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Background Brief:

Flights of Fancy: Vietnam to Use Military Force to Stand Up to China?

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A RAND Corporation specialist wrote in a recent commentary for *The Diplomat* that “Vietnam could take a page out of Indonesia's playbook and dramatically escalate the potential for armed conflict to get China to back down during the next crisis.”

Q1. In your opinion what are the chances that Hanoi would respond in the military domain? Does it actually have the capabilities of doing so? And how likely is it that Beijing would see even a weak show of force by Hanoi (say the deployment of its Coast Guard and fishing militia forces) as a serious military escalation?

ANSWER: This assessment is myopic and very American-centric. The policy that is suggested is alien to Vietnamese strategic culture.

The cases of Indonesia and Vietnam are not comparable. Indonesia is located at China's extended lines of communication. Indonesia exploited its interior lines of communication to concentrate military forces around Natuna island and its surrounding waters. China was outnumbered and lacked air cover.

China only claims “historic [fishing] rights” in the waters around Natuna. China has not contested oil exploration and production in Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Vietnam is vulnerable to attack by China along its northern land border and extended coast line. Vietnam's interior lines of communication lack strategic depth, particularly along the coastline. China would be operating from Zhanjiang and Guangzhou in southern China, with support bases at Yulin on Hainan, Woody island and artificial islands in the Spratlys (three hosting long runways and hangars).

China's Southern Fleet includes twenty-two submarines (4 SSBNs, 2 SSNs and 16 SSKs). These would pose a serious threat to Vietnam's navy and likely overwhelm Vietnam's anti-submarine warfare capacity.

The status of Vietnam's submarine fleet can be debated. If they remain in port, they are vulnerable to attack. If they go to sea, they are unlikely to have a safe haven to return to.

Vietnam has repeatedly reaffirmed that it will defend itself if attacked but would not resort to armed force in the first instance. For Vietnam to threaten military force against China would be near suicidal. China's Southern Theatre Command naval forces are larger in size than the entire Vietnam People's Navy (see Table 1) and could be reinforced by other naval commands during a conflict.

Any naval engagement would be intense and Vietnam would likely expend its ship-to-ship and other missiles very quickly.

China has the numbers to outlast Vietnam in a naval war of attrition. China could swiftly inflict heavy damage on military ports so Vietnam could not resupply expended missiles or repair damaged naval warships.

However, it is possible that China's naval forces could sustain serious damage at the hand of the Vietnamese navy in the short-run.

Table 1 – Order of Battle		
China Southern Theatre Command and Vietnam People's Navy		
Type of Platform	China	Vietnam
Submarine, nuclear	4 SSBN, 2 SSN	
Submarine, conventional	16 SSK	6 SSK and 2 SSI
Destroyer	10 DDGHM	
Frigate	31 FFGHM, FFGM, FFG, FSGM	4 FFGM
Landing Platform Dock	4 LPD	
Patrol Craft/Coastal Combatants	ε38 PCFG/PCG	72 FSGM, FSG, FS, PCFGM, PCO, PCC, PBFT, PH, PHT, PB, PBR
Mine Warfare and Countermeasures	ε16 MCMV	13 MSO, MSC, MHI, MSR
Landing Ships	ε21 LST/M	7 LSM, LST

In May 2014, a Vietnamese strategist opined that Vietnam could pursue a policy of "mutual assured destruction".¹ He was not speaking of nuclear weapons but was using the phrase "mutual assured destruction" ironically. The strategist said in a conflict with China Vietnam would inflict as much damage as it could on Chinese shipping in the south of the South China Sea. This was intended to make war premium insurance skyrocket, divert shipping, and provoke the international community to intervene to halt conflict.

¹ See: Carl Thayer, "Vietnam Mulling New Strategies to Deter China," *The Diplomat*, May 28, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/vietnam-mulling-new-strategies-to-deter-china/>.

If Vietnam chose to use Coast Guard Ships and maritime militia, China would merely up the ante. China's Coast Guard outnumbers and outweighs Vietnam in all categories including armaments.

As for Vietnam's maritime militia, it is not equivalent to China's maritime militia. It is not a separate service but is part of the long-standing militia and self-defence force structure. It is only organized at a very low level. It is not a separate service with its own budget. Vietnam is still mulling legislation to establish a credible maritime militia.

Vietnam's strategic culture views conflict as a three-pronged struggle – military, political and diplomatic. The military prong would serve the other two. Vietnam would want to protract its conflict with China to draw in the world community to put pressure on Beijing to deescalate.

In sum, Vietnam is highly unlikely to respond to a Chinese maritime provocation with military force. It does not have the capability to prevail in a force-on-force conflict with China.

China would take a measured view if Vietnam deployed its coast guard and fishing militia, as evidenced by the stand-off in the waters around Vanguard Bank last year. Vietnam deployed Coast Guard and militia forces. They maintained a watching brief and China only blew sirens and fired water cannons if the Vietnamese got too close.

Q2. Is there also the consideration for Hanoi of not knowing if the U.S. would respond in a scenario where Vietnam decides to contest China in the military domain? In other words, can Hanoi trust that the Trump administration would come to its defense?

ANSWER: Vietnam would not plan its military strategy on the basis of U.S. military intervention on its side in a conflict between Vietnam and China.

The Trump Administration is highly unlikely to intervene on Vietnam's side during a Sino-Vietnamese conflict. President Trump would immediately ask, "What would the U.S. get out of it?" In other words, why should the U.S. fight Vietnam's battles?

The U.S. likely would provide intelligence as it did to the United Kingdom during the Falklands conflict. At present the defence relationship with the United States is rudimentary and Hanoi would not bait or attack China expecting the U.S. to step in.

There is no legal impediment preventing Vietnam from purchasing from the United States almost any type of weaponry, platforms and military technology that it wants. Vietnam doesn't do so because its military has legacy Russian equipment and because it cannot afford "big ticket" U.S. items.

Q3. And, as a corollary, might this change if Trump were to lose in November, and Vietnam finds a more reliable partner in the White House?

ANSWER: If Joe Biden becomes president, it is doubtful his administration would come to Vietnam's aid and fight with Vietnam against China either. The United States and Vietnam are not treaty allies and their militaries are not interoperable.

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