

Vietnam Modernizes Its Military With a Wary Eye on China

Richard A. Bitzinger

Ukraine's successes in resisting and even turning back an invasion by a numerically superior Russian force has raised expectations in East Asia that smaller nations in the region could conceivably fend off an attack from a large military like China's. Taiwan, of course, has long struggled with executing such a defense strategy, but since its strategic considerations are in many ways unique, other countries nominally threatened by China may not be able to draw as many lessons from Taipei's experience. Ukraine's performance in its war against Russia, on the other hand, may look to them like a more relevant model—for better or worse.

Vietnam is one such country. Hanoi has had a tense relationship with Beijing for more than 40 years, and Vietnam was even invaded by China in 1979. In particular, Vietnam and China share overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea, where they have for years sparred over fisheries and oil and gas fields. Those quarrels have frequently resulted in clashes, including Chinese attacks on Vietnamese coast guards and fishing vessels, and [confrontations over oil rigs](#) that had been moved into disputed waters.

Hanoi has obvious interests in enforcing its claims in the South China Sea, including by protecting its maritime Exclusive Economic Zone, or EEZ, which under international law could extend up to 200 nautical miles off its coast. In this regard, Vietnam has taken a page from the Chinese military's handbook by adopting an "anti-access/area denial," or A2/AD, strategy.

In a nutshell, A2/AD is a means by which a country strives to fend off a military competitor, particularly a militarily superior force, by either preventing it from entering a zone of conflict or else seriously impeding its freedom of action inside the zone. Hanoi's version has mostly meant preventing China from approaching or operating in Vietnam's territorial waters or maritime EEZ and the airspace over it, including in the Gulf of Tonkin, which borders both countries. Consequently, after years of deemphasizing military development, the country has begun to rearm itself, increasing defense spending and procurement.

The Vietnam People's Navy has done particularly well out of this increased emphasis on A2/AD and self-reliant defense and has greatly enhanced its capabilities in recent years. For example, in the 2010s, the navy acquired six Russian-built, Kilo-class submarines, armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, or ASCMs—specifically, 3M-54 caliber ASCMs. Around the same time, the navy also received four Russian, Gepard-class, multirole frigates. These are equipped with the Kh-35 Uran-E ASCMs, and two are additionally tailored for anti-submarine warfare.

Vietnam is also building a number of new warships for its navy. Its most ambitious naval shipbuilding program to date is the local construction of six 560-ton, Molniya-class corvettes, based on the Russian Tarantul-V design. Vietnam's version is armed with Kh-35 ASCMs, a 76-mm gun and Igla-M short-range air-defense missiles. All six ships in this class were delivered to the navy from 2014 to 2017. This is in addition to other new, or relatively new, warships the navy has acquired in recent years, including two ex-South Korean navy corvettes for anti-submarine warfare, six TT-400TP gunboats and 40 indigenous 400-ton offshore patrol vessels.

At the same time, Vietnam has bolstered its coastal defenses with the deployment of the supersonic Yakhont P-800 anti-ship missile to the navy's coastal batteries. Hanoi has further expressed interest in buying the Indian-made BrahMos ASCM, an upgraded version of the Yakhont. Vietnam manufactures the Yakhont, as well as the Kh-35 and Iгла missiles, under license from Russia.

This new coastal firepower builds on Hanoi's previous investments in its coast guard, the Maritime Police of Vietnam, which was a branch of the military until 2013, when it was established as a separate agency under the Defense Ministry. The VCG, as the coast guard is more often known, patrols and enforces security and sovereignty rights in the country's territorial waters, which extend just 12 nautical miles from the shore, and in its more expansive EEZ. It comprises several patrol boats, either donated by other countries or built under license in Vietnam, including two, ex-U.S. Coast Guard Hamilton-class cutters. Both the U.S. and Japanese coast guards are also helping to train their Vietnamese counterparts.

