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VIETNAM RELEASES LONG-AWAITED 2019 DEFENSE WHITE PAPER

Vietnam just released its long awaited Defense White Paper. This policy document has been a decade in the making and its release was anticipated several times during this period.

The Defense White Paper 2019 was formally launched on November 25 at a ceremony attended by senior officials from defense agencies, the Central Commission for Information and Communications, Central Commission for External Affairs, Office of the President, Office of the National Assembly, other ministries, as well as foreign Defense Attaches and diplomats, and domestic and international representatives of the press and media.

The Defense White Paper is divided into three parts: (1) strategic context and defense policy, (2) building national defense capabilities, building defense forces, building the all-people's defense posture and management of national defense and (3) the Vietnam People's Army I (VPA), militia and self-defense forces (their history, main functions and missions, organization of the Ministry of National Defense, and development of the VPA, militia and self-defense forces.

The official launch of the Defense White Paper 2019 was addressed by Major General Nguyen Van Than, deputy director of the Institute for Defense Strategy, Than briefed the audience on three main themes - peace, self-defense and transparency.

Deputy Minister of National Defense Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh spoke at length. He noted that there had been significant changes in Vietnam's strategic environment and new challenges since the last Defense White Paper was issued. He noted in particular new developments in military arts, new policies for building and defending Vietnam, and new directions for building the VPA.

Vinh spelled out the objectives for defending Vietnam as follows: "to firmly safeguard national independence, freedom, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and national interests; to protect the Party, State and people; to ensure national security, public order and safety; and create a stable peaceful environment for national socio-economic development.

Vinh also addressed four major issues: cooperating and struggling, four no's, the defense budget, and defense cooperation with foreign countries.

First, Vinh succinctly summarized Vietnam's policy of "cooperating and struggling" with outside powers first adopted in 2003 and reaffirmed in 2013. He stated that Vietnam respects the "independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and [mutual] benefits of all nations in accordance with international law..." And Vietnam will "persistently struggle and settle all disputes via peaceful means based on international law, while carrying out necessary measures when its sovereignty and national [interests] are threatened."

Three no's

As for the aspect of struggle, Vinh was crystal clear: "we frankly point out differences between us and other countries so as to seek appropriate approaches to settle the issue and protect our national interests. In short, we will uncompromisingly struggle against anything that harms our national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and political system."

Second, Vinh summarized the defense policy three no's included in the 2009 Defense White Paper as follows: "Vietnam will not join any military alliances, will not associate with one party to oppose another, will not allow foreign countries to set up a military [base] in the country..." Vinh then added a fourth point: Vietnam "will not use force or threaten the use of force in international relations."

Vinh also spelled out the conditions under which Vietnam would use force.

"We build our national defense capabilities for peaceful purposes" but if Vietnam is invaded "we have to bear arms but our struggle is for peace. In other words, we only resort to the use of the military [force] for self-defense when the country is attacked, and the national independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and national interests are violated."

Third, Vinh revealed that Vietnam's defense budget had been increased modestly from two percent of GDP in 2010 to 2.36 percent in 2018 or U.S \$5.8 billion.

Fourth, Vinh noted that "Vietnam's defense policy includes both cooperation and struggle but it gives first and foremost priority to cooperation in promoting its defense cooperation with other countries and international organizations."

Vinh asserted that the publication of the new Defense White Paper was designed to demonstrate Vietnam's transparency, promote understanding, and build trust and confidence with Vietnam's neighbors.

As at this writing, no electronic copy of Vietnam's Defense White Paper 2019 is available on the home page of the Ministry of National Defense. There is no reference to the White Paper on the People's Army Online or the Vietnam Government Portal.

This would appear to be a serious deficiency in Vietnam's attempt to inform its neighbors and the international community in a timely fashion about its current defense policies.

Diplomats report that hard copies of Defense White Paper 2019 will be distributed at overseas ceremonies to mark Vietnam's 75th National Defense Day on December 22.

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