

Why Vietnam Needs to Adopt a Biological Defense Strategy

Despite its initial success, COVID-19 has revealed Vietnam's lack of preparedness for biological threats.

By Phuong Pham

Once regarded as a role model for its successful containment of COVID-19, Vietnam is now in the midst of its fourth wave, its worst since the beginning of the pandemic. Even worse, the stringent measures that previously helped Vietnam put the virus under control have been relatively ineffective, illustrated by the surge in infections since the end of April. This raises a great concern for Vietnam not only with regard to COVID-19 but also on its ability to counter biological threats writ large. With this in mind, Vietnam should establish a national strategy on biological defense in order to help it counter biological threats more effectively, given the current inadequacy of the country's biological defense capabilities.

The Vietnamese government's Decree 81/2019 on preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) classifies biological threats among the four kinds of WMD threats: chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN). In 2018, the European Union helped Vietnam to finalize its National Action Plan (NAP) on preventing CBRN threats. However, both the decree and the NAP are merely general, if not vague, guidelines for tackling CBRN threats without any in-depth plans on how to deal with specific kinds of threat. Moreover, despite having specialized agency for dealing with some kinds of CBRN threat, like the Chemical Team of the Vietnam People's Army and Vietnam Agency for Radiation and Nuclear Safety, Vietnam does not yet have one responsible for countering biological threats.

At the very least, a national biodefense strategy would establish a clear vision on how to deal with biological threats – something that Vietnam has lacked thus far. In retrospect, Vietnam has responded to biological threats passively, only after the country has been hit. This was evident in its response to two major outbreaks: the SARS virus in 2003 and COVID-19 in 2020. In the latter case, although Vietnam tackled the crisis well and received international praise for its rigorous quarantine and lockdown measures, the country has been struggling to deal with the latest wave.

This illustrates that Vietnam is highly vulnerable to biological threats. In fact, Vietnam suffered biological attacks in the past, specifically during the Vietnam War. Yet the country's lack of a biological defense strategy demonstrates its lack of vision on the issue. Those actions that Vietnam has taken so far against COVID-19 are basically tactical, raising a concern on whether it can handle the new wave well as it did previously, given the current surge in new cases and deaths. Only a strategy with a comprehensive vision will enable Vietnam to take pre-emptive measures against bio-threats more effectively.

In addition, having a national biodefense strategy would enhance Vietnam's security apparatus as a whole. According to Alexander Vuving of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, biological threats are not listed among Vietnam's main security

priorities. Similarly, the latest 2019 National Defense White Paper has not stated how to deal with biological threats, illustrating Vietnam's lack of preparedness on this front.

Moreover, the aforementioned Decree 81/2019 implies that Vietnam is approaching biological threats in the same way as other CBRN ones, which is strategically problematic. Biological weapons and threats operate and destroy the target in a relatively different way from chemical, radiological, and nuclear threats, as they are generally harder to detect and able to spread more quickly through a given environment, reasons why biological threats should be accorded special attention and treatment.

Some countries consider biological threats as a security priority, and have specialized mechanisms to tackle them. The United States, for instance, deems bio-security as a primary component of its national security, evidenced by its establishment of the Office of International Health and Biodefense, which is tasked with combating biothreats and outbreaks of infectious disease through diplomacy and its substantive National Biodefense Strategy. Adopting a similar biodefense strategy would help Vietnam enhance its security apparatus, making the nation more resilient to biological threats.

Another crucial component of a national biological defense strategy is a strong research & development (R&D) capacity and the budget necessary to establish this. Despite having witnessed growth in its R&D expenditure in the recent decade, Vietnam still lags behind other countries in the region, such as Thailand or Singapore, spending only around 0.5 percent of the GDP on this in 2017. Indeed, insufficient spending on R&D is one of the main reasons why Vietnam has been slow in developing its own COVID-19 vaccine. Up to now, Vietnam's vaccination has mainly depended on external sources, and its own vaccine has yet to be distributed. Given its expectation of a homegrown vaccine, the country has struggled in diversifying the vaccine supply, falling behind its neighboring countries in getting citizens vaccinated. If Vietnam does not invest more in improving its R&D capacity, it could well be unable to deal with future threats similar to COVID-19, nor to develop the technological "weapons" necessary to counter them actively. A biological defense strategy entails a more solid R&D foundation.

Second, to have a feasible biological defense strategy, Vietnam must have a clear allocation of tasks for agencies at every levels and sectors, from provincial to central and private to public. To make a strategy work well, there must be a harmonious cooperation among the responsible agencies and units, which implies that they have to be well acknowledged of their tasks. Vietnam's biosecurity is not just a threat for specific individuals or sectors; it is an existential threat for the whole country, which necessitates a close coordination of all units of government.

During previous waves of COVID-19, Vietnam did well in mobilizing resources from all levels to prevent the virus from spreading. In this recent wave, it did the same thing as previously, in both implementing the lockdown and quarantine methods, but failed to stem the spread of the virus. After the pandemic, Vietnam should apply the same pattern of cooperation to the creation of a strategy to deal with future biological threats.

Additionally, Vietnam must pursue international cooperation in the field of biodefense in order to enhance its resources in dealing with such issues. Due to its weak R&D capacity, Vietnam's biological and healthcare technology is not as advanced as it should be. One of the best ways to make up this shortfall is by engaging in activities with other countries, especially ones with advanced technology and more experience in tackling biosecurity threats. As noted,

almost every nation in the world faces biosecurity threats of one kind or another, so there needs to be joint effort for them to overcome. Thus, Vietnam has to facilitate activities, including but not limited to capacity-building, information and human exchange and technological transfers. If the country can coordinate well with its international partners, it will be better able to formulate a sound biosecurity strategy.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and its horrendous consequences could radically change countries' perception of biological security, accelerating them to reform their biological defense systems. In the same vein, Vietnam should increase its biological defense capability, and one of the vital steps to do that is to have a coherent biological defense strategy that enables it to better meet the challenges of the future.

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