

The Domestic Political Optics of Vietnam's International Defense Expo

The well-attended December 8-10 event was part of a broader public relations strategy designed to capture the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese public.

By Le Ngoc Thao Nguyen and Nguyen The Phuong

Last week's inaugural Vietnam International Defense Expo was noteworthy in several aspects. It obviously had defense implications, reflecting the country's efforts to diversify its defense procurements. However, there was a particular facet of the Expo that went mostly unremarked: the use that the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) made of the event in projecting a strong and positive image to the Vietnamese people. Although the event had an international scope, the political communication of the Expo clearly targeted a domestic audience, as seen in both the branding and the discourse employed by the Vietnamese government about the event and the VPA.

Military public relations campaign with symbolic acts

The holding of this first-of-its-kind event could be expected to pique the curiosity of the Vietnamese public, especially given that they were granted free entry to certain exhibits. In general, the presentation of the Expo showed a clear intention to expose the Vietnamese population to the country's military capability – a traditionally discreet topic.

Prominent in the exhibition and the media coverage of the event is the symbolic demonstration of the military power of Vietnam. Firstly, the opening ceremony was organized as an attention-getting show with Su-30 jets streaking across the sky of Hanoi and helicopters flying Vietnam's national flag. Secondly, the outdoor area of more than 20,000 square meters at Gia Lam airport was dedicated to showcasing multiple weapons systems, all of which are in service, allowing high accessibility for visitors. Most images that appeared in the official and mainstream media coverage related to these aspects of the expo. This marks the revelation of previously covert images of the armed forces and more importantly showcases what the VPA has for deployment.

The lack of visitor statistics from the organizers so far prevents a conclusive inference on the volume of public engagement, yet the favorability can be seen from news reports where people are captured queuing up in the rain for entrance or exclaiming their enthusiasm for the event. In reporting their impressions of the Defense Expo, these civilians all touched upon two common themes: the thrill of unprecedented exposure to previously concealed weapons and armaments, and their expressions of national pride about Vietnam's military capability. The fair can be thus understood as an occasion for harvesting legitimacy for the VPA in particular, and the political regime in general.

Widespread Media Coverage for Mass Awareness Raising

The collective media coverage of the event not only provides evidence of domestic support for the event but also of an intent to target the online public. This has taken the form of exhaustive multimedia coverage, including digital prints, videos, Facebook posts and even social

media live streams. In terms of content, three central themes can be noted, each of which serves a particular communicative purpose.

The first is the highlighting of public anticipation of and participation in the Expo, which aims at a transfer of positive sentiment to the consumer of the content. The second theme is the showcasing of state-of-the-art military equipment, weapons, and technologies with visual and textual reinforcements that offer audiences basic information about these weapons with a particular promotional focus on armed power. The third theme centralizes the opportunities for international cooperation that the Expo presents.

Taken together, these themes present the Defense Expo as a significant and desirable milestone in the development of Vietnam's military capability. This reinforces the message put forward by Vietnamese elites about the occasion and its place in Vietnam's defense strategy. As Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh declared in his speech at the opening of the Expo, the country's defense strategy serves the Vietnamese people and regional stability, peaceful development, and cooperative growth for all.

The overall effect of this network of media coverage can be understood by the principle of "availability cascade," in which audiences tend to remember and recall ubiquitous messages. Such an effect is likely to have been amplified by the active use of social media channels. The hashtag #VietnamDefense2022 has been promoted, together with the official event page on Facebook, to trigger rounds of user-generated content relating to the event. All of this clearly suggests that the VPA recognizes how a strategic communications network can be used to target domestic audiences in both physical and virtual realms.

Patriotic Discourse with Appeal to Emotion

Despite the commercial nature of the Expo, the discourse associated with the fair was hardly commercial. The connecting thread in this discourse was rather built on the themes of patriotism and nationalism. From Chinh's speech to the official posts on the government's Facebook portal, the VPA is described with words like "heroic," "powerful," and "glorious" and associated with the lyrics of war-themed songs. Specifically, four out of 12 posts on the government official Facebook's page about the event included patriotic language, and each triggered an echoing effect in the comments section. The phrases were also repeated in the accumulation of Facebook posts and comments related to the hashtag #VietnamDefense2022.

Another mode of discourse, mainly promoted by the media and more implicitly shown, connects the event with war veterans. This content features visuals of veteran reunions and selected interviews with veterans who are honorably invited to the military fair, interwoven with images of the weaponry on display. By making emotional appeals to those who have served the country, Hanoi has attempted to craft an inclusive narrative that venerates past glories. One purpose of this politics of memory is to bridge the gap between generations. With language related to remembrance shared by the youth participating in the Expo, the overall message is one of national and social cohesion.

Toward a More Open Institution

The Expo demonstrated Vietnam's serious effort to use multiple tactics to engage the Vietnamese public, from symbolic military acts to the use of normative discourse, both online and off. The overall approach is to bring once-secretive armed forces closer to the public, which

can be seen as a tactical move in a longer-term strategy of cultivating a more open relationship between the military and the people.

Before the Expo, broadcasting has been the VPA's main channel of communication with the public. Two TV programs, one aired on VTV (Vietnam Television) since 2006 and the other aired on HTV (Ho Chi Minh City Television) since 2009, detail the rudimentary lives of Vietnamese soldiers from different branches of the armed forces. Both programs rely on a one-way flow of information and assert advocacy content.

But the recent paradigm shift is reflected in the program "Sao Nhap Ngu" ("Star Enlisted"), the first military-related reality show broadcast on the VPA's television channel QPVN, which began broadcasting in 2017. By using popular public figures, including singers, comedians, game streamers, and public opinion leaders in different fields, the show gains more social capital for the military, proven by its 1 million followers on Facebook and its nomination by the public as TV Show of the Year in 2020. Following the experiences of participating public figures, audiences are not only entertained by the staged scenes but also equipped with valid information related to the VPA. The format of the show is inspired by a South Korean reality show called "Real Men 300" where the workings of the Korean army are revealed together with artists from the Korean wave.

All of these public relations tactics are likely part of a wider communication strategy that serves several purposes. Politically, the use of popular culture in the VPA's political communication shapes a strategy to generate a close rapport between the military and the public. The Expo is part of a long-standing strategy to capture the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese public, by reinventing the military's reputation as a reclusive and traditional "society within society," historically strong but remote from the public, and depicting it as a modern and trusted institution. As "people" in the VPA become more fronted in the communication of and about the VPA, this institution can expect greater levels of public legitimacy. Militarily, as the Defense Expo has shown, the message is that the VPA, in the context of the South China Sea dispute and an uncertain global security landscape, has the capacity and the will to confront any challenges and effectively protect the country's sovereignty.

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