

## **Vietnam Adds Military Muscle as South China Sea Tensions Escalate**

**Vietnam was the world's eighth-largest arms importer from 2011-2015, leaping from 43rd place in the previous five-year period**

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MANILA— Rising tensions in the South China Sea have turned Vietnam into one of the world's most active arms importers, with Hanoi buying more weaponry than wealthy neighbors South Korea and Singapore as it tries to counter China's increasingly aggressive territorial claims.

Tiny Vietnam was the world's eighth-largest arms importer from 2011-2015— a huge leap from the previous five-year period when it was in 43rd place, according to the latest annual study of global arms-trade patterns by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, a security think tank. Vietnam accounted for roughly 3% of world-wide arms purchases between 2011 and 2015, the study, released Monday, shows.

India, which imported 14% of globally traded arms, topped the list, followed by Saudi Arabia and China.

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea have driven Vietnam to invest heavily in its navy and air force to help it defend maritime claims, which are contested by China and other neighboring countries.

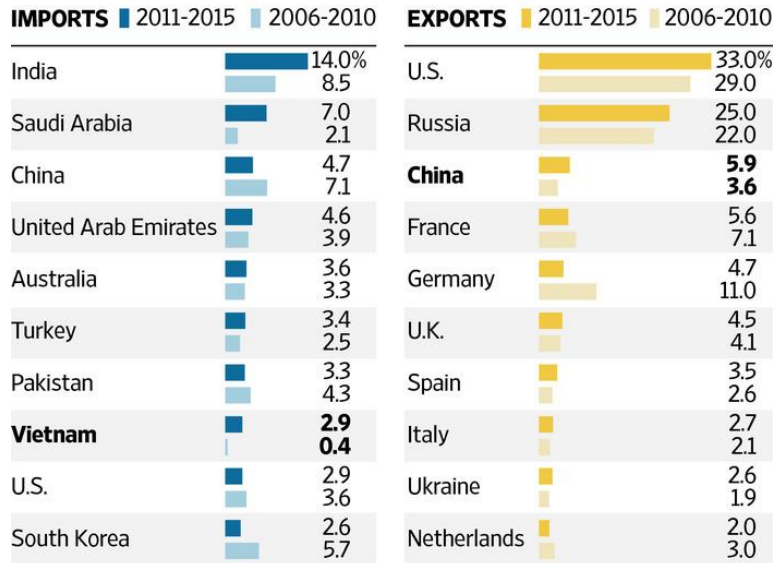
“With Vietnam we're seeing a very clear reaction to what China's doing in the South China Sea,” said Siemon Wezeman, senior researcher at SIPRI.

China, meanwhile, has emerged as a major weapons exporter, overtaking European rivals to become the world's third-largest arms supplier, the SIPRI survey shows. China supplied roughly 6% of global arms over the past five years, SIPRI said, up from 3.6% in the 2006-10 period— though still significantly lagging market leaders the U.S. (33%) and Russia (25%).

## Trading Fire

Vietnam has emerged as one of the world's top arms importers since 2011, while China is now the third-largest weapons supplier.

### Shares of international arms imports and exports



Source: SIPRI

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“It’s obvious and necessary for Vietnam to invest in new military equipment, especially after the South China Sea has become a hot spot,” said Tran Cong Truc, former chief of the government’s border committee said, stressing that the new hardware isn’t aimed specifically at China.

Vietnam officially spent \$4.3 billion on defense in 2014, compared with China’s \$132 billion military budget. Both countries are believed by defense analysts to understate their military spending.

Sino-Vietnamese ties were severely strained in 2014 when China moved an offshore drilling rig into disputed waters east of Vietnam. Relations have been rocky ever since, with Vietnam protesting earlier this month when satellite imagery revealed the presence of Chinese surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island, China’s main outpost in the Paracel Islands, a chain also claimed by Hanoi.

Vietnamese officials have also repeatedly criticized China for its recent construction of seven artificial islets in the Spratly Islands, another remote South China Sea region claimed by both parties.

Other Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, which also has territorial disputes with Beijing over the South China Sea, and Indonesia, which is watching China’s greater assertiveness with unease, have been buying new military equipment. But Vietnam’s modernization program has been much more ambitious, according to security experts.

In recent years, Vietnam has ordered six Russian-made Kilo-class submarines armed with cruise missiles, 36 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 jet fighters, six stealth naval frigates, six fast attack craft, and most recently an advanced Israeli air-defense system.

“It’s not over the top” given the heightened tensions, Mr. Wezeman said. “It’s just enough to make sure that if China pushes, then Vietnam can do some counter-pushing.”

Vietnam will likely remain a top weapons importer as it continues its “steady march” toward assembling a credible military deterrent, said Carlyle Thayer, a Vietnamese defense expert at the University of New South Wales.

“Of course, Vietnam has to be very concerned about [Chinese assertiveness]; there’s no reason for them to stop buying more weaponry, he said.

Maritime-surveillance aircraft, drones, and advanced sensors and satellite systems will be next on Hanoi’s shopping list, Mr. Thayer said, equipment that will enable the Vietnamese military to make full use of its advanced new hardware.

Having lifted restrictions on the sale of nonlethal weaponry to Vietnam in 2014, the U.S. is eager to tap into the Vietnamese market and erode Russia’s dominance there, Mr. Thayer said, with the sale of second-hand P-3C Orion surveillance aircraft a likely first step.

Tensions with many emerging weapon-importing countries such as India, the Philippines and Vietnam – which might otherwise be promising markets for Chinese arms – have limited Beijing’s options as it tries to grow sales, Mr. Wezeman observed.

So while China has successfully established itself as an arms supplier to developing countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, it will struggle to compete against the U.S. and Russia in more lucrative markets, he said.