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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**6 Kilos: Can Vietnamese Submarines help reclaim the South China Sea?**

**by**

**Christopher Bailey**

**CDR, USN**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**1 November 2013**

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## **Abstract**

*6 Kilos: Can Vietnamese Submarines help reclaim the South China Sea?* In April 2009, Vietnam purchased 6 Russian *Varshavyanka* class diesel submarines, better known to the world by their NATO designation, *Kilo* class. This is a massive leap in both technology and operational reach by the Vietnamese Navy. This paper will present a background of the current operating environment in the South China Sea. Despite countless talks over balance in the region, continued aggression by the Chinese shows a paradox of words over actions. Next, the paper will provide an account of the current state of the Vietnamese Navy and its limited operating capabilities. The paper will then get at the argument that these submarines will help facilitate a naval balance in the region, indirectly creating a maritime balance in the region. The counterargument will show that some scholars feel continued acquisitions by the Vietnamese armed forces, more specifically the submarines, will have a destabilizing effect on the region, further complicating already delicate relationships. Finally, the paper will provide recommendations for both Vietnam and the U.S. and how a continued cooperation will help avoid destabilization in the region.

## INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970's, interest in the economic rights of the seabed under the South China Sea was amplified when what was believed to be vast amounts of oil was discovered. What was already a hotly contested region, the South China Sea now became a potential resource base for the region's quickly growing economies and industrial bases. Diplomatic discussions continue between Vietnam and China over disputes, and multilateral efforts by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are aimed at peaceful resolution and resource sharing. However, recent military acquisitions by Vietnam aimed at reclaiming lost territory and stopping further unchecked territorial and maritime claims by China, suggest that Vietnam plans to use all arms of their national power to resolve the disputes. More specifically the following paper will argue that their recent purchase of six *Kilo*-class Russian submarines will indirectly create a naval balance in the South China Sea, preventing further unchecked maritime economic and territorial claims by the Chinese. This paper will describe the current status in the South China Sea that is facing Vietnam. The paper will then provide an account of the current state of the Vietnamese Navy. Skeptics argue that further military acquisitions and an arms race will further destabilize the region. Maritime theories of sea control and sea denial will be used to show that a small unbalanced force, like a small, new undersea capability, in time will help the Vietnamese reclaim lost territory and will prevent follow on confrontations in the region. Finally, the paper will provide several recommendations that will show how the U.S. can assist in bringing stability to the region that annually sees half of the world's commercial goods pass through its waters.

## BACKGROUND

The South China Sea is one of the busiest sea-lanes in the world. Currently, over half of the world's maritime commerce transits the South China Sea annually, estimated at over \$5 trillion. It is an extremely rich fishery and all bordering nations have conflicting and overlapping commercial claims. Vast amounts of both oil and natural gas have been discovered under the seabed. In 2008, the U.S. Energy Information Administration estimated South China Sea energy reserves at 213 billion barrels, larger than Saudi Arabia's reserves.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that this resource rich area is of great interest to the regional nations on the boundaries of the South China Sea. However, China has insisted on excessive claims over the last 6 decades resulting in an unstable maritime commons.

In 1947, China first published its expansive territorial claim in the South China Sea. In a region bounded by 6 other sovereign nations, China's "cow tongue" shaped claim, sometimes referred to as the "9 dash line" due to the way it is depicted on charts, essentially stating that the entire South China Sea was Chinese territorial waters. In June 2013, China's mapping agency issued a new map of the region claiming that over 80% of the South China Sea is Chinese internal waters. Gordon Chang, a columnist at Forbes.com and for the World Affairs Journal, and a Chinese regional expert states "Beijing's new map, according to those who have seen it, removes any ambiguity by converting the dashes into a national boundary. All islands and waters inside the line, therefore, are China's, at least according to the Chinese. It is the biggest attempted grab of territory since World War II."<sup>2</sup> Despite this extravagant claim by the Chinese, they still diplomatically show their desire for cooperation

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Spitzer, "The South China Sea: From Bad to Worse," *TIME.com*, July 15, 2012, accessed October 31, 2013. <http://nation.time.com/2012/07/15/the-south-china-sea-from-bad-to-worse/>

<sup>2</sup> Gordon C. Chang, "China and the Biggest Territory Grab Since World War II," *Forbes*, June 2, 2013. Accessed October 22, 2013. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/gordonchang/2013/06/02/china-and-the-biggest-territory-grab-since-world-war-ii/>

and stability in the region. However, despite continued push for stability, recent confrontations show that the Chinese still believe the “cow’s tongue” is a legitimate claim.

