

# Can Vietnam's Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?

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**KEYWORDS:** VIETNAM; VIETNAMESE MILITARY; SOUTH CHINA SEA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This article examines Vietnam's warfighting capabilities for defending its disputed claims with China in the South China Sea.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Vietnam's military modernization is increasingly focused on deterring China from seizing disputed territory in the South China Sea. By developing and fielding select capabilities—including Kilo-class submarines, Su-30MK2 maritime strike fighters, a network of anti-access missiles, and other weapon systems—Hanoi has likely achieved its core objective of convincing Beijing of the hardships it would face in a military conflict against Vietnam in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, if deterrence fails because Beijing believes it can mitigate the substantial but reasonable risks, then Vietnam is probably incapable of sustaining an extended, large-scale, or high-intensity conventional conflict in the region. This conclusion is supported by an analysis of its evolving warfighting doctrine in the air and sea domains, lack of jointness and unrealistic training activities, and shortcomings in the Vietnamese military's maritime domain awareness capabilities and weapon systems interoperability.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- U.S. policymakers should seek specific areas of cooperation and collaboration with Vietnam in the defense and military spheres that would enhance Hanoi's warfighting capabilities. For example, the U.S. could pursue closer collaboration on coastal radar, satellite and other communications systems, maritime surveillance aircraft (including unarmed drones), and naval patrol craft.
- A dramatically reduced role for Washington in the Asia-Pacific would greatly increase the prospects of China employing bullying tactics against Vietnam. Hanoi could respond by accelerating and expanding its own military modernization efforts. Yet it is equally plausible that Hanoi would instead simply seek ways to accommodate Chinese demands, calculating that an arms race would be destabilizing and unwinnable. Neither scenario is in the strategic interests of the U.S. or Vietnam.
- Through sustained U.S. leadership in the region, the U.S. and Vietnam should deepen their burgeoning defense partnership to ensure that Hanoi stands a better chance in a significant military confrontation with China.

At the head of his participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting held in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November, China's paramount leader, Xi Jinping, issued a statement entitled "For a New Vista in China-Vietnam Friendship."<sup>1</sup> In this statement, Xi lauded the "camaraderie and brotherhood" forged by China and Vietnam's shared Communist revolutionary activities, and he praised their history of "good neighborliness." These factors, he argued, should enable Beijing and Hanoi to find a "fundamental and durable solution" to the most pressing bilateral dispute—their substantial overlapping sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. By the end of his visit, Xi and the Vietnamese general secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, agreed to manage tensions in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Despite Xi's optimistic message and the positive outcome, Vietnamese leaders are increasingly concerned that China's actions in the region are destabilizing and meant to alter the status quo. Beijing, for instance, could eventually leverage its expanding military footprint in the South China Sea—which now includes naval and air patrols as well as upgraded military facilities with runways sitting atop reclaimed land features under de facto Chinese control—to seize additional features that are currently under Vietnam's control. Additionally, China has been attempting to administer substantial portions of the South China Sea with the China Coast Guard frequently patrolling these waters, making them off-limits to Vietnamese fishermen even when they fall within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Vietnam has approximately one million fishermen and 120,000 fishing boats throughout the country's EEZ, and its leaders have emphasized linkages between coastal economic development and the ability to access and exploit resources in the South China Sea. In other words, the South China Sea is Vietnam's economic lifeline, with significant implications for the country's sovereignty, security, and domestic and political stability.

In the event that China and Vietnam are unable to peacefully resolve their differences in the region, what are the prospects that the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) can stand up to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in a confrontation in the South China Sea?<sup>3</sup> This article attempts to make such an assessment based on an evaluation of several key factors, including

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<sup>1</sup> Xi Jinping, "For a New Vista in China-Vietnam Friendship," Xinhua, November 10, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Huang, "China, Vietnam Sign Cooperation Pacts in Bid to Play Down South China Sea Tensions," *South China Morning Post*, November 14, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, "VPA" refers to Vietnam's ground, navy, air, and border forces as well as maritime police. All of these forces are subordinate to the Ministry of National Defence. To avoid confusion, the term "army" is used to specifically denote Vietnam's ground forces.

the VPA's changing military doctrine, organization, training, personnel, and capabilities. It notes substantial improvements to the VPA in recent years, but also highlights remaining weaknesses that the military needs to address to make itself a more credible fighting force. The article is divided into the following seven sections:

- ≈ pp. 116–18 describe the recent history of Vietnamese-Chinese relations over the South China Sea.
- ≈ pp. 118–19 examine the VPA's capabilities and efforts to modernize the Vietnamese military and discuss the reprioritization of air, maritime, and missile system assets.
- ≈ pp. 119–22 analyze the VPA's doctrine and attempt to transplant its land-centric concept of “all-people's war” into its emerging operational doctrines for air and maritime combat.
- ≈ pp. 123–24 assess the organizational structure of the VPA, in particular the weaknesses posed by the parochialism of the army.
- ≈ pp. 124–27 outline the human resources and training of the VPA, arguing that the lack of quality training opportunities is preventing the forces from achieving greater effectiveness.
- ≈ pp. 127–30 address maritime domain awareness and intelligence gathering and highlight deficiencies in these systems' interoperability and capabilities.
- ≈ pp. 130–34 examine the implications for regional stability and identify areas where the United States could usefully support Vietnam.

#### VIETNAMESE CONCERNS GROWING IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Vietnamese concerns about Chinese designs on the South China Sea are nothing new. In January 1974, for example, a brief naval skirmish between South Vietnamese and Chinese warships resulted in Vietnam's total loss of its holdings in the Paracel Islands. Another brief encounter in the Spratly Islands in March 1988 resulted in the deaths of dozens of Vietnamese sailors at Johnson South Reef and the loss of the reef itself. Despite these violent incidents, bilateral tensions remained relatively contained until May 2014 when China moved an oil rig into disputed waters. This decision sparked a months-long maritime standoff, with China sending overwhelming force to the region, including not only coast guard ships and fishing trawlers but also naval and air assets. Although Beijing did not employ these military assets in the standoff, its coast guard aggressively rammed Vietnamese vessels until the incident ended when China withdrew from its position.

