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Rebranding the People's Army: Vietnam's Modern Military Image ^[1]

The Dien Bien Phu Victory Parade, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the battle that ended French colonialism in Vietnam, is a significant part of the Vietnam People's Army's (VPA) ongoing campaign to present a new, more modern image of the military. Viewed in an overall image projection of the VPA, this effort signifies the authoritarian regime's interest in unveiling more of its traditionally confidential aspects of Vietnam to the public, both at home and abroad, fueling a comprehensive diplomatic strategy.

At first glance, this year's parade may appear typical and celebratory, following a structure and flow similar to previous significant parades. However, it deviates from expectations, marking the 70th anniversary of the Dien Bien Phu Battle without a large-scale display of the military's weapon platforms (the last parade with military equipment was organized in 1985). Instead, the composition and display of troop formation on the stage convey a series of messages that are open for public interpretation.

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, [in his parade speech](#), underscored the Dien Bien Phu victory as a pivotal moment not just in Vietnam's revolutionary history, but also as a catalyst for global anti-colonial movements in the 20th century. This historical legacy, celebrated with a focus on national unity and patriotism, reinforces the VPA's position as a symbol of Vietnam's identity. From the era of struggles to the post-reform development, the VPA embodies values of sacrifice, unity, justice, and loyalty, shaping Vietnam's national identity.

For this special occasion, the VPA has ingeniously adopted creative methods to publicize its legacy, bridging history with contemporary society. This includes [offline exhibitions](#) which showcase over 300 artifacts and documents. Adding an artistic flair to history, the "Path to Dien Bien" [art exhibition](#) features works by 57 artists, capturing the revolutionary spirit and historical milestones. These exhibitions, coupled with vibrant posters and digital campaigns, bring historical narratives closer to the public, ensuring the VPA's past glories remain pertinent in today's world.

The VPA showed that its relevance goes beyond military defense. By intertwining military events with economic activities, such as the [National Tourism Year in Dien Bien Province](#), the VPA demonstrates its multifaceted role in Vietnam's development. This integration highlights the military's contribution to national stability and economic growth, reinforcing its image as a pillar of society.

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discursive moves.

The most noticeable upgrade in the branding of VPA is the military-civilian bond, which contributes to softening the image of the army in the public eye. First, reports of supportive locals during the three-month rehearsal of the parade, wholehearted participation of Vietnamese nationals traveling to Dien Bien on D-day, and teary farewell between civilians and army personnel afterward trigger emotional attachment that the domestic population has for their army, reiterating the image of “People’s Army.”

Second, digital media have been utilized for more effective social penetration of information. The Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) mouthpiece, *Nhan Dan*, has deployed a special information campaign emphasizing the historical significance through multimedia content surrounding the celebration. From an exclusive multi-lingual website to specially-issued panoramic photos depicting the occurrence of the historic victory, the VPA has gained more traction in public discussion both before and after the parade. To engage better with the younger generation, the VPA has leveraged social media networks. At the event, some Vietnamese celebrities and viral content creators, with their KOL influence and expertise in navigating platforms like Facebook and TikTok, have brought the parade to social media virality.

Internationally, the VPA has executed some military diplomacy gestures on this occasion, seeking to enhance Vietnam's prestige and diplomatic standing. The inclusion of former adversaries in the Dien Bien Phu celebrations signifies a move towards reconciliation. Discourse depicting the victory intentionally averted name-calling the former state enemies, resonating with the VCP's intentionally blurry self/other distinction in its foreign policy rationale. In this light, this diplomatic gesture portrays Vietnam as “a friend” to all countries in the modern era, leaving the antagonistic encounters behind – a persistent image that the VCP has pursued since the 1990s.

For the first time, the parade included Vietnam's peacekeeping forces, highlighting their contributions to various humanitarian missions over the past decade. This showcase, combined with military diplomatic gestures, portrays Vietnam as “a responsible and active member of the international community” committed to maintaining peace and stability. This image reflects the VPA's shift toward a more altruistic message. Given that this narrative aligns closely with the self-proclaimed international standing announced by the VCP during the 13th National Congress in 2021, it is expected that the VPA will be increasingly used as a resource for Vietnam's national branding.

A notable aspect of the VPA's new image in the Dien Bien Phu battle commemoration is the domestic-international interplay in image building by emphasizing women's representation and ethnic diversity. Women in the VPA were widely featured in the parade with a strong association with peacekeeping troupes. Vietnamese women here are depicted as strong and integral members of the military, aligning with the national agenda for gender equality and empowerment. Such depiction also corresponds to Vietnam's new commitment to UN Women early this year, namely “the National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security.” The connection between women's representation in the parade and the diplomatic initiative highlights the VPA's commitment to elevating women's roles within the military and society both domestically and internationally.

The parade also featured personnel in traditional costumes of various ethnic groups indigenous to Dien Bien province, celebrating Vietnam's cultural richness and unity. In this light, the VPA sends a powerful message of unity and inclusion. This approach not only strengthens national solidarity in areas of ethnic complexity but also addresses international concerns about ethnic minority rights in Vietnam.

The VPA is navigating a new chapter in military branding, blending historical pride with modern aspirations. The Dien Bien Phu Victory Parade encapsulates this transformation, combining patriotic fervor with innovative public engagement strategies and carefully crafted discursive moves. This strategic rebranding reflects a shifting mindset within Vietnam's Communist Party regarding the use of military heritage. The VPA's evolving image suggests a willingness to publicize this once-confidential component of the authoritarian regime. The interlaced messages between historical legacy and modern development, between domestic and international impact embedded in the VPA's narrative at the parade highlight the sophistication of its military rebranding, aiming to build a cohesive and progressive image both at home and abroad.

This case study shows the regime's efforts to use public diplomacy strategy surrounding the VPA's image to steer the two-level game in its favor: domestic party's interest in strengthening legitimacy and international national interest in raising international profile (with the priority placed on the former). More importantly, the presence of a military institution in Vietnam's public diplomacy calculation that has emphasized cultural assets and people-to-people exchange is unprecedented. As Vietnam continues to assert its place on the global stage, the long-term trajectory of this military branding effort warrants close observation.
