹⁹ Second, the VPA lobbied for increased defense spending. And third, the VPA consolidated its control over military-run enterprises and national defense industries.

On “Depoliticizing” the Military

Party control over the VPA has long served to retard the emergence of a military caste in Vietnam. In the late 1980’s Vietnam’s party leaders (and military officers) roundly rejected calls to terminate the military’s political role. In 1989, for example, Vietnam was shaken by the disintegration of communist rule in Eastern Europe. In August, for example, VCP leaders reacted critically and negatively to the Solidarity movement in Poland. When Solidarity became the government Vietnam denounced the event as a “counter-revolutionary coup d’etat”. At home Vietnam moved to silence advocates of pluralism and multi-party democracy. Vietnam’s leaders were also fearful of calls to depoliticize the military.²⁰

In reacting to events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Vietnam’s political elites fell back on ideological orthodoxy. The VCP Central’s Committee rejected political pluralism at the sixth plenum held from 20–29 March 1989, and condemned imperialism for undermining the socialist bloc at the seventh plenum (15–24 August 1989). The army strongly endorsed the resolutions of both plenums. For example, Senior General Le Duc Anh argued:

Pursuing socialism and Marxism-Leninism, firmly grasping the dictatorship of the proletariat and intensifying party leadership are the renovation principles set forth by the party Central Committee’s sixth and seventh plenums which must be understood from the viewpoint of renovation and must be aimed at no other targets than the national independence, freedom, and happiness of the people.²¹

The upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and the challenges to ideological orthodoxy that they provoked in Vietnam, served to reinforce party-army relations. The party’s statutes were amended and the state constitution was changed to redefine the military’s political role and the party’s control over the military. In brief, the Vietnam People’s Army was charged with defending Vietnam’s socialist one-party political system.

Top military leaders not only endorsed the party’s line, they advocated firmer efforts to oppose the strategy of peaceful evolution. Le Duc Anh, for example, was quoted as saying “Vietnam’s army could not remain divorced from politics

¹⁹*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 23 March 1992.

²⁰For comments on Poland and Czechoslovakia see: Hong Thanh Quang, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 4 March 1990.

²¹Writing in *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, December 1989.

and must make greater efforts to promote national renewal.” In his view, “the army could not remain isolated from the country’s political problems at a time when Vietnamese socialism was under attack.”²² To take another example, the army newspaper editorialized:

The imperialists forces’ present scheme — which they hope will work — lies in their attempts to carry out a “peaceful evolution” aimed at restoring imperialism in those parts of the world where the socialist system has already been established....

Western countries are using pluralism and the multiparty system — an attribute of bourgeois democracy — as a deadly political weapon to discredit the communist party and then eliminate the latter’s leading role, and to eventually deliver power into the hands of anti-socialist forces....

Thus, through “political pluralism” the imperialist forces have tried by all means to gradually change the political nature of the socialist system. They regard this political maneuver as the most important spearhead, because in their belief, if they can change a political system then they can change everything....

The imperialists have therefore chosen the tactic of “silk worms eating mulberry leaves” to begin by degenerating one Eastern European socialist country into a moderate capitalist country and then advancing toward degenerating other Eastern European countries.²³

The army roundly condemned the notion that it should be “depoliticized”.²⁴ One military writer argued, “there has appeared the ‘theory’ about the ‘non-party’ character of the army as a complement to political pluralism”. He continued:

The class character of the socialist state and army inevitably requires the permanent and undivided leadership of the communist party in all fields, political, ideological and organizational. Without the communist party’s leadership, there can be no socialist democracy and state nor a new-type army of the working class.

Political realities in the world over the past few months show that to persist in the socialist path, it is indispensable to promote and consolidate the leadership of the communist party. To deny that leadership means to replace it by another leadership and to follow another path.

Realities in Vietnamese history have also demonstrated that the party leadership, the people’s contribution and the state management of the army are essentially unified in the same system. That unity has become a valuable tradition that cannot be broken by force, for it is the sum total of a long revolution and revolutionary war during which millions have laid down their lives.

²²Report of interview by *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* carried by AFP, Hanoi, 23 December 1990.

²³*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 13 September 1989.

²⁴See: Le Quang, “The ‘True Nature’ of the So-Called Depoliticization of the Army,” *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, November 1990.

In the new stage, the Vietnamese army must be better than ever before to carry out Uncle Ho's teachings, namely to be loyal to the party, loyal to the country and loyal to the people.

In other words, it must unconditionally submit to the party leadership, hold high Marxism-Leninism and be ready to fight and make sacrifices for the independence and freedom of the fatherland and for the success of socialism.²⁵

In preparations for the seventh party congress during November 1990-early April 1991, basic-level party organizations in the military flexed their political muscles and suggested various changes in national defense and security section of the party's draft congress documents. Indeed, a good illustration of the military's political role in Vietnamese society can be provided by the extracts of some of these discussions. These were grass-roots affairs that reviewed draft documents to be submitted to the seventh congress:

—The party chapter members expressed concern that the chapter on national defense [in the draft *Platform on Socialist Construction in the Transitional Period*] did not say anything on the orientations for building the armed forces, “thus leaving everyone with the impression that the armed forces have been on the downgrade and national defense has been deprived of its significance.” Report on discussions held by party chapters in the Mobilization and Organization Department of the VPA General Staff.²⁶