Over the last twenty-five years, ongoing diplomatic efforts to resolve the disputes have occurred in parallel with periodic maritime confrontations between the parties. Diplomatic pressure is not hampering hostilities on the contested water. Since 1988, here is a short sampling of Chinese and Vietnam engagements in the South China Sea:

- March 1988. Chinese and Vietnamese ships engage over a 5km long reef (Johnson Reef). Naval gunfire is exchanged. Chinese ships sank all Vietnamese ships. 74 Vietnamese killed.<sup>3</sup>
- July 1992. China deploys two naval vessels to prevent Vietnam from resupplying a commercial facility.<sup>4</sup>
- July 2007. Chinese Naval vessel fires on Vietnamese fishing vessels near the Spratly islands injuring 5 fishermen.<sup>5</sup>
- February – September 2010. Numerous Vietnamese fishing vessels, stopped, boarded by Chinese patrol craft. Fines are levied, catches are seized, and crews are arrested.<sup>6</sup>
- May and June 2011. In two separate incidents, Chinese surveillance vessels cut the seismic cables of two Vietnamese ships. One was operating only 65 miles off of the Vietnamese coast; the other was in the western part of the Spratly islands.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yann-huei Song and Stein Tonnesson, “The Impact of the Law of the Sea Convention on the Conflict and Conflict Management in the South China Sea,” *Ocean Development & International Law*, August 5, 2013. 202013.2013:244. DOI: 10.1080/00908320.2013.808935.

<sup>4</sup> Song and Tonnesson, “The Impact of the Law of the Sea Convention on the Conflict and Conflict Management in the South China Sea,” 245.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>6</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea”, Paper to International Studies Association 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, March 16-19, 2011. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Song and Tonnesson, “The Impact of the Law of the Sea Convention on the Conflict and Conflict Management in the South China Sea,” 255.

- March 2013. Chinese military vessel fires flares at a Vietnamese fishing boat setting the cabin on fire.<sup>8</sup>

While this list is not exhaustive, it suggests that the Chinese, despite diplomatic rhetoric of cooperation and resource sharing, have no intention of conceding sovereign rights and usage of this region. Military confrontations continue on a fairly routine basis and the Chinese are still enforcing unrecognized claims to islands and waterspace.

Opposite the confrontation in the South China Sea is the diplomatic effort of China, Vietnam, the U.S., and ASEAN, to bring stability to this high traffic region and to make it a true international maritime commons in accordance with the UN's 1982 Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The 2011 incidents of cable cutting highlight the disparate views of China and Vietnam and who has what right to operate where. Vietnam claimed that their survey ship was operating well within Vietnam's 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone, as defined by the UNCLOS. China's reaction not only went against the basic tenets of UNCLOS, it was also not in keeping with the 2002 Declaration on Conduct (DOC) of Parties signed by both China and member ASEAN states. This DOC was signed "to be a guideline for inter-state behavior until final agreement could be reached on a more formal code of conduct."<sup>9</sup> It stated that Vietnamese/Chinese conflict and disagreement in the South China Sea is to be resolved through talks and negotiation rather than armed at-sea confrontation. China's dialog was concessionary and had cooperative language that led all parties to believe that a non-confrontational resolution was possible. Despite diplomatic efforts, asymmetric engagements will continue to take place in the South China Sea, in particular in the water

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<sup>8</sup> William Wan, "China admits its ship fired at Vietnamese fishing boat," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Thayer, "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea," 12.

space surrounding both the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Multilateral efforts by international government organizations like the UN and ASEAN push towards peaceful diplomatic resolution of resource sharing and territorial boundary disputes, while fishermen are harassed and detained and seismic survey ships are damaged.