The seriousness of this incident prompted the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to reconsider Vietnam's relationship with China. For instance, during Vietnam's 12th Party Congress in January 2016, a permanent member of the party's secretariat, Le Hong Anh, gave an authoritative speech that highlighted the South China Sea as being the most challenging area for Vietnam in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Then, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, Senior Lieutenant General and Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh for the first time publicly used the term *đấu tranh*—defined as “political struggle” or “political agitation”—to describe Vietnam's increasingly antagonistic relationship with China.<sup>5</sup> He noted that while Vietnam seeks to strengthen cooperation with China “to find common points in strategic interests,” it simultaneously must “struggle openly with a constructive spirit.” He went on to state that China was responsible for “changes to the status quo along with the threat of militarization.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, since the May 2014 incident involving the Chinese oil rig, Hanoi has been referring to a “new situation” with Beijing, suggesting the advent of a more adversarial dynamic.<sup>7</sup>

The VCP leadership's growing concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea are only reinforcing the wisdom of their plan to modernize the VPA. As early as January 2007, the VCP adopted a resolution entitled “Maritime Strategy toward the Year 2020,” which prioritizes modernizing the country's air and maritime assets. This resolution is supported by another program—officially titled “Adjustments to the VPA's Organization

<sup>4</sup> Van Hieu, “Báo cáo kiểm điểm sự lãnh đạo của BCH Trung ương khoá XI” [Report on Criticism of XI Central Committee's Leadership], Voice of Vietnam, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, January 21, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The Vietnamese concept of “cooperation and struggle” (*vừa hợp tác vừa đấu tranh*), perhaps first introduced by the VCP in 2014, applies to defending Hanoi's “national interest” (*lợi ích dân tộc*) against external states. For more information, see X. Linh et al., “Thủ tướng: Vừa hợp tác, vừa đấu tranh với TQ” [Prime Minister: Cooperation and Struggle with China], VietNamNet, November 19, 2014. This concept has since been consistently reaffirmed by the VCP. Senior Lieutenant General Chi added the concept of *đấu tranh*, however, to describe the nature of Vietnam's new relationship with China. Vietnamese officials commonly use “new situation” as a code term to describe the growing possibility of an armed conflict with China in the South China Sea. For the full statement, see Nguyen Chi Vinh, “The Challenges of Conflict Resolution: Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh” (presentation at the Shangri-La Dialogue, fourth plenary session, Singapore, June 5, 2016). For more on “cooperation and struggle” generally, see Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-U.S. Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 183–99. For more information on the use of the term “new situation,” see “Vietnam Builds Military Muscle to Face China,” Reuters, December 19, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Nguyen, “The Challenges of Conflict Resolution.” It is worth highlighting that Vietnam's public blaming and shaming of China's activities in the South China Sea represents a dramatic departure from past official statements. A good example is Vietnam's last defense white paper, issued in 2009, which only discusses relations with China in a cooperative context. See Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, “Một số nội dung cơ bản của chiến lược bảo vệ tổ quốc trong tình hình mới” [Core Contents of the Strategy to Protect the Country under New Situations], *Tap chí Quốc phòng toàn dân*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, June 10, 2014.

until 2020”—that is aimed at converting the military into a more “compact, powerful, mobile, and flexible” fighting force. According to a recent analysis of the program, it focuses specifically on upgrading the Vietnam People’s Navy (VPM), Vietnam Air Defence–Air Force (VAD-AF), and Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) “in the areas of communications, electronic combat, and technical reconnaissance.”<sup>8</sup> This will require the VPA to transform itself from a traditionally ground-centric military force into one that is capable of projecting limited power in the air and sea domains.

To accommodate the high cost of these military modernization efforts, Vietnam is spending more on defense. Strong economic growth—consistently hovering around 6.0% over the last decade and approximately 6.2% in 2016—has been predictable enough that it has inspired confidence in the VCP leadership to increase military spending each year while keeping the percentage of GDP spent on defense steady at 2.3%.<sup>9</sup> Although Vietnam’s defense budget is a closely guarded state secret, Western sources generally estimate that the VPA’s budget is currently between \$4.2 and \$4.9 billion and will rise to \$6.2 billion by 2020.<sup>10</sup> Hanoi’s quiet network of military-run businesses, however, likely raises this figure significantly.<sup>11</sup>

### MAKE CHINA THINK TWICE

Realizing that it cannot hope to outmatch the numerical and technological superiority of the PLA in the air and sea domains, Vietnam instead seeks to develop a more modest array of offsetting and retaliatory military capabilities to deter Beijing from seizing disputed territory in the South China Sea.

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<sup>8</sup> Phuong Nguyen, “High Ambitions, Tall Orders for Vietnam’s Military,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 2, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, “Vietnam” ~ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview>. As a source of comparison, Vietnam’s official defense budget is dwarfed by other countries also worried about China. For example, Taiwan is slated to spend approximately \$11.6 billion on defense in 2018, while Japan could spend as much as \$48.1 billion in 2018—up from around only \$6 billion just the year before.

<sup>10</sup> “Defense Budget Overview,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: Southeast Asia*, July 25, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> According to an unprecedented statement in January 2015, Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defence disclosed combined annual earnings for its military businesses of \$13.7 billion, which, if true, represented nearly 7% of Vietnam’s GDP for the year. Notably, 67% of this amount came from the fast-growing military telecommunication corporation Viettel. Indeed, military-run businesses probably maintain substantial budgets outside the scope of officially reported defense budget data, meaning that Vietnam’s true defense budget is likely significantly larger than estimated by Western sources. See, for example, Jon Grevatt, “Vietnam Reveals the Significant Financial Scope of Military-Run Businesses,” *IHS Jane’s Defense Weekly*, February 1, 2015; Tuyet Minh, “Báo Nga: Lần đầu Việt Nam lộ doanh thu DN quốc phòng” [Russian News: Vietnam’s Revenues of Defense Enterprises First Disclosed], *Bao Dat Viet*, January 30, 2015; and Thuy Dieu, “Lợi nhuận của Viettel vượt 2 tỷ USD” [Viettel Profit Exceeds \$2 Billion], *VnEconomy*, December 30, 2015.

In this regard, the VPA has acquired advanced weapon systems, such as six Russian-built Kilo-class submarines and 36 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 multirole aircraft, which have the range to strike targets throughout the South China Sea as well as on the Chinese mainland. Additionally, Hanoi is actively building a complementary network of anti-access missiles—including the Bastion-P shore-based anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) and S-300 surface-to-air missile batteries—to guarantee that Chinese military operations within Vietnam's EEZ would encounter lethal and heavy resistance in the event of an attack. Vietnam has also improved its ability to retaliate in close naval engagement scenarios using ASCMs fired from new Russian Gepard-class frigates and Tarantul V (Molniya) class corvettes. Finally, Vietnam has greatly expanded its coast guard presence, fielding a force larger than those of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia combined—all archipelagic and peninsular nations. These paramilitary maritime vessels are lightly armed to conduct maritime law-enforcement activities as well as tactical reconnaissance and maritime surveillance in the South China Sea.<sup>12</sup>

By fielding these capabilities, Vietnam has probably achieved its core objective, which is to demonstrate the ability to inflict great harm against PLA forces in order to deter China from initiating a confrontation in the first place. If Beijing does so anyway, then Hanoi likely plans to carry out a spectacular attack—for example, sinking a PLA Navy surface ship with a torpedo launched from one of its submarines—to convince Beijing to back down and return to the *status quo ante* as quickly as possible. It is less certain, however, that Vietnam is sufficiently prepared to confront China in a broader, high-intensity conflict lasting months. I examine why this is the case below.