—The first question is as follows: Should national defense, security and foreign policy be included in the same chapter? There are two different views here... Meanwhile, not a single word of chapters two and three have been used to define the strategic objective of defending the fatherland... One of the issues arousing interest and igniting debate among many people is “the quality of troops.” Summary of new ideas contributed to the issue of national defense and the army raised in the party's draft platform.²⁷

—Many people suggested that chapter four on national defense and foreign policy should present more clearly the viewpoints on, guidelines for, and contents of building the people's army into a regular modern army... Chapter four be divided into two chapters: One on national defense and the other on foreign policy. Summary of views of basic party organizations in Military Region 7.²⁸

—In assessing the causes thereof [of the current socio-economic crisis], the draft report says, that we are the main cause. To say this is evasive and vague, and the leading role of the party and the state has not been expounded. We should say that

²⁵Maj. Gen. Tran Xuan Truong, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 6 June 1990.

²⁶Voice of Vietnam, Hanoi Home Service, 7 January 1991.

²⁷Trung Tin, “National Defense and the Army in the Transition Period,” *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 24 January 1991.

²⁸Hong Son, “Activities of Basic Party Organizations of the 7th Military Region,” *Saigon Giai Phong*, 7 February 1991.

the main causes are that our party and state have made serious mistakes and had serious shortcomings... Statement by Lt. Col. Ha Trong Truy, deputy chief political officer of Sao Vang Infantry Divisional Group.²⁹

The grassroots meetings were followed by the first round congresses of party organizations in the military. These were organized at provincial, regional and central levels; within the services and branches of the VPA and Ministry of National Defense; at military command and corps levels; and in various military academies and research institutes. These congresses serve to illustrate the closeness of party-army ties and the army's role in the political process. Each first round congress selected delegates to attend the national all-army party congress.

After the conclusion of the first-round congresses, the Fifth All-Army Party Organization Congress was convened from 23rd–27th April 1991. It was attended by 324 delegates representing all party organizations in the military.³⁰ Three draft party documents were discussed: *Platform for Socialist Construction in the Transitional Period*, the *Strategy for Socio-Economic Stabilization and Development Up to the Year 2000* and the Central Committee's *Political Report*. Calls for a restructuring of chapter four of the party's platform dealing with national defense and security were adopted.³¹ In the end the congress reached "high agreement on the main contents, standpoints, and major principles in the draft [party] documents."³²

The all-army congress called on the military to have "absolute faith" in the leadership of the Vietnam Communist Party and to become an "active arm" of its policies. The congress also reaffirmed the VPA's determination to "defend the party and the socialist regime" in the face of complex world developments and attacks from "hostile forces" both within and outside Vietnam.³³ At the conclusion of the congress fifty-eight official (and five alternate) delegates were

²⁹Voice of Vietnam, Hanoi Home Service, 7 March 1991.

³⁰Voice of Vietnam Network, Hanoi, 29 April 1991. The first congress was held in June 1960, the second in November 1976, the third in January 1982 and the fourth in October 1986.

³¹Report on major developments of the first two days of the Fifth All-Army Party Congress; Hanoi Domestic Service, 24 April 1991.

³²Voice of Vietnam Network, Hanoi, 27 April 1991.

³³Letter to the military published in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* cited by AFP, Hanoi, *The Nation* (Bangkok) 29 April 1991.

chosen to attend the seventh national party congress.³⁴ The military therefore represented 4.9% of the delegates to the congress.³⁵

Seventh National Party Congress

The disintegration of the Soviet Union (as well as the earlier collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe) sent shock waves throughout communist party establishment in Vietnam. The VCP moved quickly to ensure the loyalty of the Vietnam People's Army. Vietnam's military leaders responded by seizing the opportunity to press for an enlarged role in the political system and for a halt to declining defense funding. They were rewarded with increased representation on the Central Committee at the seventh congress in 1991. Fifteen members of the VPA were elected to the 146-member Central Committee, or 10.2% (up from 7% at the previous national congress held in 1986).³⁶

An analysis of personnel changes in military representation brought about by the seventh party congress reveals that none of the regional military commanders who were on the previous Central Committee were reappointed. This led David Elliott to conclude "there are no entrenched regional military networks centered around an individual, through it does not exclude the possibility that the new regional military commanders represent well-established military interests at the center." Elliott also noted a shift in military representation away from the Ministry of National Defense and towards the military services (e.g. navy and air force) and the military's own corporate interests. Here Elliott highlighted the appointment of the director of the General Staff's Rear Service General Department, General Nguyen Trong Xuyen:

As any student of military sociology will attest, an increase in the influence of the General Staff signifies a rise in military influence at the expense of broader state control. The rear services, or supply branch, is also a telling indicator because this branch is responsible for seeing that the military gets what it needs from the total goods available in society. It probably has a role in the increasingly active military involvement in the economy, especially through direct or indirect establishment of trading enterprises controlled by the military.³⁷

³⁴The All-Army Congress declined to re-nominate three military officers who had served on VCP Central Committee elected in 1986 (Le Ngoc Hien, vice minister of defense; Nguyen Quoc Thuoc, MR4 commander; and Nguyen Minh Chau, head of an anti-smuggling committee); "Delegates Dumped", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 May 1991.

³⁵There were 1,176 delegates to the seventh congress representing 2.3 million party members throughout the country.