The U.S. has been vocal in its support of multilateral efforts aimed at bringing stability to the region. In her 2010 address to the ASEAN Regional Forum, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted, “The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea. We share these interests not only with ASEAN members or ASEAN Regional Forum participants, but with other maritime nations and the broader international community...we oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant.”<sup>10</sup> The U.S. remains committed to peaceful resolution of all commercial and territorial disputes without any armed conflict in the region, but at the same time, Secretary Clinton reiterates commitment to UNCLOS and freedom of navigation within sovereign exclusive economic zones. Despite U.S. support for multilateral resolution, inconsistencies remain in the diplomatic and military arms of the local governments’ national power. With U.S. emphasis on international access to the maritime commons, there remains an imbalance in the region.

From fall 2011 to summer 2012, further contradictions in a Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic resolution became clear. Following the two cable cutting incidents in the spring of 2011, the two sides met at a bilateral summit in Beijing. Here they signed a 6-point “Agreement on basic principles guiding the settlement of sea-related issues.” The 6 points contained language like peace, friendship, cooperation, respect, constructive, long-term

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<sup>10</sup> Hillary Clinton, *Remarks at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum*, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010, Accessed September 6, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

solutions and so forth.<sup>11</sup> This cooperative attitude by the two sides would collapse the following summer at the July 2012 summit of foreign ministers of ASEAN in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The group failed to agree on a conference concluding communiqué typically written as a formal record of the events. The Southeast Asian member states could not come to a consensus on how to press China into cooperation over South China Sea disputes.<sup>12</sup> Bilateral diplomatic successes were coupled with multilateral failures and the Vietnamese were wise to pursue a third leg to their strategy; modernizing their armed forces.

Vietnam's policy towards China can be summarized as a three-pronged effort. First, bilateral efforts between the two countries have produced numerous agreements and treaties aimed at balance and de-escalation in the South China Sea. Both sides have been concessionary on less contentious issues like their shared land border and the smaller Gulf of Tonkin. Chinese and Vietnamese Party leadership hopes this conciliatory stance can carry over into talks over the South China Sea. Second, Vietnam's second approach is through multilateral agreements such as "ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus Eight and the East Asia Summit."<sup>13</sup> As previously described, these multilateral efforts have had mixed results. Dr. Carlyle Thayer of the University of New South Wales and the Australian Defense Force Academy is a recognized Vietnam and Southeast Asia regional expert. He characterizes Vietnam's third prong of their

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<sup>11</sup> Ramses Amer, "China, Vietnam and the South China Sea Disputes: Assessing the Implications of the May-June 2011 Incidents," Paper prepared for the Third International Workshop on "South China Sea: Cooperation for Regional Security and Development, 3-5 November 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Barta and Carlos Tejada, "Sea Dispute Upends Asian Summit," *Wall Street Journal Online*, July 23, 2012, Accessed September 6, 2013.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303919504577524133983292716.html>

<sup>13</sup> Thayer, "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea," 5.

China strategy as “self-help” and military modernization.<sup>14</sup> He sees Vietnam’s increased emphasis on much a needed upgrade of their military capabilities and hardware as a critical third prong of their three-tiered relationship with China. He describes it as a “defensive strategy aimed at area denial.”<sup>15</sup> Currently, the Vietnamese Navy is operating with aged equipment in need of a force wide modernization. Growth in the undersea domain is an ideal strategy in what is currently an unbalanced region. A sea denial platform, like a submarine, should help keep the Chinese from further unchecked claims.

