

## Is Vietnam in denial on military strategy?

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Vietnam's recent, and significant, investment in military hardware is aimed at coping with a changing strategic environment. But will it make any significant difference in balancing against China's military might in the South China Sea?



Over the last ten years, Vietnam has been especially focusing defence investment in its air and naval capability. This has included the purchase of Su-30MK2 fighter bombers, Project 636 submarines, as well as several types of surface vessels and missiles. These purchases may reveal Vietnam's inclination towards an anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) strategy aimed at preventing foreign access or activities in its territorial waters. But in the face of the superior Chinese military power, Vietnam's military procurements appear inadequate for pursuing an A2/AD strategy and may not achieve their intended goal.

First, as surveillance is the key for a 'denial' strategy, Vietnam's existing platforms for maritime surveillance are potentially vulnerable. Hanoi has introduced three types of maritime surveillance aircraft (DHC-6-400, M-28P and C-212) for its air force and coast guard. But these slow propeller-powered aircraft are easy prey for Chinese fighters' beyond-vision-range missiles, and even surface vessels' long-range surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Although Hanoi has launched a remote sensing satellite using French technology and management, its function for denial operation could be limited. The remote sensing satellite is to scrutinise geographic and geologic information rather than real time intelligence on the location of Chinese vessels. Additionally, the French management of the satellite may not cooperate with Hanoi's military demands due to pressure from Beijing's. If those aerial surveillance platforms are unable to search maritime targets during warfare, most Vietnamese strike units would need to find their own targets, and an optimal distribution of fire power would be less likely.

Second, Vietnam has a smaller number of sophisticated weapon systems than China. In terms of the third and fourth generation fighters, surface vessels and submarines, Vietnamese forces have even less than half of those in the Guangzhou Military Region. This leaves the Vietnamese military with a smaller margin for loss, presenting a disadvantage in attrition war. Vietnamese submarines may overcome certain asymmetrical disadvantages in the short term but would struggle in the long term. The People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) South Sea Fleet could also deploy submarines outside major Vietnamese naval bases, such as Cam Ranh Bay, to monitor their operation.

Third, both Hanoi and Beijing procured several similar [Russian weapon systems](#),<sup>[1]</sup> such as the Su-30MK2, Project 636 submarines and S-300 PMU-1 SAMs. Due to the earlier purchase and China's famous reverse engineering, the Chinese forces can already grasp the complete performance and characteristics of these weapon systems — Vietnam can't. As a result, Hanoi may lose some tactical surprises which are supposed to compensate for their quantitative inferiority. In sum, Vietnam's military modernisation may not achieve an A2AD strategic goal.

Finally, domestic budget constraints also suggest that another wave of massive military hardware procurement is unlikely. As such, it is unlikely that Vietnam will possess substantial capabilities in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, although Hanoi's effort on defence may not effectively check Beijing's massive military power, it does provide some strategic value. First, Vietnam is able to deter China much better than before. Compared to the end of the last century, the disincentives for Beijing using force against Vietnam are much greater. In order to ensure a successful outcome, the PLA would have to deploy more units to counter its Vietnamese counterparts. But more units would decrease strategic surprises and leave a more aggressive impression of China among the international community. As the Philippines — another 'frontline' state facing China's strategic pressure — strengthens its defence through the Enhance Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States, Vietnam's considerable investment in defence could make it harder prey for China's expansion or assertiveness.

Second, Hanoi's military modernisation may serve as a bargain chip in negotiation with other powers for security cooperation. Vietnam's investment in defence could lower the cost of intervention and ensure its commitment to defence rather than overall dependence. This would increase the possibility of extended deterrence or external intervention from a third party. And it would improve the [military balance between Vietnam and China](#)<sup>[2]</sup>. But in view of Beijing's increasing economic and military capability, a third party power may hesitate to support Hanoi in fear of the high costs of confrontation.

Overall, Hanoi's military modernisation has not dramatically changed its attitude toward Beijing. Despite tension over conflicting territorial claims, [Vietnamese decision makers still contact their Chinese counterparts](#)<sup>[3]</sup> through party-to-party and other channels. Considering the bilateral economic ties and inferior military capability, Hanoi may continue with a cautious tone in its relations with Beijing.

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