³⁶Carlyle A. Thayer, "Institutional Change: Background to the Vietnamese Economic Reforms", Paper delivered to Conference on Indochinese Development, Macquarie University, North Ryde, New South Wales, 13-14 November 1992.

³⁷David Elliott, "Vietnam's 1991 Party Elections," *Asian Affairs* 19(3) Fall 1992, 164.

At the seventh congress the party statutes were amended to make clear that the military remained subordinate to the party.³⁸ References to the one-commander system were dropped. Article 28 placed the armed forces under the “absolute, direct control” of the party in all fields, a toughening of the previous formulation which read the armed forces were under the party’s “direct, centralized, and unified control in all fields.” The 1986 statutes which said that military commanders must “respect and maintain close relations” with local party administrations was changed to read the party “leads and builds” the armed forces and military units throughout the country are placed under the “leadership of the local party organs in all fields.” The seventh congress also linked Vietnam’s program of industrialization and modernization to the modernization of the VPA and the development of an indigenous national defense industry

Military members on the party Central Committee were elected to serve on its higher executive and administrative organs. Generals Le Duc Anh and Doan Khue were elected to the second and fifth positions on the thirteen-member Politburo, an elevation in status for the military.³⁹ Anh was also elected to the Secretariat, which had been pared down in size from thirteen to nine members. Khue was appointed Minister of National Defense after the congress. Six VPA officers served as members of the Central Military Party Committee: Le Duc Anh (first deputy secretary), Doan Khue (deputy secretary), Dao Dinh Luyen, Le Kha Phieu, Nguyen Nam Khanh, and Nguyen Trong Xuyen.⁴⁰ In September 1991, Luyen and Phieu were appointed, respectively, Chief of the General Staff and head of the Political General Department. The following year Phieu was promoted to the rank of Senior Lt. General along with Nguyen Trong Xuyen (head of the Logistics General Department).⁴¹

Rising Military

In a major post-congress development, the VCP Central Committee’s third plenum (August 1992) restored the system of party committees in the military. According to *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, “Renewal and rectification of the army’s party committee is aimed at strengthening the absolute and direct leadership of the party over all aspects of the army and at guaranteeing the party’s continuing

³⁸For a discussion of the military and 1976 party statutes see Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam,” in Zakaria Haji Ahmad and Harold Crouch, eds., *Military-Civilian Relations in South-East Asia*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985, 245–248.

³⁹Thayer, “Institutional Change: Background to the Vietnamese Economic Reforms”, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Lt. Gen. Le Hai has also been identified as a member but he is not on the VCP Central Committee.

⁴¹Vietnam News Agency, 31 July 1992.

strict control over the army.”⁴² Le Kha Phieu (director of the Political General Department) was added to the Secretariat as an additional representative from the military.⁴³

In 1992 Vietnam adopted a new state constitution that gave the military an enlarged political role in defending the socialist regime. For example, under the terms of Article 12 the VPA for the first time was placed in the same legal position as other state bodies. The military and state were charged collectively with scrupulously implementing and preventing violations of the constitution and laws. Article 44 specified that the military had been assigned an enlarged role in internal security matters. In a change of wording from the 1980 text, it referred to the VPA as the “backbone” of Vietnam’s “all-people’s national defense and public security” system.⁴⁴

The military was also made more responsible to state organs. Article 45 declared, for example, that the armed forces were “duty bound to defend the socialist regime.” Article 84 granted the National Assembly the power to adopt “special measures to ensure national defense and security” while article 98 included the VPA among the organizations that could be questioned by the National Assembly.

Changes in the party statutes and state constitution were in part a reaction to events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union where the party lost control over the armed forces. In the case of Vietnam senior party-military officials agreed to keep their own house in order. The military was given undiminished bloc representation in National Assembly elected in July 1992, amounting to 38 seats (or 9.6%).⁴⁵ Among the prominent military deputies in the 1992 National Assembly were Le Duc Anh (former Minister of National Defense, see below), Doan Khue (Minister of National Defense), Le Kha Phieu (head of the Political General Department), Dam Van Nguy (commander of Military Region 1), Dao Dinh Luyen (Chief of the General Staff Department), Dang Quan Thuy (commander of Military Region 2), Nguyen Trong Xuyen (Ministry of National Defense), Phan Thu (head of the National Defense Industry and Economic General Department), and Pham Van Tra (commander of Military Region 3). All were members of the party’s Central Committee elected in June 1991.

⁴²Quoted by AFP, Hanoi, 7 September 1992.

⁴³Politburo member Nguyen Duc Binh was also added at this time.

⁴⁴For a discussion of the military and the 1980 state constitution see Thayer, “Vietnam,” op. cit., 241–243.

⁴⁵“Cuoc Bau Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi Khoa IX Da Dien Ra Tot Dep Trong Khong Khi Ngay Hoi Lon Cua Nhan Dan Ca Nuoc”, *Nhan Dan*, 21 September 1992.

The military pressed for and obtained the appointment of Le Duc Anh, former Minister of National Defense (and former commander of Vietnamese forces in Cambodia), as President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This was a newly created office with substantive powers. He and General Doan Khue were also appointed to the newly created National Defense and Security Council. General Dang Quan Thuy was elected one of the three vice chairmen of the National Assembly's Standing Committee, and appointed head of the National Assembly's National Defense and Security Committee. Under Anh's patronage, his former subordinates in Cambodia, Doan Khue and Le Kha Phieu, advanced up the rungs of power. Khue replaced Anh as Minister of National Defense in 1992.

