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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Briefing:

Vietnam's Advanced Kilo-class Submarines & South China Sea

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August 21, 2015

Q1- What can you tell us about Vietnam's submarine force and ambitions and how will these submarines contribute to Vietnam's military presence in the region?

ANSWER: Vietnam plans to have a fully operational submarine brigade by 2017 by which time it will have taken delivery of all six advanced Kilo-class conventional submarines that it ordered from Russia in 2009. Russia will provide follow on service and maintenance from facilities at Cam Ranh Bay. India is providing training for 500 submariners in undersea warfare.

The origins of Vietnam's desire to incorporate an under surface warfare component to its navy go back to the final years of the Cold War when a submarine crew was reportedly trained in the Soviet Union. Vietnam's ambitions were dashed with the collapse of the USSR and the momentary loss of its special relations with Moscow. The new Russian Federation pressed Vietnam to repay wartime debts and insisted on hard currency for arms sales. In the late 1990s Vietnam acquired two mini Yugo-class submarines from North Korea that served as training aids for the acquisition of Kilo subs.

Submarines by their very nature are stealthy. China has achieved a fair degree of maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea through networking its occupied features with surface ships and maritime patrol aircraft. Vietnam can now conduct its own reconnaissance by employing the Kilos without too much fear of detection.

Since China does not have well developed anti-submarine warfare capabilities it will be hard for it to detect and locate Vietnam's Kilos known for their stealth capabilities.

Vietnam occupies over 25 features in the South China Sea and fears that China could suddenly block access or seize any number of them at will. China now has to add Vietnam's submarine capabilities into its defence equation. If China committed an act of aggression Vietnam could retaliate. Kilo submarines are equipped with both heavy torpedoes and anti-ship cruise missiles.

Vietnam's Kilo subs also have two other capabilities. They can lay mines at sea and they can launch land attack cruise missiles. In other words Vietnam could lay mines near China's naval ports that access the South China Sea. And in time of conflict, Vietnam could strike China's home ports.

Vietnam is far out in front in the acquisition of conventional submarines among its neighbours in Southeast Asia. Only Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have conventional submarines. China boasts a submarine force in excess of sixty however.

One key question analysts ask is whether Vietnam can absorb so many submarines into its navy and use them effectively. These analysts feel Vietnam may be overcome by the costs and demands of maintenance and servicing of its six submarines.

Q2- The latest delivery comes amidst simmering disputes in the South China Sea: what is Vietnam's role in the maritime disputes?

ANSWER: Vietnam claims sovereignty over the Paracel islands, occupied by China, and the Spratly islands, occupied by Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and China. China claims "indisputable sovereignty" over the South China Sea within the area enclosed within its nine-dash line map. A map with these lines was officially submitted to the United Nations in May 2009. Vietnam occupies the largest number of features in the South China Sea.

The conflicting maritime claims between Vietnam and China have resulted in a number of incidents involving Vietnamese fishermen in waters near the Paracels. China has harassed foreign oil exploration/seismic vessels operating in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) where its maritime area intersects with China's nine dash lines. The most serious incident was in May-July last year when China parked the HD 981 mega oil drilling platform in disputed waters beyond the median line of the two sides' hypothetical EEZs. Chinese fishing boats regularly intrude into Vietnam's EEZ. When Vietnam's National Assembly promulgated the Law of the Sea of Vietnam, the China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) immediately issued exploration blocks overlapping Vietnam's EEZ.

Vietnam responded to the HD 981 crisis by dispatching Coast Guard and Fishery Surveillance Force civilian vessels to challenge the Chinese. This resulted in boat ramming and the use of high powered water hoses directed at opposing ships.

Vietnam also protests any action by China to assert administrative control over the Paracels, such as inaugurating tourist cruises to these islands. Failure to do so may be construed as Vietnam's acquiescence to China's actions.

Vietnam and China conduct government-to-government talks about demarcating the waters outside the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin, that is, beyond the area where they have already reached agreement.

On the legal front, Vietnam has so far refrained from raising its maritime dispute with China with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Vietnam, however, has tabled a statement of interest with the Arbitral Tribunal hearing the claim against China brought by the Philippines. This note has not been published but it reportedly requests the Tribunal to take Vietnam's interests into account. Vietnam was invited to appear as an observer before the first round of Arbitral Tribunal hearings on the Philippines' claim and it did so.

Q3- Do you believe these new submarines will alter the balance in Vietnam's favour? If so, how?

ANSWER: Vietnam's new fleet of submarines will not alter the naval balance of power between Vietnam and China. China has a fleet of over 60 submarines and is enlarging its stock of nuclear powered attack submarines. These will be based at Yulin Naval Base on the southern part of Hainan island. But Vietnam's submarine fleet will mean that Vietnam can contest China's naval presence if China should threaten Vietnam's interests in the South China Sea.

Vietnam has not released any public details about its maritime strategy. However, it is clear from its acquisition of land based anti-ship missiles, fourth generation multirole jet fighters armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, missile fast attack craft, and stealth frigates also armed with anti-ship missiles, that Vietnam is rapidly developing an "anti-access/area denial" strategy 200 nm out from its extended coast line. Vietnam's navy is not intended to confront China in a major clash. Rather it is aimed at lower order contingencies involving smaller number of Chinese ships operating at extended distances from their home ports.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam's Advanced Kilo-class Submarines & South China Sea," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, August 21, 2015. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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