

## **Parsing the News About the Vietnam-Russia Joint Military Drills**

**While Moscow trumpeted the announcement in state media, Hanoi's announcement of the exercise has been much more cautious.**

By Hai Hong Nguyen

In recent weeks, observers have expressed a range of different reactions to the news of a possible joint Russia-Vietnam military exercise in the months to come, alongside Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. According to an April 19 report in the Russian state-run news agency, RIA Novosti, which quoted a statement by Ivan Tاراev, head of the International Military Cooperation of the Russian Ministry of Defense, the two countries have agreed to conduct a joint military exercise. The agreement was reportedly made in a virtual meeting of Maj. Gen. Sergei Lagutkin, the head of Russia's Regional Control Centre, and Maj. Gen. Do Dinh Thanh, commander of the Vietnamese military's Armored Corps.

The report quoted Tاراev as saying that at the virtual meeting, the two sides agreed to name the exercise "Continental Union – 2022," and defined it as an opportunity "to improve the practical skills of commanders and staff in organizing combat training operations and maintaining units in a difficult tactical environment, as well as developing non-standard solutions when performing tasks."

Vietnam's response to the news was interesting. On April 21, at a regular press conference, the spokesperson of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) did not directly answer a question from Channel News Asia about the exercise. Instead, she reiterated Vietnam's defense diplomacy policy, which included exchanges, joint training, workshops, and joining competitions with a view to "strengthening friendship cooperation, solidarity, trust and mutual understanding for peace, cooperation, and development in the region and across the world."

In the meantime, according to Quan Doi Nhan Dan (People's Army), an official outlet of the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense (MND), representatives from the Vietnamese and Russian defense ministries held a second virtual meeting to discuss preparations for this year's International Army Training Competition (commonly known as the Army Games). The Games are to be hosted by the Russian Defense Ministry with the participation of other registered countries' armies. Notably, this meeting took place on April 22, the day after the above-mentioned MOFA press conference. Quan Doi Nhan Dan continued its report by stating that in a preceding virtual consultation held on April 15, the Head of the Vietnamese MND delegation, Maj. Gen. Do Dinh Thanh requested that the Russian side "enable the Vietnamese Armored team to arrive in Russia before the Games to join training exercises, become familiarized with the terrain, and exchange experiences to improve the competition outcomes if the Army Games 2022 is to be held in the coming time frame."

Reading between the lines, there are a number of conclusions that can be drawn. First, the two virtual meetings between representatives from the Vietnamese and Russian defense ministries were real, but Russia did not announce the second meeting, which focused on the Army Games. However the Vietnamese tactically and wisely combined the contents of the two

meetings into one common news report, aiming to explain the meaning of “joint military exercise,” as reported by the Russian media. A possible interpretation was that the Vietnamese did not intend to publicly speak about the meetings given the sensitivity of the issue given the background of the war in Ukraine, but it then had to do so in response to public reactions and concerns both at home and abroad following Russia’s media announcement. David Hutt, a Southeast Asia affairs analyst, warned in the *Asia Times* that Vietnam could face U.S. sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act adopted by the U.S. Congress in 2017. With the combined news report, Vietnam sent a message to the U.S. that the so-called joint military exercise was merely a game in which it has participated since 2018 and concurrently answered the skeptical question raised by Carl Thayer in an article published in *The Diplomat* recently.

In 2021, Vietnam co-hosted the Army Games and decided to continue to take part in this year’s iteration of the Games. Vietnam’s continued participation in the Army Games was reaffirmed in the documents signed by Vietnamese and Russian Defense Ministers after their talks in Moscow in December 2021.

Second, the message sent out and published in the Vietnamese and Russian media outlets disclosed differing objectives of the two sides. Russia, facing tough sanctions from the U.S., the European Union, Japan, Australia, and other countries for its invasion of Ukraine, chose to make a public announcement and use a vague phrase – joint military drills – instead of calling it the Army Games. By making such an announcement regarding Vietnam, its Soviet-era ally and a “reliable partner to all members of the international community,” Russia anticipated showing that not all countries were opposing its invasion of Ukraine.

However, on the other hand, Vietnam did not want to trigger further anger from the U.S. following its two “abstentions” on the March 2 and March 21 U.N. General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and its opposition to removing Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council on April 8.

Third, given that the issue was related to military activities, the meetings of Russian-Vietnamese military officials and Vietnam’s participation in the Army Games 2022 were confirmed by MND, not MOFA. Vietnam considers this activity as part of its defense diplomacy, which constitutes the country’s comprehensive state-to-state diplomacy. Therefore, leaving the issue with the military branch would save the face of Vietnam on the eve of the Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh’s visit to Washington to attend the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit on May 12-13. Furthermore, an explanation from MND in this context carried heavier weight than one from MOFA. Chinh is also expected to speak on the Vietnam-U.S. relationship at an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on May 11. If asked about Vietnam’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the military exercise, Chinh’s expected response will surely be no different from his statements given at the press conference with his visiting Japanese counterpart recently in Hanoi and the MOFA statement mentioned above.

Vietnam has a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, a fact that is well known to everyone. Last year, the two countries’ presidents issued a joint statement during the Vietnamese president’s visit to Russia. The statement emphasized a shared vision of the Vietnamese-Russian comprehensive strategic partnership, in which military cooperation is defined as a “special pillar” of the partnership. There is no doubt that for at least a decade to come, the Russian supply

of weapons will remain critically important to Vietnam's efforts to strengthen its defense capability.

However, Vietnam is also aware that any public sign of taking sides with Russia while the latter's troops and tanks are still occupying Ukraine could expose it to consequences and cost it much-needed U.S. support in the South China Sea. Surely, Vietnamese diplomats would not be so naïve as to take this risk to Vietnam's national interests at a time when the West is costly watching those countries who are continuing to do business with Russia at a time of increasing international tension.

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