Vietnam's waters, then, are better protected than they once were. Its air force, on the other hand, remains a large but obsolete force, comprised mostly of MiG-21 supersonic jets and Su-22 bombers from the Vietnam War era. The Vietnam People's Air Force, or VPAF, has been trying to modernize its arsenal since the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, it began a push to buy Russian-made Sukhoi Su-27 fighter aircraft and began going after the more capable Su-30MKK in 2003—but this process has been slow and modest. So far, the air force has procured only 11 Su-27s and just 30 Su-30MKKs. In 2005, Hanoi took a leap forward by signing a major arms deal with Poland for 10 M-28 maritime patrol aircraft and 40 surplus Su-22M fighter jets. Nevertheless, it remains drastically under-strength.

On the other hand, the VPAF has greatly improved its air-defense capabilities with the acquisition of the S-300PMU1 surface-to-air missile system from Russia in 2009 and additional systems in 2012, and the Israeli-built SPYDER-MR surface-to-air missile system in 2016. These two systems have expanded the country's air-defense envelope far into the Gulf of Tonkin and South China Sea.

Overall, the VPAF's limited arsenal notwithstanding, Vietnam has significantly modernized and upgraded its armed forces. These improvements have in turn enhanced its ability to conduct A2/AD operations in its nearby maritime and air territories. It is uncertain, however, whether these capabilities would be sufficient to appreciably deter or dissuade China from threatening or attacking Vietnam.

Naturally, Vietnam faces a very different threat environment than Ukraine. The Russo-Ukraine conflict is mostly a ground war, whereas a prospective Sino-Vietnamese clash would likely be fought mainly in the maritime domain—namely, the South China Sea—and the airspace over it. Vietnam's A2/AD strengths relative to China's currently lie mainly in its submarine forces; its longer-range air-defense systems, especially its S-300 surface-to-air missile systems; and its anti-ship missile force, particularly its submarine-launched ASCMs and coastal batteries.

That said, the country possesses limited quantities of these systems, which could be exhausted quite quickly in combat. China, though, can draw on considerable numbers of offensive weapons—warships, submarines, combat aircraft and all types of anti-ship, anti-submarine and anti-air munitions, not to mention its own considerable air defenses—to counter Vietnamese attacks. In a numbers game, Beijing holds a clear advantage.

It is also not certain that Vietnam would be able to draw on any allies to assist it or rearm it in the event of such a conflict, as Ukraine has done. The U.S. has extended some aid to the Vietnamese military, such as supplying it with surplus Coast Guard cutters or small arms. And, notably, the U.S. has included Vietnam in its Maritime Security Initiative, established in 2016 to provide Southeast Asian navies with assistance and training to improve their maritime security and reconnaissance abilities.

On the other hand, Hanoi has no formal military alliances or treaty relations with another Indo-Pacific nation—such as the U.S., Australia or Japan—that might provide it with a security guarantee or extended deterrent. In this regard, Vietnam’s situation differs significantly from that of Ukraine, in that Kyiv, prior to being invaded by Russia, had growing political and military ties with the West, which later provided a foundation for wartime support and supply. Nor is Hanoi’s security situation anything like that of Taiwan, to which the U.S. has made considerable commitments—both implied and explicit—to its defense.

At best, Vietnam shares with other Indo-Pacific nations a growing concern over an increasingly belligerent and bellicose China. This common anxiety gives Hanoi a potential measure of security support, and perhaps even military aid, in the event of a conflict, but nothing is guaranteed. If a conflict breaks out, Vietnam would likely be forced to rely on its own extant A2/AD, which, while having its strengths, is still untested and tentative.

Richard Bitzinger is an independent analyst focusing on security and defense issues relating to the Asia-Pacific region, including the rise of China as a military power, and military modernization and arms proliferation in the region. He was previously a senior fellow with the Military Transformations Program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore and has held jobs in the U.S. government and at various think tanks.