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Background Brief:

Vietnam: Will Military Aircraft Mishap Result in Turn to Non-Russian Suppliers?

February 3, 2023

We request your analytical input and analysis of the following three questions:

Q1. On January 31, Vietnam's Air Force lost one Su-22 in an incident in Yen Bai province. What are the possible reasons for this incident?

ANSWER: There are two likely reasons for the crash of the Su-22, failure of the landing gear and pilot error. According to Vietnamese press accounts, the Su-22 encountered a problem while landing and the pilot was ordered to eject. The pilot then tried to correct the problem manually, failed, and the plane crashed.

There have been at least five crashes involving Su-22 aircraft in recent years: 2015 (over the South China Sea), 2018 (Nghe An province), 2019 (Yen Bai province), 2000 (Khanh Hoa province) and 2005 (Yen Bai province).

Three crashes by Vietnamese military aircraft (CASA C-212, Su-22, and the Yak-52) in recent years indicate that pilot error was the likely caused due to limited flying hours and reliance on flight simulators to make up for practical training. According to one study, Vietnamese air force pilots use "virtual flight rules or radar vector in perfect weather only and have no experience with adverse weather conditions."

Q2. Can you evaluate Russian or Soviet aircraft in Vietnam's Air Force, including the Su-22 and the need to replace them with Western-made ones? What is your perspective?

ANSWER: Vietnam's Air Defence-Air Force is equipped with a range of seventy-one Soviet-era/Russian combat aircraft of various models including twenty-five Su-22s, eleven Su-27s, and thirty-five Su-30s in addition to thirty Yak-52 trainers. In 2019, U.S. defence officials serving in Hanoi reported that Vietnamese military officers had expressed their unhappiness with Russian equipment and services.

Vietnam is in critical need to modernise its combat aircraft. Vietnam's Su-22 fighter bombers acquired in the 1980s are nearing obsolescence as they approach the end of their service life. In late-2020, Vietnam moved to restructure its logistics support services to improve maintenance, repair and overhaul of its legacy combat air fleet. Special priority has been accorded to maintaining, repairing and overhauling Vietnam's Su-30MK2 multi-role jet fighters.

Vietnam is also in need of modern jet trainers to replace the Yak-52s. In 2019, Vietnam placed an order to procure twelve Russian Yak-130 trainers. And in February 2021, Vietnam signed a contract to purchase twelve Aero Vodochody L-39NG jet trainers from the Czech Republic including a training package for pilots, instructors, ground crew and mechanics, spare parts and other support equipment. Later that year Vietnam placed an order for twelve U.S. T-6 jet trainers. Vietnamese pilots commenced participation in the U.S. Air Force Aviation Leadership Program in the United States. This would lay the foundation for the sale of U.S. F-15E Strike Eagle fighters at the end of this decade.

Vietnam's thirteenth party congress in early 2021 approved a major military modernisation program that gave priority to the Air Defence-Air Force. However, Russia's subsequent invasion of Ukraine, which has imposed limitations on arms exports, and the threat of western sanctions, has scuppered any plans Vietnam may have had for acquiring advanced Su-30s and Su-57 fifth generation stealth aircraft.

Q3. Do you have updated information about reports that Vietnam is discussing the purchase of drones and helicopters from U.S. defence companies? See: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-defence-companies-talks-sell-vietnam-helicopters-drones-sources-2022-12-15/> ?

ANSWER: It should be noted that in 2019, Vietnam placed an order for six Boeing Insitu ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles for its Coast Guard under the U.S. Maritime Security Initiative. Boeing was one five American defence companies that discussed sales with Vietnamese government officials at a recent meeting organised by the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council. The other companies included: IM Systems Group, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and Textron.

The war in Ukraine has raised the salience of drones and other UAVs in armed combat. The United States would be a definite market for Vietnam's military.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Vietnam's Air Defence-Air Force possesses a single American manufactured helicopter, the Light 11 Bell 205 (UH-1H *Iroquois*). The Vietnam People's Army Naval Air Wing has two H225 transport helicopters manufactured by Airbus (a European consortium) in its inventory. In 2011, Vietnam took delivery of two French EC725LP Super Cougar helicopters for search and rescue.

Otherwise, Vietnam's Naval Air Wing and Air Defence-Air Force are equipped with Soviet/Russian helicopters (ten Kamov-28 Helix A for anti-submarine warfare, two Ka-32 Helix C transport, six Mi-17 *Hip* H, fourteen NMi-8 *Hip* and three Mi-171).

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the only helicopters acquired by Vietnam between 1995-2021 were two French EC725LP Super Cougars.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Will Military Aircraft Mishap Result in Turn to Non-Russian Suppliers?" *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, February 3, 2023. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove

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