The importance of the military's political role in Vietnamese society was further underscored in October 1993 on the eve of the first mid-term party conference. At that time the Central Military Party Committee held a meeting to consider the Central Committee's draft political report to the mid-term conference. The enlarged meeting was chaired by General Doan Khue and included not only party Central Committee members working in the armed forces, but leading cadres from the Ministry of National Defense, general departments, research centers and other institutions associated with the VPA.

One report indicated that the meeting "set aside one day to discuss the parts dealing with the general evaluation, directions, and duties, including the section on the renovation of the political system, party building work, security, national defense, and the situation and duties in the future."⁴⁶ Another account stated that the Central Military Party Committee meeting "called for more efforts to supplement and perfect the party Central Committee's draft political report."⁴⁷ At the mid-term conference in January 1994, the VCP gave priority to the modernization and industrialization of Vietnam. The mid-term conference also elected Le Kha Phieu to the Politburo, and added two regional commanders to the Central Committee.

In 1995 the VCP became embroiled in internal factional in-fighting between the proponents of accelerated reform and opening to the United States and conservative ideological opponents who wished to move more cautiously. Political maneuvering in advance of the eighth national party congress between reformers and ideological conservatives led to casualties on both sides. In early 1996, Dao Dinh Luyen was dismissed from his post as VPA Chief of Staff. Luyen had been an advocate of military modernization and the acquisition of much needed foreign technology. In a speech given in late December 1995 to an army conference, he strongly supported the reformist line advocated by Vo Van Kiet.

⁴⁶Voice of Vietnam Network, 21 October 1993.

⁴⁷Voice of Vietnam Network, 24 October 1993.

Shortly after his speech, Luyen was replaced by his deputy, Pham Van Tra. Luyen's detractors spread the rumor that he had been involved in a scandal involving the purchase of military equipment from Russia. Luyen's demotion led to resentment in the military over meddling in its internal affairs. These events prompted party Secretary General Do Muoi to call for army-party unity at the army's all-party congress in May. At the same time as Luyen was dismissed, General Le Kha Phieu was promoted to the second spot in the defense hierarchy. Rumors then began to spread that he was a likely contender to become the next party secretary general. On the eve of the eighth congress, Nguyen Ha Phan, the main conservative ideological opponent of Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, was summarily dismissed from the Politburo. Phan's mentor, Dao Duy Tung, was widely suspected of having engineered the dismissal of Dao Dinh Luyen.

The rise of the military in Vietnam since the late 1980s has had several consequences. It has led to increased defense expenditure that has financed a modest program of force modernization with particular emphasis on the navy.⁴⁸ The rise of the military has also led to an expansion in defense contacts beyond traditional allies — such as the former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan) — and old friends (such as India and Indonesia), to former enemies (China), regional states and newer partners. Finally, the rise of the military has led to the development of substantial economic interests by military-run enterprises.

Military Modernization

Growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in 1992 also spurred the VPA to play a more proactive role in pushing for increased funding with which to modernize. Resolutions endorsing an increase in defense spending were approved by the National Assembly and VCP Central Committee were approved that year. The Minister of National Defense submitted a report to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers calling for new purchases of equipment and technology. The Chairman approved the report and authorized an increase in the 1992 defense budget. The defense budget was raised again in 1993 “to satisfy the newly-emerged needs of national defense and security.”⁴⁹ These were identified as strengthening Vietnam's defense capabilities in the South China Sea in light of China's occupation of islands and features the previous year. In January 1994, at Vietnam's first mid-term party conference, the Defense Minister Doan Khue called on the government to increase funding so the defense industry could

⁴⁸Carlyle A. Thayer, “Force Modernization: The Case of the Vietnam People's Army,” *Contemporary South East Asia* 19(1), June 1997, 1-28.

⁴⁹Voice of Vietnam, 14 July 1993.

move towards self-sufficiency.⁵⁰ Finally, in May 1995, Do Muoi, the then General Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, delivered a speech calling for the modernization of the navy so it could protect Vietnam's "sovereignty, national interests and natural marine resources."⁵¹ In short, Vietnam sought to re-arm itself after years of neglect. In changed strategic circumstances, where a large land army was no longer imperative, Vietnam gave priority to modernizing naval and air forces for operations in the maritime environment of the South China Sea.

For the past several years Vietnam has been engaged in activating overseas defense contacts in order to redress its defense industry deficiencies and to acquire needed modern technology on a selected basis. During the 1990s Vietnam opened defense contacts with more than three dozen countries (Algeria, Australia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Burma, Cambodia, Canada, China, Cuba, Czech Republic, El Salvador, Finland, France, India, Iran, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, North Korea, South Korea, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Slovak Republic, South Korea, Thailand, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the United States). It initially sought assistance in equipment maintenance and refurbishment from countries as diverse as Indonesia, India, and Israel.

