

Why the Bear is Back: Russian Military Presence in Vietnam

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Global Research, June 15, 2015

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

Russia-Vietnam ties that seemed to be cooling after the end of the Cold War are warming up all over again. More than 20 years after Moscow abandoned its largest foreign base, Russian military aircraft are once again welcome visitors at Cam Ranh Bay.

The renewed Russian presence in Vietnam has predictably set the alarm bells ringing in the Pentagon, with the Commander of the US Army in the Pacific confirming that Russian strategic bombers circling the massive American military base in Guam are being refuelled at Cam Ranh Bay.

On March 11 Washington wrote to Hanoi, requesting that the Vietnamese authorities not assist Russian bomber flights in the Asia-Pacific. The Vietnamese reaction was to remain publicly silent. According to Phuong Nguyen of the Washington-based Center for Strategic & International Studies,

“From the perspective of many Vietnamese officials who fought against the United States during the war, Moscow helped train generations of Vietnamese leaders and supported Hanoi during its decades of international isolation.”

Nguyen adds:

“Few things are more vital to Vietnam than an independent foreign policy. Given Vietnam’s complex history, its leaders do not want their country to be caught between major powers again. Anything that resembles U.S. interference in Vietnam’s dealings with Russia could unnecessarily aggravate this fear.”

Although the Vietnamese consider the US an increasingly important partner in Southeast Asia, it’s Russia that tops the pecking order. As per an agreement inked in November 2014, Russian warships visiting the deep water port of Cam Ranh only have to give prior notice to the Vietnamese authorities before steaming in whereas all other foreign navies are limited to just one annual ship visit to Vietnamese ports.

Why Vietnam matters

Located at the gateway to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Vietnam is of critical importance to Russia. Permanent basing of air and naval assets in Vietnam helps the Russian Pacific Fleet solve its problem of having to pass through the narrow straits of the Sea of Japan to gain access to the Pacific.

To be sure, the current Russian presence is minimal compared with the firepower of the 1980s, when Moscow's Pacific fleet consisted of an incredible 826 ships, including 133 submarines, 190 naval bomber jets and 150 anti-submarine aircraft. Even back then, Moscow's buildup was hardly aggressive. According to Alvin H. Bernstein of the US Naval War College, it was "unlikely to have a specific, aggressive, regional intent since that would be quite out of character for a power" that has revealed itself as "cautious and non-confrontational".

Three decades on, Moscow under President Vladimir Putin is once again seeking to enhance its role as both an Asian and global power, and as Bernstein noted, the country wants to be "prepared for all contingencies and opportunities".

It's also part of Vietnam's Look East policy. In fact, much before US President Barack Obama announced its pivot to Asia, Russia was already pivoting East, making inroads into once pro-American countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

However, it is in Vietnam where Russian diplomacy is in overdrive. But first a quick flashback.

Vietnam is a small country with a military that punches way above its weight. For those with short memories, the Southeast Asia country handed out resounding defeats to France and the U.S. in back to back wars. Stupendous bravery, clever battle tactics and a never-say-die spirit were decisive in winning those wars, but a key factor was that the Vietnamese had powerful friends.

During the Vietnam War, Russia played a critical role in Vietnam's defence, supplying a massive quantity of weapons. Over the course of the 21-year war Russian assistance was worth \$2 million a day. In return, Vietnam offered Russia free use of the Cam Ranh Bay base. As part of this agreement, the Russians stationed MiG-23 fighters, Tu-16 tankers, Tu-95 long range bombers and Tu-142 maritime reconnaissance aircraft at the base.

Cam Ranh became Moscow's largest naval base for forward deployment outside Europe. Some 20 ships were berthed daily at the base, along with six nuclear attack submarines. The base played a pivotal role in helping Russia in its Cold War faceoff against American-led forces in Asia and the Pacific. For instance, when the U.S. Seventh Fleet sailed up the Bay of Bengal to put pressure on India during the 1971 India Pakistan War, the Russian Pacific Fleet was quickly able to dispatch nuclear-armed submarines and warships to defend India.

Despite Cam Ranh Bay's importance to Moscow geopolitically and its value as an intelligence gathering post, the Russian presence practically evaporated after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Military bases of the scale of Cam Ranh Bay cost an insane amount of money to operate and Russia no longer had cash to burn. In 2001, even the listening station was abandoned.

China gets Klubbed

Although the Russian military presence declined, strong ties continued to bind Russia and Vietnam. In the backdrop of Vietnam's high-decibel spat with China for control of the oil-rich Spratly Islands, Hanoi went on a high-octane hardware hunt. Vietnam's legendary air force acquired 24 Su-30 combat jets from Russia, and by the end of 2015, it will operate 36 Sukhoi, becoming the third largest operator of this advanced super-maneuverable aircraft.

However, it is the Vietnam People's Army Navy (VPAN) that is really beefing up. In 2009, Vietnam signed a \$3.2 billion deal with Russia that includes six Kilo class submarines and construction of a submarine facility at Cam Ranh Bay.

Another big-ticket acquisition is that of 50 Klub supersonic cruise missiles for its Kilos, making Vietnam the first Southeast Asian nation to arm its submarine fleet with a land attack missile.