### NEW GUERILLA WARFARE

The VPA is contemplating new ways to conduct military operations in the air and sea domains against China as it has never fought such a war. Although the VPA appears to still be in the early stages of developing a doctrine to encapsulate how it plans to fight this new sort of conflict, one concept that continues to loom large is “all-people’s war,” or the mobilization of the entire population to protect the nation. One important component of all-people’s war is the ability to conduct asymmetric warfare against an enemy. This approach calls for leveraging the strengths of weaker military forces to exploit

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<sup>12</sup> For more information, see Lyle J. Morris, “Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty: The Rise of Coast Guards in East and Southeast Asia,” *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 2 (2017): 78.

the weaknesses of stronger military forces. The idea harkens back to at least the thirteenth century when the legendary Vietnamese war hero Tran Hung Dao successfully employed asymmetric warfare tactics to defeat Mongol invaders led by Kublai Khan in spite of their greater numbers and superior weaponry. Today, Vietnamese leaders expect to use guerrilla tactics in what they call the “people’s war in the new situation,” code for their growing concerns over Chinese activities in the South China Sea. In at least one private but official discussion, a Vietnamese officer informed his Western counterpart that the VPA hoped to bring guerrilla warfare to sea.<sup>13</sup>

The VPN can probably leverage the quietness of its six Kilo-class submarines to sneak up on the enemy, strike, and then vanish. Indeed, as of March 2016, the VPN had approved an internal research project at the vice-admiral level to assess the most effective employment of submarines.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, according to well-known Vietnamese military commentator Le Ngoc Thong, submarines are best suited to guerrilla-style combat because they are quiet, quick, and small.<sup>15</sup> Le also notes that Vietnam’s geography, specifically its long coastline with many islands, offers multiple locations for submarine ambush.<sup>16</sup> Separately, the VPN’s purchase of ground mobile “fire and forget” ASCMs, such as the Bastion-P, could afford it the opportunity to attack Chinese surface vessels without exposing itself to substantial risk of retaliatory fire.<sup>17</sup>

In 1964, the Viet Cong sunk the USNS *Card* by deploying commandos to secretly swim up to the ship and attach explosives to it.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on this proud history of effectively using frogmen in the Vietnam War, the VPN’s

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication with Western government official, August 2016. In several citations throughout this article, the author uses “personal communication” to describe sensitive discussions he had with subject-matter experts. During the course of this research, the author spoke with experts spanning all walks of life, including academics, think tank experts, journalists, defense contractors, and current and retired government officials of multiple nationalities. These discussions influenced the course of the research, even if only some of them are cited here.

<sup>14</sup> “Effective Use of Submarine Force Discussed,” *People’s Army Newspaper Online*, March 9, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Le Ngoc Thong, “Vi sao giới quân sự Việt Nam chưa quan tâm đến ‘tàu ngầm Trường Sa?’” [Why Are Vietnamese Military Experts Not Interested in the “Truong Sa Submarine?”], *Angle of Soldiers* (web log), trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, February 10, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Le Ngoc Thong, “Vũ khí và lối đánh Việt Nam: Một góc nhìn gần” [Vietnamese Weapons and Combat Tactics: A Close-Up], *Angle of Soldiers* (web log), trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, August 12, 2013; and Le Ngoc Thong, “Có sao lại phải lo sợ khi Việt Nam có tàu ngầm?” [Why Is Someone Afraid of Vietnam’s Submarines], *Angle of Soldiers* (web blog), trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, February 1, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Torode, “Vietnam Creating Submarine Deterrent to Chinese Expansionist Efforts in South China Sea,” *Japan Times*, September 11, 2014; and Terrence K. Kelly, Anthony Adler, Todd Nichols, and Lloyd Thrall, *Employing Land-Based Anti-ship Missiles in the Western Pacific* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Huard, “Viet Cong Commandos Sank an American Air Craft Carrier,” *War Is Boring* (web log), April 26, 2016.

Naval Special Operations is once again prioritizing elite swimming and diving training for the purposes of conducting sabotage operations against enemy vessels. During the May 2014 incident, China claimed to have spotted Vietnamese frogmen in the vicinity of its oil rig.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the VPN now uses hyperbaric chambers accessed from its dive ships, enabling faster recovery times from deep-dive operations.<sup>20</sup>

Vietnam is also investing in paramilitary maritime law-enforcement forces, including the VCG and a civilian force known as the Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force. While primarily serving in a constabulary role, these forces can also quickly and inexpensively “flood the zone” of a potential maritime standoff. In the tradition of guerrilla military doctrine, they are only lightly armed. VCG vessels, for example, possess deck-mounted gun turrets and firearms for crew members.<sup>21</sup> The Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force is reportedly armed with machine guns and explosives.<sup>22</sup> These forces would be employed to establish defensive positions without escalating the conflict further. Indeed, maritime strategy articles in *Communist Review*, a publication of the VCP, recommend that Vietnam “focus on building defensive fighting positions coordinated with the all-people’s security fighting position at sea.”<sup>23</sup>

Vietnamese leaders rarely discuss their evolving concepts for air operations. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that they are relatively confident in air defense over the homeland but lack similar confidence in overwater capabilities. On homeland defense, the VAD-AF needs to look no further than the Vietnam War for lessons that it could apply in a potential conflict with China. During the Vietnam War, Hanoi, with assistance from

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<sup>19</sup> “The Operation of the HYSY 981 Drilling Rig: Vietnam’s Provocation and China’s Position,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, June 8, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with Western government official, August 2016.

