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Is Vietnam Going to Hold a Military Exercise With Russia?

Russian media say that Russian and Vietnamese officers held a meeting to discuss military drills – which would be a controversial move amid Moscow’s war in Ukraine.

By Carl Thayer

On April 19, RIA Novosti filed a dispatch from Vladivostok quoting the press service of the Eastern Military District (VVO): “For the first time, a conference on planning a Russian-Vietnamese military exercise was organized and held at the headquarters of the Eastern Military District. The meeting of the delegations took place via video link.” No date was given on when this virtual meeting was held.

According to RIA Novosti, the Russian side was represented by Maj. Gen. Sergei Lagutkin, the head of the Regional Control Centre, and Col. Ivan Taraev, the head of the International Military Cooperation Department. The Vietnamese side was represented by Maj. Gen. Do Dinh Thanh, Commander of the Armored Corps. Both sides agreed on the subject of the military exercises, the dates, and venue. The two sides also discussed medical and logistical support, and cultural and sport programs.

According to Taraev the objective of the exercises would be “to improve the practical skills of commanders and staffs in organizing combat training operations and managing units in a difficult tactical environment, as well as developing non-standard solutions when performing tasks.” The two sides proposed “Continental Union-2022” as the name of the military exercises.

Vietnam has yet to confirm or deny officially that the planning meeting took place. On April 21, for example, at a press conference, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang responded to a direct question from Channel News Asia about the reported Russia-Vietnam military exercises, in these words, “Viet Nam’s consistent policy is that all of its defense cooperation with other countries – including delegation exchange, joint training and military exercises, games and contests – are meant to bolster friendship, solidarity, mutual trust and understanding, for the sake of peace, cooperation, and development in the region and in the world.”

Following the press conference, Vietnam’s English-language media (Hanoi Times, Viet Nam News, VietnamNet, Vietnam Times, VnExpress) published stories under the headline “Vietnam Responds to Reports of Planned Military Drills with Russia” by juxtaposing references from the Russian media with Hang’s official response.

Vietnam’s army newspaper, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, provided further details of discussions between Russian and Vietnamese military officials held on April 24. According to correspondent Viet Chung, on April 15 an online consultation between the two militaries took place. Maj. Gen. Do Dinh Thanh requested his Russian counterpart to assist Vietnam in preparing for the International Military Games (Army Games 2022) by allowing Vietnamese tanks and their crews to arrive prior to the start of the Games to familiarize themselves with the terrain prior to the start of the tank competition.

Viet Chung also reported that on April 22, Maj. Gen. Phạm Van Ty, deputy director of the Search and Rescue Department, represented Vietnam at the second online conference between foreign participants and the Russian Defense Ministry to discuss preparations for Army Games 2022. Ty reported that Vietnam would participate in 14 events.

Russia's International Military Games, or Army Games, were inaugurated in August 2015 and are an annual event held between July-September. Army Games 2021 involved 175 teams from 43 countries and territories competing in 34 events. Vietnam was an observer at the first Army Games 2015 and a regular participant from 2018. In 2021, Vietnam participated in 15 events and came in seventh place. For the first time, Vietnam hosted two competitions (sniper and accident zone).

Vietnam is one of twelve co-organizers for Army Games 2022 scheduled to be held from August 13-27, including 36 separate competitions. Vietnamese military representatives attended the first organizational meeting on September 2, 2021. At that time, 45 countries had indicated their intention to participate. On April 22 of this year, Russia announced that 237 teams from 31 countries had confirmed their participation in Army Games 2022.

Derek Grossman recently asserted on Twitter, "Another update on supposed Vietnam-Russia military exercise. Turns out this is likely much ado about nothing. Event was planned as an athletic competition between armies, i.e. not an actual joint exercise. Like I've said, Vietnam as a rule doesn't really do joint exercises."

To the contrary, Russia's Army Games 2022 is a "big deal" in its own right, given the number of participants and scope of activities. Army Games 2022 takes on added significance due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and efforts by the United States and European countries to sanction Russia and isolate it diplomatically. Vietnam has already distanced itself from these efforts by abstaining on two United Nations General Assembly votes against Russia, and voting against suspending Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council. Participating in Army Games 2022 could be taken as a further indication that Vietnam is siding with Russia against U.S. and European efforts to weaken and isolate it.

There are two expressions used by the Vietnamese military to describe what in English are included in the term "military exercise." Vietnam eschews the term *tap tran* that carries with it the negative connotation of a military exercise involving war fighting. Vietnam, however, participates in activities covered by the term *dien tap* that carries the positive connotation of a training or practical exercise.

Is it significant that Maj. Gen. Do Dinh Thanh, commander of the Armored Corps, was involved in discussions with Russian military officials in the Eastern Military District?

From August 11-19, 2021, for example, a detachment of Lao Armed Forces personnel took part in Laros-21 (Laos-Russia) at the Sergeevsky training ground, Primorsky Territory, Eastern Military District. Laros-21 was a counterterrorism exercise aimed at eliminating an illegal formation equipped with heavy armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, and grenade launchers.

Laros-21 involved a total of 500 Lao and Russian personnel, and 100 pieces of military equipment including Su-25 attack aircraft and Ka-52 assault helicopters. Part of the exercise involved live firing by tank crews interacting with the Eleron-3SV unmanned reconnaissance vehicle. At the end of this serial, Russian officers demonstrated "the methodology for organizing training in firepower and other basic subjects of combat training."

Given Vietnam's procurement of Russian T-90 main battle tanks in 2017, it is possible that Russia and Vietnam were planning something along the lines of Laros-21?

As of this writing, detailed accounts in the Russian media and the discrepancies between Russian and Vietnamese public versions of their meetings suggest two possibilities: (1) the discussions were about two separate engagements, the Army Games and a bilateral military training exercise; or (2) the discussions were solely about Vietnam's participation in Army Games 2022.