Weighing two tons, the Klub has a 200 kg warhead. The anti-ship version has a range of 300 km, but speeds up to 3,000 km an hour during its last minute or so of flight. According to Strategy Page, the land attack version does away with the high speed final approach feature and that makes possible a larger 400 kg warhead.

What makes the Klub particularly dangerous when attacking ships is that during its final approach, which begins when the missile is about 15 km from its target, the missile speeds up," reports Strategy Page. "Up to that point, the missile travels at an altitude of about a hundred feet. This makes the missile more difficult to detect. That plus the high speed final approach means that it covers that last 15 km in less than 20 seconds. This makes it more difficult for current anti-missile weapons to take it down.

Russian built submarines armed with the potent Klubs are expected to play a critical role in any conflict in the South China Sea. According to one analyst, the land-attack cruise missiles mark a "massive shift" advancing Vietnam's naval capabilities. "They've given themselves a much more powerful deterrent that complicates China's strategic calculations."

It is believed Chinese warships have no effective defense against missile like Klub, which why they have gone ballistic about Russia selling them to Vietnam.

While the Kilos are being built, Russia and India are currently in charge of training Vietnamese officers who will work in the submarines.

Further Russian firepower

Plus, in 2011 the VPAN acquired two Gepard-class guided missile stealth frigates from Russia at a cost of \$300 million, with the Gepard fleet set to increase to six by 2017. These versatile ships are equipped for surface attacks, anti-submarine warfare and air defense.

The VPAN's other acquisitions include four Svetlyak-class fast patrol boats with anti-ship missiles; 12 frigates and corvettes of Russian origin; and two Molniya-class missile fast attack ships built with Russian assistance, with four more expected by 2016.

Vietnam has also acquired advanced radars; 40 Yakhont and 400 Kh-35 Uran anti-ship missiles; Kh-59MK anti-ship cruise missiles; R-73 (AA-11 Archer) short-range air-to-air missiles; 200 SA-19 Grison surface-to-air missiles; two batteries of the legendary S-300 surface-to-air systems; VERA passive radio locators; and two batteries of the K-300P Bastion coastal defense missiles.

Economic angle

According to a research paper by Portugal-based academics Phuc Thi Tran, Alena Vysotskaya G. Vieira and Laura C. Ferreira-Pereira,

“The acquisition of military capabilities is critical, not only purely for the sake of defense and strategic calculations, but also for the important function it plays in the safeguarding of both economic interests and the security of oil field explorations in the South China Sea. This latter aspect is particularly critical given the role that Russia has been playing herein. Indeed, the lion’s share of these exploitation projects has being undertaken by Vietnam jointly with Russia.”

While defense gets more traction in the media, it is energy that’s the single biggest area of cooperation between Moscow and Hanoi. The Russia-Vietnam joint venture Vietsovetpetro has generated big dividends for both countries. The company has produced more than 185 million tons of crude oil and more than 21 billion cubic meters of gas from oilfields in the South China Sea. Nearly 80 per cent of Vietnamese oil and gas comes from Vietsovetpetro, and the income corresponds to around 25 per cent of GDP.

Russia has also made considerable investments in Vietnam’s heavy and light industries, transportation, post, aquatic culture and fishing. These projects have led to other spinoffs – impressed by the profits generated by Russian corporations, a slew of other companies such as Mobil, BP and TOTAL have ramped up investments in Vietnam.

Vietnam’s strategic hedging towards Russia is closely connected to its economic cooperation in oil exploration, which brings significant economic benefits to both sides. Strong defense ties between the two countries has enabled Vietnam to acquire modern military equipment, providing the country with the ability to advance joint explorations of oil and gas despite growing Chinese opposition towards these projects.

At the same time, Russia is returning to reclaim its great power legacy. It offers Moscow a myriad of opportunities to secure political and economic influence with the various emerging powers in the heart of the most dynamic region on the planet.

But, don’t blame Vietnam since this country is not an exception but a confirmation to the prevailing Asian rule. As professor Anis Bajrektarevic well states in his luminary work ‘*No Asian Century*’:

“What becomes apparent, nearly at the first glance, is the absence of any pan-Asian security/multilateral structure. Prevailing security structures are bilateral and mostly asymmetric. They range from the clearly defined and enduring non-aggression security treaties, through less formal arrangements, up to the Ad hoc cooperation accords on specific issues. The presence of the multilateral regional settings is limited to a very few spots in the largest continent, and even then, they are rarely mandated with (politico-military) security issues in their declared scope of work. Another striking feature is that most of the existing bilateral structures have an Asian state on one side, and either peripheral or external protégé country on the other side which makes them nearly per definition asymmetric.”

Rakesh Krishnan Simha is a New Zealand-based journalist and foreign affairs analyst. According to him, he writes on stuff the media distorts, misses or ignores. Rakesh started his career in 1995 with New Delhi-based *Business World* magazine, and later worked in a string of positions at other leading media houses such as *India Today*, *Hindustan Times*, *Business Standard* and the *Financial Express*, where he was the news editor.

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