In sum, a strategic turning point was reached in 1991 at the seventh national congress. The reformist party Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh was not re-elected. He was replaced by the more conservative Do Muoi. The military increased their representation on the party Central Committee and began to play a more assertive role in decision-making. As Vietnam's economy expanded, so too did defense expenditures. Vietnam chose not to rebuild a large land army but to engage in selective force modernization with priority on the navy and air force. In doing so Vietnam was responding to the need to protect its offshore territories and oil rigs in the South China Sea from the threat of Chinese naval modernization and assertiveness. Vietnam's defense expenditure doubled from US \$1.1 billion in 1992 to just over US \$2 billion in 1997, an annual increase of 26 percent. Vietnam spends about 8.5% of GDP on defense, well above its ASEAN neighbors.⁵²

⁵⁰*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 24 November 1993, 1-2.

⁵¹*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 25 May 1995, 1.

⁵²For further details of Vietnam's military modernization efforts see: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Regional Military Modernization Strategies and Trends," Paper to conference on Security and Societal Trends in Southeast Asia, Meridian International Center, Washington, D.C., September 6-7, 2000 and Thayer, "Force Modernization," op. cit.

Eighth National Party Congress

In the months leading up to the eighth party congress it was widely reported that the VPA was seeking wider political representation. VCP Secretary General Do Muoi, when asked if he wanted to see Vietnam's military gain more power, replied "Without the military, disorder may occur." He also characterized the military as a "pillar" for national unity and security.⁵³ The eighth national party congress was held in Hanoi from 28th June to 1st July 1996 and was attended by 1,198 delegates representing 2.13 million party members. Military delegates represented 13% of the total, an increase of 5% from the previous congress.⁵⁴

The eighth congress approved a heavily amended Political Report (particularly the foreign policy section) and the *Report on Socio-Economic Development* that mapped out a strategy by which Vietnam could become a modern industrial nation by the year 2020. The report also called for the combining of economic development with national security and defense. When the leadership item on the congress agenda came up, delegates selected a Central Committee totaling 170 members, the largest ever. At the Central Committee's first plenum its members re-elected Do Muoi, Le Duc Anh and Vo Van Kiet to the Politburo and endorsed Do Muoi's continuation as party secretary general. This was done on the proviso that the three would step down before the completion of their new five-year term in office.⁵⁵ Military representation on the Politburo (and the newly created Standing Board) was enhanced by the selection of four army representatives among its nineteen members. Increased military representation was designed to ensure political stability.⁵⁶ The also gave that body a distinctly conservative cast. Lt. General Pham Thanh Ngan, deputy director of the VPA General Political Department, was a protégé of Le Kha Phieu. Shortly after his election to the Politburo he was promoted to the rank of Senior Lt. General and made director of the General Political Department.

In December 1997, at the fourth plenary meeting of the Central Committee, the long-awaited changes in the ruling troika took place. Do Muoi stepped down as party Secretary General and was replaced by Le Kha Phieu, the former head of the VPA's General Political Department.

⁵³Greg Torode, "Vietnam: Military 'Retains Crucial Role'," *South China Morning Post*, 1 July 1996.

⁵⁴*Xay Dung Dang*, 7, 1996, 24-25.

⁵⁵ Reuters, 29 June 1996.

⁵⁶Greg Torode, "Vietnam: Greater Military presence on Enlarged Politburo to Ensure Political Stability," *South China Morning Post*, 2 July 1996.

Economic-Defense Zones

In late 1998 the Minister of National Defense, Pham Van Tra, called for the setting up of special economic-defense zones (*khu kinh te-quoc phong*, KT-QP).⁵⁷ Each military region was called upon to establish one or two such economic-defense zones to promote economic activity and national defense. By the end of the following year thirteen KT-QP zones, with total investment of U.S. \$215 million, had been set up in strategic areas along borders with China, Laos and Cambodia. This initiative, and the phase two reforms of army-run enterprises (see below), were conducted in tandem.

According to Defense Minister Tra, “an economic and military combination enhances fighting capacity, improves the defense industries, allocates soldiers in key areas and, perhaps most importantly, balances the budget for all military activities.”⁵⁸ Vice Minister of Defense Nguyen Van Rinh, stated that the program was aimed at “fewer numbers but greater proficiency.”⁵⁹ The objective is to combine economic activities with defense capability in remote and relatively under populated areas. Funding for this new initiative will come from both the Ministry of National Defense and provincial governments. But because of insufficient revenue, the VPA has been given permission to mobilize funds from international organizations as well as domestic sources.

In the new economic-defense zones the VPA has been assigned the task of assisting in the relocation of families from highly populated provinces to mountainous areas and islands. The military has been assigned to build the infrastructure for settlers. An estimated 84,000 families will be settled in the areas when the project ends in 2013. The Tay Nguyen Corps (*Binh Doan 15*) has opened thousands of hectares of new land for the growth and production of rubber, coffee, wet rice, fruit and industrial crops. The Tay Nguyen Corps has also been involved in livestock breeding. Its units have constructed industrial processing facilities, schools, cultural houses, sports complexes, and amusement centers. Elsewhere, military units have been engaged in dual civilian-military tasks. Naval patrols are involved in off-shore fishing, border guard units have been assigned afforestation tasks, the Flight Services Corporation combines its commercial operations with pilot training, army hospitals offer their services to civilian clients, and military research centers are authorized to sign contracts with non-military bodies.

⁵⁷Agence France-Presse, Hanoi, 3 November 1998.

⁵⁸Hanh Dung, “Military Enterprises,” *Vietnam Economic Times*, December 1999, 23.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 22.

