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Background Brief:

U.S. Arms Sales to Vietnam?

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We are writing a report on the state of play of talks between the United States and Vietnam after Vietnam's International Arms Expo on possible U.S. arms supplies. What is the importance of discussions on the possible supply of more sophisticated weapons than those shipped so far to Vietnam?

ANSWER: According to U.S. defence sources, Vietnam's Air Defence-Air Force (ADAF) conducts more training exercises with the United States than with any other country, including Russia. The bilateral defence relationship is particularly strong between the ADAF and the United States Air Force (USAF) at the senior level.¹

In June 2021, the U.S. agreed to sell Vietnam T-6 Texan trainer aircraft and in December it was officially announced that Vietnam would procure twelve T-6s, with five to six aircraft delivered in 2024 and the remaining aircraft in 2027.² This sale means that the USAF will become the leading U.S. service engaged with the Vietnamese military.

The sale of the T-6s comes with a training and maintenance package for ADAF personnel as well as training modules in logistics, flight safety, aviation medicine and English language.

In June 2019, U.S. Embassy officials in Hanoi were quoted as saying that the T-6 sale "represented a strategic shift from Russia to the United States 'under the nose' of China and would be a major part of helping Vietnam move away from dependence on Russian weapons and corruption, as well as China's influence."³

¹ This Background Brief draws on Stephen Burgess, "The US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership and the Key Role of Air Force Relations," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, December 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2870567/the-usvietnam-comprehensive-partnership-and-the-key-role-of-air-force-relations/>.

² Viet Anh, "US to sell trainer aircraft to Vietnam," *VnExpress*, June 6, 2021, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/us-to-sell-trainer-aircraft-to-vietnam-4288916.html> and Viet Anh, "US to send 12 military training aircraft to Vietnam," *VnExpress*, December 9, 2022, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/us-to-send-12-military-training-aircraft-to-vietnam-4546311.html>.

³ Burgess, "The US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership and the Key Role of Air Force Relations."

In anticipation of the sale of the T-6 trainers, the U.S. began training the first Vietnamese Air Force pilots in special purpose English language in 2016, followed by a fifty-two week military pilot training course. The first pilot graduated at the end of May 2019.⁴

Currently, the USAF admits two-three ADAF airmen annually in an aviation leadership program that lasts for three years and takes two to three students at a time. This program will have to be ramped up as it is estimated that fifty ADAF trainees will be needed to produce thirty pilots to fly the twelve T-6s.

The USAF Aviation Leadership Program includes training in managing partnerships, aviation culture and safety, air competence, risk management, maintenance and English -language training to meet international standards.

Vietnam's acquisition of the T-6s trainers and participation in the USAF Aviation Leadership Program could lay the foundation for the sale of U.S. F-15E Strike Eagle fighters at the end of this decade.

Carlyle A. Thayer, "U.S. Arms Sales to Vietnam?" *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, December ,15 2022.

Thayer Consultancy provides political analysis of current regional security issues and other research support to selected clients. Thayer Consultancy was officially registered as a small business in Australia in 2002.

⁴ Vu Anh, "First Vietnam military pilots graduating US training course," *VnExpress*, June 4, 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/first-vietnam-military-pilots-graduating-us-training-course-3933647.html> and Nguyen Hoang, "Vietnamese air force pilot graduates from US aviation leadership program," *VnExpress*, June 7, 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnamese-air-force-pilot-graduates-from-us-aviation-leadership-program-3935165.html>.