<sup>21</sup> “Ảnh hỏa lực đáng gờm trên tàu Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam” [Images of Fearsome Weapons on Vietnam Coast Guard Ships], *Kien Thuc News*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, April 27, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> “Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force Vessels to Be Equipped with Weapons: New Decree,” *Tuoi Tre News*, August 1, 2014; and Directorate of Fisheries, “Thông tư liên tịch số 01/2015/TTLT-BCA-BNNPTNT: Quy định về trang bị, quản lý, sử dụng vũ khí quân dụng, công cụ hỗ trợ và thiết bị chuyên dùng của lực lượng kiểm ngư” [Joint Circular No. 01/2015/TTLT-BCA-BNNPTNT, January 13, 2015, on Regulation on Equipping, Managing and Using Military-Grade Weapons, Supporting Equipment and Specialized Apparatus by the VFSF], trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, January 13, 2015; and Lam Son, “Lực lượng kiểm ngư được trang bị vũ khí quân dụng” [Vietnam Fishery Resource Surveillance Is Equipped with Military-Grade Weapons], *Lao Dong*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, February 26, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Nguyen Duc Thang, “Đẩy mạnh thực hiện Nghị quyết 09-NQ/TW, ‘Về chiến lược biển Việt Nam đến năm 2020’” [Accelerate the Implementation of Resolution 09-NQ/TW on “Vietnam’s Maritime Strategy by 2020”], *Tap chí Cộng sản*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, September 10, 2014; and Nguyen Chu Hoi, “Đẩy mạnh công tác dân số vùng biển, đảo và ven biển trong tầm nhìn đến năm 2020” [Implementation of the Population Tasks at Sea, Islands, and Coast with Vision 2020], *Tap chí Cộng sản*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, September 18, 2012.

the Soviet Union, quickly ramped up its anti-aircraft artillery to complicate U.S. plans to fly at low altitudes. In addition, the VAD-AF creatively found vulnerabilities in U.S. operations—for example, by effectively fusing the collection of U.S. radio messages with Vietnamese radar mapping to identify and intercept U.S. fighters that were low on fuel or damaged.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, overwater air operations will be significantly more difficult for the VAD-AF given that it has never conducted a maritime strike. Its only known offensive air operations came against ground targets in Cambodia during Vietnam's war with Cambodia in 1978.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in an air war versus China, the VAD-AF would face a highly contested environment if it attempted to operate over water in the South China Sea. To stand a credible chance in air combat, Vietnam would first need to disable China's use of three runways in the South China Sea and get past its improving air defenses positioned across disputed features in the region.

Although it is possible for Vietnam to transplant its land-centric concept of “people's war” into the air and sea in certain respects, the VPA will nevertheless face significant challenges operating in these new domains. Most notably, long distances, highly variable weather conditions, and the absence of natural features to conceal air and surface assets in the South China Sea present challenges not normally encountered on land. It is not clear that current doctrinal conceptualizations of warfare have adequately incorporated these factors. Moreover, one of the key enablers of a successful guerrilla campaign is access to third-party state or nonstate actors for arms and financial support. During the Vietnam War, for example, Hanoi received assistance from both the Soviet Union and China. In the case of a potential conflict in the South China Sea, the VPN and VAD-AF would almost certainly not have access to a third party—whether regional or extraregional—that would offer such assistance. Vietnam, however, is working to mitigate this risk by engaging in technology transfer and coproduction activities with a range of states, including Russia, India, and increasingly Japan. The VPA is also stockpiling weapons produced by the Vietnamese national defense industry to avoid the need to rely on others to sustain a war effort.

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<sup>24</sup> Marshall L. Michel III, *Clashes: Air Combat over North Vietnam: 1965–1972* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Merle L. Pribbenow II, “A Tale of Five Generals: Vietnam's Invasion of Cambodia,” *Journal of Military History* 70, no. 2 (2006): 464.

## ARMY PAROCHIALISM

Having seen how legacy ideas such as “people’s war” constrain Vietnam’s ability to confront China, this section looks at a separate but equally important problem: the organizational structure of the VPA. The most prominent feature in this regard is that the army dominates the VPA. This is not too surprising given that many countries’ armed forces are army-centric. However, in the case of Vietnam, the army maintains a particularly exalted position among the population. Considered the pride of Vietnam for its instrumental role in defeating external powers—including not only France and the United States but also China in the 1979 border war—the army is a service without parallel in the country’s military system. The military’s presence is felt almost everywhere throughout Vietnam. The VPA builds on goodwill with the people by offering medical treatment, education, and relief services following natural disasters. The government leverages all active and reserve troops, as well as militia and paramilitary forces and more than 1.5 million members of the veterans’ association, to carry out domestic objectives.<sup>26</sup> Because of this deep and ongoing interaction with the public, the role of the military in Vietnam is virtually unassailable, even if recent stories of corruption are becoming increasingly prevalent in society.

Organizationally, the general staff of Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defence, which oversees all aspects of VPA modernization, is also the army’s general staff. Army parochialism is so pervasive that, according to one former Western government official, the other services—including the VPN and VAD-AF—are not even recognized as independent organizations; they merely serve as augmenting support to the ground forces. Indeed, according to this official, it would be more accurate to describe the VPN and VAD-AF as “the army’s ships and the army’s planes.”<sup>27</sup> The government itself has supported this conceptualization of the VPN, with state-run media noting in 2009 that Vietnam required “strategic boats and ships for the army.”<sup>28</sup> Further illustrative of army dominance of the military is the fact that of the 22 uniformed members of the Central Committee, the VPN and VAD-AF have only 1 representative each, with the other 20 hailing from the army.

<sup>26</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Military Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Military Engagement, Corporate Interests, and Professionalism,” in *The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia: Conflict and Leadership*, ed. Marcus Meitzner (New York: Routledge, 2011), 63–84.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication with a Western government official, July 2016.

<sup>28</sup> “New Boats Equipped for Transport Units,” *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, February 18, 2009.