The VPA has assumed responsibility for the implementation of social welfare projects that no other ministry wants to undertake. Military groups are the driving force behind road and dyke construction, planting new forests, relocation of ethnic minorities,⁶⁰ and provision of newspapers and television. The VPA has inaugurated a new program, the Army and People Healthcare Corporation, with agreement of the Ministry of Public Health. Border troops are involved in an anti-illiteracy campaign. Border guards not only construct new schools, but provide the teachers for an estimated 80,000 pupils. The military works closely with community elders and religious leaders. It cooperates with state bodies in social welfare activities in remote mountain areas and islands where government officials seldom venture. As a result of its active involvement, the VPA now has a say in local government decisions and, in effect, acts as an arm of the government in remote economic-defense zones.⁶¹

The Military and the Second Wave of Reform

Since the adoption of *doi moi* Vietnam has taken a number of steps to further sanction the army's role in commercial activities as well as its long-standing involvement in economic development and construction activities.⁶² Following the 1986 Sixth National Party Congress, for example, the Politburo issued Resolution Five (*ngghi quyet 5*) on the military's role in productive labor and economic work.

In 1995 there were an estimated 335 army-run enterprises in Vietnam.⁶³ They employed about one hundred thousand soldiers or one-sixth of the VPA's standing force. Earnings from these enterprises increased each year from a base of US \$25 million in 1990, to US \$79 million in 1991, US \$110 million in 1992, US \$170 million in 1993, US \$220 million in 1994, to US \$360 million in 1995 (or two per cent of GDP), US \$450 million in 1996, US \$585 million in 1997 and US \$600 million in 1998. Among the most successful military-run companies were the four giants: the Truong Son Construction Corporation (12th Corps); Thanh An Corporation (11th Corps), 15th Corporation (15th Corps) and the Southern Service Flight Corporation.

⁶⁰The VPA's is also involved in settling so-called nomadic ethnic minorities into permanent villages. Security officials are concerned that these ethnic minorities are abandoning traditional ancestor worship to follow "other religions" that may cause social unrest.

⁶¹Tran Le Thuy, "On the home front," *Vietnam Economic Times*, December 1999, 25.

⁶²For an overview see: Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Economic and Commercial Roles of the Vietnam People's Army," *Asian Perspective*, 2000, 24(2), 87-120.

⁶³*Jane's Defence Weekly*, 24 September 1997, 13.

By 1995 forty-nine military-run enterprises had formed joint ventures with foreign partners with a capitalization estimated at US \$472 million. They were engaged primarily in such areas as construction, automobile manufacturing, mechanical engineering, garment making, hotels and real estate, and the manufacture of consumer goods.⁶⁴ By 1997 the number of joint ventures rose to fifty-six.

Over half of the three hundred military enterprises were small companies with limited prescribed capital and outdated equipment. They could not compete effectively in the market.⁶⁵ As a result, reforms were undertaken under the direction of the General Department of Defense Industry and Economy. Military-run companies were divided into three main types: defense-economic enterprises (*doanh nghiep kinh te quoc phong*) that produced and repaired weapons and military equipment, undertook special defense duties, and also produced commercial goods); national defense economic enterprises (*doanh nghiep quoc phong*) that produced and traded civilian products, provided daily logistics support, or participated in economic development in remote areas); and exclusive economic enterprises (*doanh nghiep chuyen lam kinh te*) that specialized in producing and trading in commercial products.⁶⁶ As a result of streamlining, mergers, restructuring and dissolution, the number of military-run enterprises was reduced 193 by 1997. A number of competitive military-run enterprises emerged in capital construction, flight and maritime service, mining, engineering, production of industrial explosive materials, and garment manufacture.

In 1998, Vietnam launched a second wave of reforms in military-run enterprises aimed at professionalizing the army's commercial activities. The most notable step in this direction was announced by the Prime Minister on 24th December. The Economics Division, formerly under the General Department of National Defense Industry and Economics, was upgraded to the status of an independent Economic Department under the direct control of the Ministry of National Defense.⁶⁷ According to Hanh Dung, "The business shake-up includes cutting down the number of small-scale enterprises, concentrating on key strengths, promoting co-operation between army enterprises to win state contracts and making their products more competitive."⁶⁸ Unlike savage cuts undertaken in

⁶⁴Carlyle Thayer, "People's Army gets in step with era of friendly reform," Special Survey, *The Australian*, 6 September 1996, 18.

⁶⁵Voice of Vietnam, 1 January 1997.

⁶⁶ *Nhan Dan*, 13 September 1997.

⁶⁷Vietnam News Agency, 28 April 1999 and Defense Minister Pham Van Tra quoted by BBC News, 28 April 1999.

⁶⁸Hanh Dung, "Military Enterprises," *op. cit.*, 22.

1995-96 when over 300 army-run enterprises were reduced by one-third (to 193) in 1997 and then further reduced to 164 through closures and mergers, the present reforms are aimed at professionalizing army businesses. This means assisting enterprises to achieve new levels of efficiency by lowering the ratio that are run directly by the army.

