

Vietnam accelerates military build-up, plans for war

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In its biggest military re-armament program since the end of the Vietnam War, the country's leadership is accelerating a decade-long drive to modernise its armed forces.

A Reuters report, "Vietnam builds military muscle to face China," published on December 18, said Hanoi was seeking to "deter" China as tensions rise over disputes in the South China Sea. If that fails, Vietnam is rapidly preparing "to be able to defend itself on all fronts" the article claimed.

Senior officers and other highly placed sources in Hanoi told Reuters that Vietnam's strategy has "moved beyond contingency planning" into full-scale preparation for war. Key army units, including the elite Division 308 which guards the mountainous north, have been placed on "high combat readiness," to fend off any sudden attack.

A video report accompanying the article noted that historically "Vietnam has defined itself" by conducting wars against bigger powers, and it is "now preparing for its next one." In reality, Vietnam is preparing to enter an imperialist war as an accomplice of the United States, which waged a neo-colonial war to subordinate the country in the 1960s and 1970s.

In line with the corporate media's demonising of China over the intensification of hostilities in the South China Sea, Reuters falsely depicted Vietnam's military build-up as defensive. It claimed that the "turning point" was China's positioning, in May 2014, of an oil rig "just 80 nautical miles" from Vietnam's coast. The dispute escalated into a dangerous confrontation between Chinese ships and the Vietnamese coast guard.

The oil rig was in fact set up near the Paracel Islands, which are claimed by both countries, but have been controlled by China since 1974. The area overlaps a Vietnamese oil exploration block which Hanoi had

earlier awarded to the US energy giant, ExxonMobil. The US quickly intervened in the conflict, with State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki branding the placement of the rig as "provocative and unhelpful to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region." Vietnamese authorities, in turn, encouraged a wave of sometimes violent protests at Chinese diplomatic offices and Chinese-invested businesses, denouncing China and driving thousands of Chinese citizens from the country.

As part of the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, Washington has deliberately inflamed longstanding but low-level regional disputes into dangerous flashpoints by declaring its "national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea and encouraging countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines to press their territorial conflicts with China.

Since 2007, visits by American warships to Vietnamese ports have become a regular feature of military relations, along with a growing number of joint exercises.

The Obama administration is working assiduously to strengthen US strategic engagement with Vietnam. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter and the Vietnamese government signed a Joint Vision Statement in July, under which the US would train Vietnamese troops to participate in UN "peacekeeping operations."

Carter committed to providing Vietnam with \$US18 million to purchase two US-made patrol boats, as a prelude to the co-production of weapons and defence supplies, seeking to curtail Russian military influence. This followed a decision by the US in October 2014 to lift its longstanding ban on the sale of maritime weaponry to Vietnam. In July President Obama met with Nguyen Phu Trong, general secretary of the

Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The meeting declared a joint commitment to the US demand for “freedom of navigation.”

The US and its main regional ally Japan are seeking to boost the military capacity of Vietnam and other countries in Asia to prepare for war with China. Japan and Vietnam have agreed to hold their first-ever joint naval exercise in the near future with a Japanese warship expected to visit the strategic naval base at Cam Ranh Bay.

Vietnamese crews are also undergoing training in undersea warfare at India’s INS Satavahana submarine centre. Coinciding with a series of defence, trade and economic agreements signed by the two countries’ leaders in November 2014, India is engaged in energy projects with Vietnam in the South China Sea, including in areas claimed by China, while simultaneously providing a \$US100 million line of credit to Vietnam to buy military hardware.

In recent months, the first four of six heavily-armed submarines purchased from Russia began patrolling the South China Sea. The fleet is expected to be fully operational by 2017. The navy is also acquiring Russian-designed ships equipped with anti-ship missiles, as well as 2 frigates, 6 corvettes and 18 fast-attack missile boats. New vessels will have enhanced anti-submarine weapons. Coastal defences have been strengthened with anti-ship artillery batteries.

Vietnam’s Air Force operates 30 Russian-supplied fighter-bombers, which patrol its military bases in the Spratly archipelago. Air defences have been upgraded and expanded with Israeli early warning radars and Russian surface-to-air missile batteries. Negotiations are underway with European and US arms manufacturers to buy more fighter jets, maritime patrol planes and unarmed surveillance drones.

The army maintains a conscript-based force of an estimated 450,000 troops. It has recently started manufacturing Israeli rifles under license, and has used Israeli and European technological help to refit some 850 Russian tanks. Laws were passed last year lengthening compulsory military service from 18 months to two years.

The Vietnamese leadership is engaged in a delicate balancing act; while not an official US ally, it has tilted markedly towards Washington, despite longstanding economic ties with China, its largest trading partner. In

an attempt to counter America’s growing influence, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Vietnam and Singapore in November, promoting China’s “Belt and Road” trade and infrastructure initiative. This includes major transport and power plant construction projects in Vietnam, with financing from the Bank of China.

According to a commentary in the *Diplomat* on November 6, Xi’s visit was also intended to boost the pro-China faction within the VCP leadership, co-led by Party Secretary Phu Trong and Defence Minister Phung Quang Thanh. Tensions between these elements and the more US-oriented faction of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung are likely to be a major factor in the party congress, held every five years, which will convene later this month to select the new leadership of the VCP.



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