Army parochialism has resulted in three major problems for the VPA. First, the VPN and VAD-AF have struggled to establish their own service identities, cultures, and mission sets and to obtain status and respect on par with their army brethren. For example, when assigned to Ministry of National Defence headquarters, VPN and VAD-AF officers must take off their service uniforms and wear army uniforms instead.<sup>29</sup> Second, the VPA lacks information exchanges and rotational opportunities across the services, creating a jointness deficit within the military. Although the VPA has acknowledged the importance of jointness in military operations, it has yet to establish a joint staff headquarters to advocate for and oversee the transition to a more joint force.<sup>30</sup> Finally, despite China's growing military footprint in the South China Sea, the army still appears to be fixated on the land dimensions of warfare and may not be capable of effectively preparing for conflict in the air and sea domains. It appears to perceive the South China Sea as "sea territory" or "blue soil" that, while worthy of protection, is infeasible to defend. Therefore, the VPA prioritizes the coast, manned outposts, and oil rigs for protection.<sup>31</sup>

#### THE HUMAN SIDE OF WARFARE

VPN and VAD-AF training appears to have intensified recently, with a growing focus on the South China Sea. For instance, following the international arbitration ruling against China's claims vis-à-vis the Philippines in July 2016, the VPN conducted an "island recapturing" exercise (*diễn tập tái chiếm đảo*), and the VPN carried out two more such exercises this past summer.<sup>32</sup> It appears that these operations are synonymous with amphibious assault operations, with the literal translation of "island recapture" (*tái chiếm đảo*) in Vietnamese being "attacks on occupied islands." Although this exercise appears to have involved substantial coordination between the VPN

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication with Western officials, August 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication with a Western official, September 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Personal communication with a U.S. think tank expert, August 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Nguyen, "Tàu pháo hộ tống hải quân Việt Nam tập bắn đạn thật" [Vietnam Escort Gunboat Practiced Live-Fire Exercise], *Baodatviet*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, July 11, 2017. There are also several video clips on the internet of these training events. See, for example, "Lữ đoàn Hải quân đánh bộ 147 diễn tập thực binh bắn đạn thật" [147th Naval Infantry Brigade Held Live-Fire Exercise], Vietnam Defense TV, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, July 9, 2017; and "Lữ đoàn Hải quân đánh bộ 101 diễn tập bắn đạn thật" [101st Naval Infantry Brigade Held Live-Fire Exercise], Vietnam Defense TV, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, August 19, 2017.

and VAD-AF, in general it is difficult to find VPA exercises that can be defined as truly joint and that do not center on support to ground-force operations.

VPA training also remains so highly scripted that these events might be more accurately described as drills. Rather than testing dynamic and improvisational skills, they simply reinforce the mastery of static, repetitive skill sets. It would appear that Vietnam's network of 21 defense academies only reinforces the VPA's emphasis on drills, based on an official description.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, a greater focus on training efforts in recent years has not resulted in observable greater proficiency in the air and sea domains. The VPN, for example, still has limited proficiency and confidence in close-in maneuvers as virtually all exercises continue to be held at long distances, demonstrated by a video clip of the VPN firing at a target from a far distance.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, although the VPN conducts patrols with its Kilo-class submarines, the extent to which it engages in subsurface training is unclear.

In the air domain, according to Nguyen Thanh Trung, a fighter pilot and national war hero, "for a military pilot, accumulating 1,000 flight hours is very difficult and time-consuming, maybe [taking] 10 to 15 years, or even much longer."<sup>35</sup> This means that a Vietnamese pilot only receives 65–100 flight hours each year, or even less. The lack of both training hours and realistic training scenarios has likely contributed to a series of recent high-profile accidents. In June 2016, for example, the VAD-AF lost a Su-30MK2 while training over the South China Sea—an accident that was later blamed on engine failure.<sup>36</sup> In response, the VCG attempted to launch a search and rescue operation that resulted in the crash of a CASA 212 maritime patrol aircraft as well.<sup>37</sup>

Lack of expertise in operating high-tech weapon systems has convinced VPA leaders of the need to reach out for assistance to foreign militaries beyond Russia, which supplies the vast majority of Vietnam's defense systems. Improved English-language skills within the VPA have been critical to this effort because they have opened the door to dealing with not

<sup>33</sup> For more information, see Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *Vietnam National Defence*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> "Lữ đoàn 171 Hải quân diễn tập bắn đạn thật trên biển" [Naval 171th Flotilla Held Live-Fire Exercise at Sea], VietNamNet, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, June 27, 2016; and personal communication with a Western official, September 2016. In addition, see the following video clip from VietNamNet ~ <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/quan-su/lu-doan-171-hai-quan-dien-tap-ban-dan-that-tren-bien-312346.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Hoang Dan, "Phi công quân sự tích lũy được 1.000 giờ bay là rất khó" [Military Pilots Accumulating 1,000 Flight Hours Is Very Difficult], *Soha News*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, June 21, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> "Sukhoi Su-30MK2 of Vietnamese Air Force Crashed into Sea," Defence Blog, June 14, 2016 ~ <http://defence-blog.com/news/sukhoi-su-30mk2-of-vietnamese-air-force-crashed-into-sea.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Van Thanh Vo and Mac Thai, "Vietnamese Search Team Finds Body at CASA 212 Plane Crash Site," *VN Express International*, June 23, 2016.

only English-speaking countries in the West but other nations as well. For instance, India is a particularly valuable defense partner because its military inventory primarily consists of Soviet-era weapon systems. Indian officials are also willing to assist Vietnam with training because of shared concerns over China's rise. New Delhi has offered submarine training using Vietnam's Kilo-class submarines and in late 2016 agreed to train Vietnam's Su-30 pilots.<sup>38</sup> It has even apparently offered ground-forces training, including tank training—underscoring the special and intimate nature of their cooperation, given Vietnam's sensitivity to interactions with its army.<sup>39</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Hanoi in September 2016 and offered Vietnam two lines of defense credit totaling \$600 million, further emphasizing the closeness of bilateral defense relations.<sup>40</sup>

Japan is another increasingly important defense partner. In late August 2017, Japanese vice minister of defense Ro Manabe and his Vietnamese counterpart, deputy defense minister Nguyen Chi Vinh, concluded the fifth Vietnam-Japan defense policy dialogue. The two sides agreed to continue their cooperation in maritime security, defense industry endeavors, technology transfer, and military medicine, among other areas.<sup>41</sup> In January 2017, Japan pledged to send six used coast guard patrol boats to Vietnam, and in June of the same year the two countries conducted their first-ever joint exercise aimed at combating illegal fishing in the South China Sea.<sup>42</sup> Japan has also pledged to give Vietnam funding to build six new coast guard patrol boats.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas every year Hanoi enjoys a plentiful supply of eligible recruits that generally possess high regard for the VPA's history and missions, neither the VPN nor the VAD-AF have increased their personnel numbers to complement military modernization geared toward combat in the maritime and air domains. The VPN's naval personnel, consisting of both sailors and

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<sup>38</sup> Dinakar Peri, "India to Train Vietnam's Sukhoi Fighter Pilots," *Hindu*, December 6, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> On ground forces training, see, for example, Vishnu Som, "As China Arms Pakistan, India Trains Vietnamese Soldiers in Jungle Warfare," NDTV, March 16, 2016. On tank training, see Binh Nguyen, "Tuớng Ắn Độ khen ngợi sĩ quan Việt Nam huấn luyện trên xe tăng hiện đại" [Indian General Praises Vietnamese Officers Being Trained on Modern Tanks], *Soha News*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, March 15, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Ho Binh Minh, "India Offers \$500 Million Defense Credit as Vietnam Seeks Arms Boost," Reuters, September 2, 2016; and Thayer, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-U.S. Competition," 183–99.