According to Hanh Dung, the Ministry of National Defense “is structured like a real, if miniature, government.”⁶⁹ According to one foreign economist, it is difficult to conceive of any industry in which the military is not involved. The VPA’s tentacles reach into every corner of the economy. For example, there are 164 corporations currently under the control of the Ministry of National Defense. Four general corporations are under the Ministry’s direct control, while the remaining 160 are under the control of ten departments subordinate to the ministry. Of these 164 corporations only about thirty or so are joint ventures involving foreign partners.⁷⁰

As noted above, these enterprises may be classified into one of three categories: (1) national defense economic enterprises that are subsidized by the Ministry of National Defense; (2) defense-economic enterprises that are allowed to tender for civil contracts as well as fulfilling army orders; and (3) exclusive economic enterprises that operate like state-owned enterprises.⁷¹ It is this last group which accounts for more than half of the army’s business activities. In other words, these corporations are involved in the full spectrum of activities from the most basic (laundry and food processing) to the highly advanced (computers and telecommunications).⁷² Most army-run enterprises cannot stay solvent by meeting their military contracts alone and must seek outside work. Defense Ministry figures show that 10-20 percent of military enterprise output goes to the army; in other words, up to 80 percent of the army’s contracts come from the civilian sector. Army enterprises are therefore coming under increasing pressure to concentrate on finding a permanent niche in the economy for themselves,

⁶⁹Ibid., 23. Material in this paragraph is drawn heavily from this source.

⁷⁰There has been a reduction in the number of foreign-partner joint ventures. Some military joint ventures that did not do well were sold to foreign investors. At present, there are no plans to expand the number of VPA-foreign joint ventures.

⁷¹Some consideration is being given to creating a fourth category, army enterprises that can survive on their own in the market economy.

⁷²For example, Tecapro, which specializes in computer science and environmental solutions, was established in 1990 by Military Technology Institute. Its first bid was for a contract with Vietsovpetro, a Soviet-Vietnamese petroleum joint venture. It then won three oil spillage contracts with Vietsovpetro and fourteen contracts with Petrolimex, a national company. Tecapro now operates two joint ventures with foreign partners. Army orders account for less than ten percent of Tecapro’s capacity.

particularly in the development of technology that has both civil and military applications.

Military Professionalism

For over five and a half decades military professionalism in the Vietnam People's Army has included mastery of three main components: traditional military art, political-ideological affairs, and technological modernization and standardization.⁷³ Because the VPA has nearly been continuously at war, training and education has developed in a more or less ad hoc fashion with emphasis on practical experience over formal instruction. In the current period, when the outbreak of conventional war is considered a low possibility, a major attempt is being made to professionalize the officer corps through a web of laws, regulations and rules. Formal educational requirements have now been made compulsory for the first time. The curriculum at command and staff colleges (and higher) has been expanded to include a wealth of new subjects in the social sciences, humanities, sciences and technology. Nevertheless, the role of political-ideological indoctrination has not lost its salience.

The Vietnam People's Army is tasked with fulfilling five main roles: national defense, internal security, standardization, modernization, and economic production. These have naturally evolved over time. National defense has now been extended to the maritime domain. The army's role in internal security has been extended from suppressing domestic rebellion to defending the socialist regime. The role of standardization now includes a greater legal character and a much more conventional main force structure.

In December 1999, the sixth session (tenth legislature) of the National Assembly adopted a new Law on Officers of the Vietnam People's Army.⁷⁴ This new law is the most important recent development in the professionalization of the VPA. The law came into effect on the 1st April 2000 and specifies the educational requirements for officer entry into the VPA and further continuing education and training standards, age and time in grade, and the requirements for promotion from one rank to another. All officers will have to obtain a university degree or its equivalent to remain in uniform after the year 2000. Regimental and divisional commanders will be required to earn post-graduate degrees in specialized fields, such as politics.

⁷³For an overview see: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: The Many Roles of the VPA," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Military Professionalism in Asia: Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives*. Honolulu: East-West Center, 2001. 137-149.

⁷⁴"Luât Sĩ Quan Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, January 14, 2000, p. 3.

Younger members of the VPA can now expect greater upward mobility and improved prospects for promotion and assignment. In other words, there is now a clear career path for promotion within each service. Officers who fail to meet the selection criteria for promotion to the next rank within a designated time period will be retired. For example, for those pursuing a command and staff career, an officer must first become a Corp commander before qualifying for Military Region deputy commander. Only commanders of Military Regions can become deputy chiefs on the General Staff.

As the new law is implemented it will eliminate the bloated rank structure at senior levels. For example, the number of officers holding the rank of general has been limited to 150 (down from a high of 400 during the Vietnam War). The era of “political generals” has well and truly passed. Commanders of Military Regions will hold the rank of Lieutenant General, while the highest rank of General (*Dai Tuong*) is reserved for the Minister of National Defense, Chief of the General Staff and head of the General Political Directorate.

Officers are now required to attend military schools whose requirements for admission have been raised to reflect a greater stress on formal educational requirements (there are other provisions for promotion from the ranks or during combat). Officers must attend a military school for each rank they aspire to. Battalion commanders must attend one of the regional Infantry Officers’ Schools, while regimental commanders must attend the Da Lat Military Academy. Divisional commanders must attend the National Military Academy in Son Tay. At senior level, military officers are required to attend the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy in Hanoi.

