

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Vietnam People's Army: From People's Warfare to Military Modernization?* By Zachary Abuza. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reinner, 2025. Hardcover: 321pp.**

Zachary Abuza's *The Vietnamese People's Army: From People's Warfare to Military Modernization?* is one of the most comprehensive English-language studies on Vietnam's armed forces to date. While the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) has long been central to the country's revolutionary identity and post-war political order, its development in recent decades remains comparatively understudied, particularly in comparison to Vietnam's diplomacy and economic reforms. Abuza fills this gap by situating the VPA within the broader context of Vietnam's transformation after the 1986 *Đổi Mới* (renovation) reforms, evolving threat perceptions and the structural challenges of modernizing the military of a small, resource-constrained state.

The book opens with an analysis of Vietnam's strategic culture, tracing its evolution over the past two millennia, before focusing on the post-reunification and *Đổi Mới* periods. Abuza identifies four enduring pillars: vulnerability to major power interference; the doctrine of "people's war", self-reliance in foreign policy and defence production; and the traditional view of Indochina as a unified strategic battlefield. He argues that while these principles have evolved during the reform era, they continue to shape Vietnam's military stance.

The subsequent chapters examine the VPA's institutional embeddedness within the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Through mechanisms such as dual leadership and the commissar

system, the VPA functions not as a national military in the Western sense but as the CPV's armed wing, tasked with defending both national sovereignty and the socialist regime. However, Abuza's suggestion that this institutional setup has delegitimized the VPA in the eyes of society seems exaggerated. Chapters Four and Five analyse the organizational structure of the Ministry of National Defence (MND), its expansive responsibilities and the VPA's budget limitations, as well as its procurement methods and defence-industrial base. Particular attention is given to Viettel Group—a state-owned multinational telecommunications company administered by the MND—and military-linked shipyards, with emphasis on enduring commercial ventures and the growing problem of corruption. His discussion about the diversification of arms sources, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, is timely and insightful.

Chapter Six surveys the services, including the army, navy, air force, coast guard, maritime militia and the emerging cyber command. Abuza highlights Vietnam's advances in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and C4I systems—weapons, combat management, command and control—while underscoring persistent conservatism and undertraining caused by limited resources. The section on peacekeeping contributions and their diplomatic importance is especially valuable. Chapter Seven turns to the VPA's domestic role, noting its prestige alongside challenges such as conscription, rising socio-economic divides and occasional involvement in suppressing unrest. Sensitive issues, including tensions with the Ministry of Public Security, are addressed with unusual candour.

Chapters Eight and Nine examine Vietnam's defence diplomacy. Abuza first reviews ties with traditional and emerging partners such as Russia, Israel and South Korea, before offering a detailed analysis of relations with the United States. This discussion is particularly rich, covering war legacy issues, arms transfers, coast guard cooperation and the difficulty of building strategic trust. Abuza convincingly demonstrates that US-Vietnam defence cooperation remains constrained despite the deepening of contacts. The concluding chapter raises the key question of whether the VPA has developed credible deterrent capabilities, particularly against China, given resource limits, incomplete joint force development and slowing modernization.

The book's major strength lies in its breadth. Abuza weaves together diverse elements—strategic culture, party-military relations, organizational design, defence-industrial capacity, service-level modernization and defence diplomacy—into a coherent narrative. Few works on Vietnam's military in English attempt such a comprehensive survey. Abuza's integrative approach and willingness to address sensitive topics often overlooked in official and academic discussions—such as corruption in land deals and procurement, the continued existence of military-owned businesses and inequities in the conscription process—make the book a valuable reference not only for Vietnam experts but also for scholars studying comparative civil-military relations and small-state defence modernization. Abuza's candour certainly boosts the credibility of his analysis. The section on Vietnam's peacekeeping operations and their symbolic significance for diplomacy is a particular highlight, as it connects domestic military reforms with Vietnam's global image.

Yet the book has limitations. Most notable is its analytical approach, which is heavily shaped by American strategic and doctrinal frameworks. While this offers clarity for Western readers, it risks overlooking distinctive aspects of Vietnamese defence thought. For example, Abuza's claim that Hanoi abandoned the concept of Indochina as a single strategic battlefield (p. 41) neglects the development of the indigenous notion of "strategic space", which remains a key element of Vietnamese security discourse. Likewise, reducing "all-people's defense" to guerrilla warfare (p. 26) obscures the layered and institutionalized nature of this doctrine, which combines local militias, regular forces, and inter-service coordination into a uniquely Vietnamese form of cohesion. The tone can also lean towards pessimism, with phrases such as "Potemkin village" modernization (p. 15), which, although provocative, oversimplifies what is arguably a gradual and adaptive modernization process. Methodologically, reliance on secondary sources and open-source reporting—inevitable given the opacity of Vietnam's defence establishment—sometimes leads to his arguments sounding more speculative than conclusive. Moreover, dependence on procurement data and official budgets risks underestimating the informal mechanisms through which the VPA allocates resources.

Nonetheless, *The Vietnamese People's Army: From People's Warfare to Military Modernization?* makes a substantial contribution

to the existing literature on Southeast Asian military affairs. It provides a rare, systematic and detailed account of one of the region's most important yet least understood armed forces, and the analysis is indispensable to scholars of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian security, as well as for policymakers seeking to understand the VPA's evolving role in domestic politics and regional strategy.

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