<sup>41</sup> "Vietnam, Japan Hold 5th Defense Policy Dialogue," VietNamNet Bridge, August 30, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Mai Nguyen and My Pham, "Japan Pledges Boats to Vietnam as China Dispute Simmers," Reuters, January 16, 2017; and Ankit Panda, "Vietnam, Japan Coast Guards Hold First-Ever South China Sea Drill on Illegal Fishing," *Diplomat*, June 19, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Did the Vietnam Premier's Japan Voyage Accomplish?" *Diplomat*, June 9, 2017; and "Tăng cường hợp tác quốc phòng Việt Nam–Nhật Bản" [Strengthening of Vietnam-Japan Defense Cooperation], *People's Army Online*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, June 5, 2017.

naval infantry, has held steady at 40,000, while the VAD-AF has remained at around 30,000 personnel since 2009.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, the PLA Navy and PLA Air Force maintain forces of approximately 235,000 and 398,000 respectively.<sup>45</sup> Complicating matters further, army dominance of the VPA keeps most personnel in army-focused positions. The VPA consists of approximately 482,000 total active troops. Of this total, 412,000 are ground forces; the remainder of the VPA's active force is in the VPN or VAD-AF. While the VPA does maintain a reserve force of approximately 5 million troops, the vast majority of these are focused on land-centric mission sets and could contribute little in the event of an air- or maritime-based contingency in the South China Sea.<sup>46</sup>

#### MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS AND SYSTEM INTEROPERABILITY

Although the VPA has successfully procured from abroad or indigenously developed important military capabilities that can be used in the South China Sea, it continues to suffer from an inability to “see” what is about to happen or is happening in the region, otherwise known as maritime domain awareness (MDA). To be sure, the leadership is aware of the problem. One article published in a Vietnamese defense journal in 2014 noted that the VPA's modernization must incorporate capabilities “to defend from afar and from high up” as well as the “ability to monitor the air space, the seas, and islands far from the mainland.”<sup>47</sup>

As part of then president Barack Obama's meeting in July 2015 with Vietnamese general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong at the White House, the United States and Vietnam adopted a joint vision statement that called for increased collaboration to improve MDA capabilities.<sup>48</sup> Nearly one year later,

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<sup>44</sup> These findings result from a comparison of data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) on VPA personnel for the years 2009 to 2015. Please see IISS, *The Military Balance 2009* (London: Routledge, 2009), chap. 8; IISS, *The Military Balance 2010* (London: Routledge, 2010), chap. 6; IISS, *The Military Balance 2011* (London: Routledge, 2011), chap. 6; IISS, *The Military Balance 2012* (London: Routledge, 2012), chap. 6; IISS, *The Military Balance 2013* (London: Routledge, 2013), chap. 6; IISS, *The Military Balance 2014* (London: Routledge, 2014), chap. 6; IISS, *The Military Balance 2015* (London: Routledge, 2015), chap. 6; IISS, *The Military Balance 2016* (London: Routledge, 2016), chap. 6; and IISS, *The Military Balance 2017* (London: Routledge, 2017), chap. 6.

<sup>45</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance 2017*, chap. 6.

<sup>46</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance 2016*, 297; and “Public Briefing on Active Troops and Reserve Force of Vietnam,” *Bao Dat Viet*, October 4, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> “Core Contents of the Strategy to Protect the Country under New Situations.”

<sup>48</sup> “United States–Vietnam Joint Vision Statement,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 7, 2015.

following Obama's May 2016 visit to Vietnam, the United States lifted its decades-long embargo on arms sales to Vietnam, reportedly prompting the VPA to consider purchasing additional MDA assets, such as the P-3C Orion.<sup>49</sup> The VPA has purchased six Canadian-built DHC-6 Twin Otter Series 400 amphibious aircraft to provide additional MDA capability. These aircraft offer medium-range maritime surveillance.

Vietnamese leaders are exploring other, at times low-tech, ways to improve the VPA's MDA. For instance, Vietnam plans to leverage its sizable fisherman population to conduct intelligence collection in the South China Sea. In 2013, it also acquired the French-built Coast Watcher 100 long-range coastal surveillance radar. Dubbed the "peephole into the Spratlys," this system should allow the detection of ships up to 170 kilometers away, giving the VPA its first over-the-horizon capability.<sup>50</sup> Vietnam is separately seeking the employment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as well as space-based satellites. The VPA has partnered with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to convert civilian-use UAVs into platforms that can be leveraged for national defense. The intent is to develop at least 35 "observation platforms" by 2020.<sup>51</sup> Vietnam has also partnered with Israel in recent years to learn more about and acquire new UAV technologies.<sup>52</sup> One particularly important UAV is the fixed-wing HS-6L, revealed in December 2015.<sup>53</sup> Produced by the military-run Vietnamese company Viettel, the HS-6L is reportedly a high-altitude, long-endurance UAV with an operational time of 35 hours and a range of 4,000 kilometers. Although very few details are available, Vietnam took its first foray into space-based MDA in September 2016 with its purchase of the Japanese-constructed ASNARO-2 satellite. ASNARO-2 is an earth observation satellite that takes pictures in all weather conditions and at any time.<sup>54</sup> Vietnamese media claim the satellite offers the highest quality of resolution available, and as of June 2017, Tokyo had signed a

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<sup>49</sup> Andria Shalal, "Vietnam, South Korea May Buy Lockheed Planes amid Chinese Buildup," Reuters, June 5, 2016. The VPA, however, might select used Japanese P-3s as a less expensive alternative. See Atsushi Tomiyama, "Vietnam Eyes Secondhand Japanese Defense Gear," *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 26, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> "Power of the Vietnamese 'Peephole' CW-100 in the South China Sea," *Kien Thuc Online*, June 8, 2013, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh; and "God's Eye View into the Spratly Islands," *Bao Moi Online*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, February 2, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Collin Koh Swee Lean, "Vietnam Boosts Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Capabilities in the South China Sea," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Broader Horizons, January 2016.

<sup>52</sup> "Vietnam Wants More Israeli Made UAVs," Israeli Homeland Security, March 2015 ~ [https://i-hls.com/archives/59443?utm\\_source=iHLS&utm\\_medium=Guy&utm\\_campaign=RSS](https://i-hls.com/archives/59443?utm_source=iHLS&utm_medium=Guy&utm_campaign=RSS).