Ninth National Party Congress

The Vietnam Communist Party held its ninth national congress in Hanoi from April 19th-22nd, 2001. In the lead up to this congress the stewardship of party Secretary General Le Kha Phieu became a vexed question. Phieu appears to have staved off an effective challenge until the eleventh hour. A number of charges were leveled at him including one “bill or particulars” containing seven points. Phieu was jettisoned and replaced by a civilian, Nong Duc Manh. Vo Van Kiet, acting as an adviser to the Central Committee, revealed that Phieu had misused the military intelligence services for his own purposes. The party Central Committee duly reprimanded the Defense Minister and the Chief of Staff, Pham Van Tra and Le Van Dung respectively.

The ninth congress elected a smaller Central Committee composed of 150 members (down from 170 members elected in 1996). Military representation on the new Central Committee rose slightly. This suggests that the military as a whole (rather than specific individuals) has been kept insulated from the wire

tapping scandal. General Pham Thanh Ngan, head of the army's General Political Department, was dropped from the Politburo. Possible fallout from this affair might account for the absence of the army commander from Military Region 4 on the Central Committee. MR 4 includes Phieu's home province of Thanh Hoa. Also, the incumbent secretary from Thanh Hoa was dropped from the Central Committee.

But it is difficult to be categorical. While it is true that military representation increased on the Central Committee as a proportion of total membership (by one percentage point), military representation on the Politburo fell from 3-4 members to one. A strong core of military incumbents were retained in leadership positions. The fates of Pham Van Tra and Le Van Dung are far from what one would expect of two senior officials who were given the second most severe reprimand out of three disciplinary measures that the party could impose. Tra retained his seat on the Politburo but dropped two places in ranking. Party sources state he was the "fall guy" for Phieu and took the reprimand in stride exhibiting no outward anger. When asked about why he had been reprimanded he pointed to the Ly Tong incident in which a civilian aircraft commandeered in Thailand penetrated Vietnamese airspace and dropped anti-regime leaflets around the time of President Clinton's visit.

Le Van Dung as Chief of the General Staff apparently had oversight of the military intelligence branch that carried out political tasks for Phieu. These reportedly included wire tapping all members of the Politburo. Despite his reprimand, Dung retained his seat on the Central Committee and was elected to the Secretariat (ranking 6th out of nine members). Dung was replaced as Chief of Staff and moved sideways to head the General Political Department after the ninth congress.

Conclusion

It is easier to describe in general terms the political role of the military as a constituency in Vietnam's political system than it is to be specific about how the military influences the policy-making and resource allocation processes. It is not altogether clear that "the military" is a unified constituency. There may well be inter-service rivalries between and army, air force and navy. There may be differences between the traditional combat arms and the other specialized branches within the VPA, including most particularly the political officer corps. There may be substantial differences of interest among the main forces, reserves, local forces, militia and self-defense forces, and differences of interest between the VPA and veterans and national defense industry employees. Some retired military officers, such as General Tran Do, have even become pro-reform political activists.

It is difficult if not impossible, on the basis of information that is publicly available, to determine how the military makes its influence felt on any particular issue. The inner workings of the Politburo are a jealously guarded secret. It is impossible to know if the military representatives on that body speak and vote as a bloc or as individuals. Information is also lacking on the role of the military bloc in the proceedings of the Central Committee. Is there a unified military position or do the military representatives vote as individuals? The composition of the military bloc on the Central Committee, heavily weighted in favor of territorial commands (see Appendix A), suggests that the main force military may be considered a political constituency that acts more or less as a coherent voice.

In describing military-party relations in contemporary Vietnam, it is possible to identify a few issues where the military has acted as a more or less unified constituency:

- Senior military officers publicly opposed the depoliticization of the VPA, particularly after the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe.
- As a corollary to the above point, the VPA has accepted a greater role in maintaining internal security and defending the socialist regime.
- The VPA responded to a deterioration in its material and financial situation by successfully lobbying for an increase in defense spending.
- The VPA has pushed for retention of its ownership over military-run enterprises and national defense industries in order to raise funds to make up for budget short falls.
- In 1992 the VPA lobbied for the appointment of General Le Duc Anh as president of the country and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.
- During the mid- to late-1990s, the military has pushed for increased funding to support force modernization, particularly for the navy and air force.
- The military resents political interference in its internal affairs as the dismissal of former Chief of Staff Dao Dinh Luyen indicates.
- The military has given its support for an expanded socio-economic role in the development of economic-defense zones in remote areas.
- The military has given its support to legislation that will set educational and training standards in order to increase the professionalization of the armed forces.

- The military has been given approval to expand its defense contacts and external relations beyond traditional defense ties.

Appendix A

**Military Representation on the Party Central Committee
Following the Ninth National Party Congress, April 2001**

Retained Military Members:

Minister of Defense	Pham Van Tra
Deputy Minister/Chief of Staff	Le Van Dung
Deputy Minister	Nguyen Huy Hieu
Deputy Minister	Nguyen Van Rinh
MR 2 Commander	Ma Thanh Toan
MR 3 Commander	Hoang Ky
MR 5 Commander	Nguyen Van Duoc
MR 7 Commander	Phung Trung Kien
MR 9 Deputy Political Commander	Bui Van Huan
National Defense Academy	Nguyen The Tri

New Military Members:

General Political Department Deputy Director	Pham Van Long
MR 1 Commander	Phung Quang Thanh
MR 2 Deputy Commander	Nguyen Khac Nghien
Navy Deputy Political Commander	Nguyen Van Tinh