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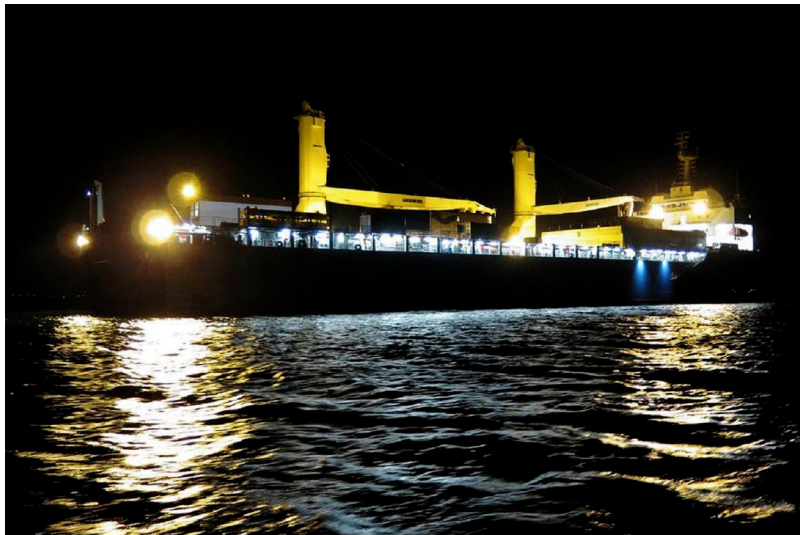
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CHINA'S WORLD

# Hanoi Takes Resistance to Beijing Underwater

Reviving Viet Cong-style guile against a bigger adversary, it bets on submarines



A freighter carrying the third Kilo Class submarine arrives at Vietnam's Cam Ranh gulf on Jan. 28. The submarine is among the six of its kind that Vietnam ordered from Russia. *PHOTO: ZUMA PRESS*

By ANDREW BROWNE

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HANOI—To help vanquish a much stronger adversary, Viet Cong guerrillas fighting U.S. forces in the 1960s used an extensive network of tunnels on the outskirts of Saigon.

From deep underground, they launched surprise attacks. The booby-trapped networks withstood pummeling by B-52 bombers. U.S. Army scouts who wriggled inside spoke of descending into a “Black Echo.”

Now, faced with a new threat from China—this time at sea—Vietnam’s outgunned and outnumbered military is falling back on a similar tactic: It’s hiding underwater. Vietnam’s largest-ever arms purchase is a multibillion-dollar deal for six Russian submarines. The third arrived just a few weeks ago, according to Vietnamese press reports. Superstealthy, the Kilo Class vessels are known in U.S. naval circles as “Black Holes.”

The subs, like the Viet Cong tunnels, are a prime example of asymmetrical warfare: They allow a weaker force to create uncertainty in the mind of a powerful opponent.

Vietnam’s submarine deal illustrates how countries in the region with no hope of matching China’s military power are looking for alternative ways to counter Beijing’s territorial ambitions, adding a new and unpredictable dimension to tensions over the South China Sea.

Subs prowling through shallow channels, in the hands of competing navies with little experience handling the subs’ complex systems, increases the risk for accidental encounters that could quickly escalate to suck in the U.S. and other major powers.

Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks in visionary terms about a “community of shared interests” in the Asia-Pacific. At a regional forum on Saturday, he pledged to “jointly build a regional order that is more favorable to Asia and the world.”

But the South China Sea is a cauldron. China’s own newly-constructed nuclear-submarine base on the island of Hainan gazes directly out over a stretch of sea reaching all the way to Indonesia that China increasingly regards as its maritime backyard.

For coastal states such as Vietnam and Malaysia, island nations like Indonesia and a tiny city-state like Singapore, subs are among the most effective way to even the odds against China’s might. All feel threatened, but none are strong enough to go toe-to-toe against the People’s Liberation Army with its rapidly expanding fleets of surface warships and subs.

The Kilo Class subs will give Vietnam a “modest but potent” answer to Chinese naval intimidation, writes Carl Thayer, emeritus professor at the Australian Defence Force Academy.



A freighter carrying Vietnam's second Kilo Class submarine anchors in Cam Ranh gulf in March 2014. *PHOTO: ZUMA PRESS*

Elsewhere in East Asia, South Korea and Japan also have formidable submarine forces. Australia plans to spend 50 billion Australian dollars (US\$39.39 billion) on powerful new subs. The Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar are thinking of acquisitions. All this makes for an increasingly crowded seabed.

With subs, though, all it takes is one, lurking unseen, to alter the military equation.

Finding and destroying them is hard; and their attacks on shipping are almost always devastating. It is this combination that makes them so destabilizing. When subs are identified during naval crises, ship commanders must make rapid life-or-death decisions on whether to shoot and risk an international conflict.

Moreover, this silent contest is now playing out in the depths of the world's busiest sea lanes.

More than half of the world's annual merchant-fleet tonnage passes through the South China Sea. It links the Western Pacific with the Indian Ocean; whoever controls it will have a tight grip on the global economy.

Vietnam, with its long coastline, is at the very heart of what has become a geopolitical struggle. Although its military is the most powerful in the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, it is also uniquely susceptible to pressure from Beijing: No Vietnamese leader can afford to get on the wrong side of China, especially not as Vietnam is becoming increasingly dependent on manufacturing work flooding in from China to take advantage of lower wages.

This is why, say military analysts in Hanoi, a crisis last May triggered by the arrival of a giant Chinese oil-drilling rig in waters both countries claim has now been smoothed over.

But Vietnam's vulnerability is also what draws in the great powers. It was no coincidence that Hillary Clinton, then the U.S. secretary of state, used a meeting on Asian security in Hanoi in 2010 to declare that a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea disputes was in America's "national interest."

That is also why the major powers are rallying around Vietnam's submarine program. India is training Vietnam's submariners; Japanese doctors are providing expertise on treating decompression sickness; America, having eased a ban on lethal-weapons sales to Vietnam, is offering to help enhance its maritime intelligence, which will make the submarines more effective.

America's rationale for going to war in Vietnam in the last century was the "domino theory"--the idea that if Vietnam fell to communism its neighbors would follow. A similar logic drives the desire of the great powers to beef up Vietnam's defenses, say regional defense analysts. If Hanoi disappears entirely into China's orbit, the thinking goes, countering Beijing in the South China Sea will be that much harder.

Vietnam, though, knows it can't count on America or any other nation for help if conflict with China breaks out. That's a big reason it's buying subs. As during its war with America, it knows its best defense lies in stealth and guile, which adds risk in already treacherous waters.

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