<sup>53</sup> Richard D. Fisher Jr., "New Vietnamese HS-6L HALE UAV Likely Aided by Belarus," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, December 23, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> "Japan to Export Earth Observation Satellite to Vietnam," Vietnam News Agency, September 20, 2016.

memorandum of understanding with Hanoi on funding to support Vietnam's long-term satellite plan.<sup>55</sup> Vietnam also allowed India to set up a satellite imaging and tracking center on its soil. In exchange, it will have access to images covering the region taken by Indian satellites.<sup>56</sup> This will give Vietnam a much-needed capability to observe China's activities at locations of interest in the South China Sea.

Yet despite the VPA's intent to build up its MDA capabilities, Vietnam has struggled to collect basic intelligence about the region. For example, even after receiving four days of prior notification that the PLA planned to land aircraft on one of its runways at Fiery Cross Reef, the VPN scrambled to collect radar but could only catch a few minutes of footage, according to an Asian government official.<sup>57</sup> Vietnam also could not detect that a U.S. aircraft carrier was steaming through the South China Sea, nor reportedly could it differentiate between Japanese and Chinese naval ships operating within its EEZ.<sup>58</sup> This lack of MDA capabilities, together with a limited capacity to integrate, fuse, analyze, and distribute such intelligence to commanders and warfighters across diverse command, control, and communications networks, will likely prove particularly disruptive to the VPA's military operations in the South China Sea unless properly addressed.

Ensuring interoperability among VPA radars is another acute challenge. Vietnam typically prefers to shop around for the most cost-effective systems, resulting in a patchwork array of MDA capabilities built by multiple countries, including Russia, France, Ukraine, and Israel, that are at times incapable of communicating with each other. As a consequence, Vietnam has been forced to spend extra money on training personnel on multiple systems and housing an array of spare parts. After the 2014 crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, for instance, Vietnamese leaders privately worried that the crash may have occurred off the coast of southern Vietnam unbeknownst to the Vietnamese defense establishment because air traffic control towers, as well as coastal and air defense units, were unable to communicate with each other.<sup>59</sup>

It is possible that Hanoi would face similar challenges were it to purchase more non-Russian/Soviet weapon systems in the future. Interestingly, Vietnam's

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<sup>55</sup> "Japan to Export Earth Observation Satellite to Vietnam"; and Nguyen Cuong, "Japan's Research on Vietnam's Long-Term Satellite Development and Utilization Plan," Vietnam National Space Center, June 28, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Sanjeev Miglani and Greg Torode, "India to Build Satellite Tracking Station in Vietnam That Offers Eye on China," Reuters, January 25, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Personal communication with an Asian government official, August 2016.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Personal communication with a Western official, August 2016.

quiet but growing relationship with Israel could help mitigate potential interoperability problems. Given its experience capturing Soviet military equipment from Arab adversaries, Israel maintains a high level of expertise in retrofitting this equipment for further use, potentially making it an ideal partner for Vietnam.<sup>60</sup>

## CONCLUSION

### *Implications for Regional Stability*

Although Vietnam has already achieved impressive results in a short period, particularly in the acquisition and production of new weapon systems, it will likely continue to face acute challenges in integrating and learning how to effectively employ these systems in air and sea combat. This will have the effect of impairing VPA military operations in virtually any protracted, large-scale, or high-intensity conflict in the South China Sea. Therefore, the Vietnamese leadership's primary intent—indeed, its hope—is to prevent war with China in the first place. Vietnamese leaders regularly express the view that armed conflict in the South China Sea should be avoided at all costs.<sup>61</sup> Instead, the core of Vietnam's national defense strategy is to expand and develop its defense relationships in Southeast Asia, as well as with like-minded partners such as the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, to hedge against China's position in the South China Sea.

Conflict prevention efforts also include regular engagement with Beijing itself to convince the Chinese leadership not to engage in destabilizing and provocative behavior, and Vietnam tries to serve as a model in this regard. Indeed, Hanoi's military modernization has clearly prioritized weapon systems that offer only a counterbalancing check on PLA offensive power. Vietnam does not currently possess, nor has it ever sought, a weapon system that could be considered an attempt to unilaterally raise the stakes vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea. However, if in the coming years Beijing decides to take a more assertive stance toward the territorial dispute—for example, by stepping up sovereignty patrols, declaring an air defense identification zone over the South China Sea (as it did over the East China Sea in 2013),

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, "T-72 Upgrade Program," IMI Systems.

<sup>61</sup> Nguyen Tan Dung, "Building Strategic Trust for Peace, Cooperation and Prosperity in the Asia-Pacific Region" (remarks at Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 1, 2013); and H.E. Tran Dai Quang, "Strengthening Partnership for Regional Sustainable Development" (38th Singapore Lecture, Singapore, August 30, 2016).

or continuing its land reclamation and construction activities to expand its military presence—then it could prompt Hanoi to care less about the risks of provoking China. Vietnamese leaders might even begin to contemplate the acquisition of medium-range ballistic missiles capable of striking deeper into the Chinese homeland.

Regardless of Beijing's decision on how to behave in the South China Sea, bilateral trust is low enough that Vietnam is seeking further upgrades to its anti-access capabilities. Most notably, it has been attempting to acquire the BrahMos supersonic ASCM from India since 2011.<sup>62</sup> BrahMos would give Hanoi the ability to launch ASCMs with similar characteristics to the Bastion-P from air- and sea-based platforms, in effect posing a multidirectional threat to any PLA naval assets. Rumors have persisted that Vietnam may have secretly secured a deal with India for BrahMos. Even though New Delhi officially denied the sale in August 2017, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that such a sale would be “consistent with the policy of peace and self-defense and is the normal practice in the national defense.”<sup>63</sup>

Additionally, Vietnamese leaders may be negotiating with Russia to procure the S-400 air defense system, which is capable of identifying and destroying dozens of targets simultaneously out to and beyond Vietnam's EEZ.<sup>64</sup> Hanoi is also quietly upgrading its South China Sea outposts. For example, in August 2016, Vietnam had apparently deployed Israeli-built Extended Range Artillery (EXTRA) guided rocket artillery launchers on several of the disputed features it controls.<sup>65</sup> These systems have sufficient range to destroy Chinese military infrastructure throughout the Spratly Islands and Beijing's forward-operating bases on Hainan Island. By November 2016, Vietnam had also extended its sole runway in the Spratly Islands—on Spratly Island itself—and built a new aircraft hangar there.<sup>66</sup> Chinese leaders

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<sup>62</sup> Bharat Lather, “Is China Driving Vietnam's Military Modernization?” *Indian Defence Review*, August 8, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> For rumors that Vietnam has already purchased and acquired BrahMos, see Helen Clark, “India-Vietnam Point Potent Projectile at China,” *Asia Times*, August 30, 2017. For comments from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see Khanh Lynh, “Vietnam Hails Burgeoning Defense Ties with India,” *VN Express International*, August 18, 2017 ~ <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-hails-burgeoning-defense-ties-with-india-3629191.html>.

<sup>64</sup> “Vietnam Is Negotiating to Buy S-400 Triumph Anti-aircraft Missiles,” *Defence Blog*, July 4, 2016 ~ <http://defence-blog.com/news/vietnam-received-new-batch-of-surface-to-air-spyder-sr-air-defence-system.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Greg Torode, “Exclusive: Vietnam Moves New Rocket Launchers into Disputed South China Sea—Sources,” *Reuters*, August 10, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Vietnam Responds with Spratly Air Upgrades,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 15, 2016.

have been noticeably circumspect in their response, probably because the PLA continues to hold an overwhelming advantage over the VPA.

### *The Role of the United States*

As part of his five-country, twelve-day whirlwind trip through Asia in November 2017, President Donald Trump stopped for two days in Vietnam, spending one day in Da Nang to address APEC and the second to meet with top Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi. Trump's visit reassured Vietnam of the U.S. position in the South China Sea, following up on Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit to the White House in May 2017. The meeting was significant because it reiterated the need for Washington to cooperate with Hanoi on issues of "maritime security"—code for primarily dealing with China in the South China Sea. Most importantly, the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to freedom of navigation and the settlement of all disputes in the South China Sea peacefully, without coercion, and in accordance with international law. Washington and Hanoi also affirmed their intent to enact the three-year plan of action (2018–20) on U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation called for under the 2011 U.S.-Vietnam Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation as well as the 2015 Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations. Additionally, Secretary of Defense James Mattis will visit Vietnam in 2018 to reciprocate Minister of National Defence Ngo Xuan Lich's visit to the Pentagon in August 2017, and the United States will also send an aircraft carrier to the strategic Vietnamese port of Cam Ranh Bay in 2018.

While top leadership meetings and the joint statement are important, U.S. policymakers and military commanders should seek to capitalize on this positive momentum to target specific areas of deeper bilateral defense cooperation. This analysis demonstrates that the VPA is likely unprepared for a sustained maritime standoff with China in the South China Sea for a variety of reasons, ranging from a lack of operational concepts and training in the air and sea domains to shortcomings in MDA capabilities and the interoperability of its weapon systems. But even if Washington wants to help in these areas, such cooperation will almost certainly be difficult due to Vietnam's long-standing mistrust over U.S. intentions and traditional reluctance to give the appearance of acting in a provocative way against China. To be sure, the United States can continue the collaborative activities laid out by the 2011 U.S.-Vietnam Memorandum of Understanding. These include information sharing in the conduct of nontraditional military operations

such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, search and rescue, and other types of military operations other than war that are typically considered less sensitive in Vietnam. Indeed, many training skills can be learned or honed in less sensitive contexts.

It will be far more difficult, however, to engage Vietnam on developing a doctrine for air and sea warfare, modifying its army-centric organizational structure, and improving training and the interoperability of weapon systems. One area that could offer a significant return on investment for Washington, and where, more importantly, there is already some activity, is MDA. The joint statement noted the need to cooperate further with Vietnam to enhance its MDA capabilities but did not provide any specifics. The United States could pursue closer collaboration on coastal radar, satellite and other communications systems, maritime surveillance aircraft (including unarmed drones), and naval patrol craft. Better MDA would greatly improve the VPA's warfighting capabilities in a long-duration, high-intensity conflict against China in the South China Sea.

Regardless, a broader and more consequential question for Vietnam is perhaps whether the Trump administration seeks to continue Washington's decades-long policy of maintaining a robust and active economic and security presence in the Asia-Pacific. Trump's "free and open Indo-Pacific" concept, which the president cited several times in his APEC speech at Da Nang, has unclear geostrategic implications.<sup>67</sup> Although Vietnamese leaders should be heartened by their meetings with the Trump administration thus far, the verdict is still out on overall policy toward the region. Trump's recently released national security strategy provides few additional details on Vietnam, only including it on a list of "growing security and economic partners" along with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.<sup>68</sup> Trump's warming relationship with Chinese president Xi, coupled with his earlier decisions to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (of which Vietnam was a critical part) and to declare that the Obama administration's policy of strategic rebalancing to Asia is over, suggests a stark departure from the past.

A dramatically reduced role for the United States in the Asia-Pacific greatly increases the prospects of China employing bullying tactics against Vietnam and other claimants in the South China Sea. Hanoi could respond by accelerating and expanding its own military modernization efforts, and

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<sup>67</sup> "Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 10, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., December 2017), 46 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

even consider the procurement of strategic weapon systems to deter China, as detailed above. It is equally plausible that Vietnam would instead simply seek to find ways to accommodate China, calculating that an arms race would be destabilizing and essentially unwinnable. Vietnam's apparent capitulation in July 2017 to Chinese demands to withdraw the Spanish company Repsol from drilling in a disputed oil block site suggests that Hanoi might settle on the latter.<sup>69</sup> Neither of these scenarios is in the strategic interests of the United States or Vietnam.

On the other hand, a more muscular U.S. approach might worry Hanoi as well. During his visit, and perhaps wandering a bit off script, Trump offered missiles to Vietnam and expressed interest in helping mediate disputes in the South China Sea, to which Vietnam did not respond, probably to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing China.<sup>70</sup> Instead, merely a sustained U.S. leadership role in the Asia-Pacific would probably cause just enough healthy concern in Beijing about the potential for U.S. military intervention in a South China Sea conflict. Although the continuation of the United States' presence in the region would certainly not embolden Vietnam, given its history of self-reliance and lingering suspicions of the West, Hanoi might nevertheless feel more comfortable standing up to Beijing the next time it faces Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. ♦

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<sup>69</sup> Mike Ives, "Vietnam, Yielding to Beijing, Backs Off South China Sea Drilling," *New York Times*, August 4, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> For Trump's remark on missiles, see "Remarks by President Trump before Bilateral Meeting with Prime Minister Phuc of Vietnam," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 12, 2017. For his comment on South China Sea mediation, see "Remarks by President Trump before Bilateral Meeting with President Quang of Vietnam," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 12, 2017.