### **THE VIETNAMESE NAVY**

The People’s Army of Vietnam Navy (PAVN) or also known as the Vietnam People’s Navy (VPN) is relatively small compared to other regional navies. It is largely reliant on Russia for former Soviet Union equipment and doctrine. The civilian government of Vietnam has recently acknowledged naval force shortfalls. They recognize the importance of maritime modernization with the potential for hostilities in the South China Sea over disputed boundaries and territorial claims.<sup>16</sup> From the mid 70’s to today, the VPN has undergone drastic growth and change. After the Vietnam War, the VPN was made up largely of riverine type patrol craft leftover from the war. In 1972, the VPN consisted of 92 total vessels, of which more than half were patrol craft or gunboats.<sup>17</sup> Today, a fairly modern navy has shifted their focus from the inland waterways and the littorals to a more capable force able to deploy into the South China Sea in defense of claimed territory. Today, the VPN’s end strength is over 43,000 operating 6 frigates, 9 corvettes, 17 fast attack craft, 30

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<sup>14</sup> Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie, *Navies of Southeast Asia: A comparative study* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 193.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 210.

patrol craft, and 13 mine warfare vessels.<sup>18</sup> Compared to the end strength of the Chinese Navy, the VPN is ideally suited to a sea denial type role. The VPN only needs to prevent total Chinese sea control of the South China Sea. Jane's assesses the current VPN as "relatively weak in comparison to other regional navies (notably China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Malaysia).<sup>19</sup> It also appears that the VPN's combat potential is not balanced with its true combat power. That is, on paper, it appears to be a capable regional navy able to reach out into its maritime and territorial claims and defend against aggression. Below the surface however, much of this capability is only one or two spare parts deep. Budgetary constraints have prevented the current force structure from much mission growth and have limited acquisitions until recently.

Civilian policy from the party seems to have tilted this balance in the favor of the armed forces recently and more specifically, the VPN's funding. This seems to be a concerted effort to move the navy's influence from the littoral and the coastline, out into the South China Sea. In 2007, the Communist Party of Vietnam directed the development of a comprehensive maritime strategy. The 2009 Defense White Paper confirmed progress towards these broad goals. Acquisition of the *Kilo* submarines, along with two *Gepard*-class frigates and additional *Svetlyak* fast attack craft show the Vietnamese Navy's intention to modernize its fleet. In addition, in mid January of this year, the Hong Ha Shipbuilding Company in Hai Phong launched the first indigenously built Vietnamese warship, a 54-meter patrol boat based on the Russian *Svetlyak* class.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the modernization push, the 2009 White Paper also emphasized the navy's responsibility "to strictly manage and control

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<sup>18</sup> Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Southeast Asia, last modified October 4, 2013, Accessed October 22, 2013.

<https://janes.ihs.com/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=Reference&ItemId=+++1305175>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

the waters and islands in the East Sea (South China Sea) under Vietnam's sovereignty, to maintain security, to counter any acts of violating sovereignty, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and national interests of Vietnam at sea...to be ready for joint and combined operations to defeat any aggression from and at sea."<sup>21</sup> Policy suggests that both Vietnam's civilian leadership of the Party, along with the highest echelons of military command, recognize the vital importance of the VPN. Modernization and increased mission sets, and new operating domains must be the way of the future if Vietnam is to maintain (or regain) any level of legitimacy in the maritime commons of the South China Sea. The reality of the national economy and an increasing defense budget, although a tight budget, has a factor in the VPN's acquisition process. Vietnam chose the *Kilo* class, not solely because of the current defense ties with Russia, but largely because it was the only conventional class export that they could afford in a significant number (6) that would have any operational impact in the region.<sup>22</sup>

Despite these modernization efforts, it is unclear how a sudden leap into a new domain (undersea), with a new platform (submarines), will have a meaningful impact in the region. Recent history shows that this has been an ongoing process in Vietnam, and they are close to having a deployed operational force capable of denying Chinese control.

### **HISTORY OF SUBMARINES IN VIETNAM**

The Vietnamese Navy has largely been one dimensional (surface) to date. The purchase of these six Russian diesel submarines is a large departure from their current operating domain. This is not their first interest in this new domain. In the late 1980's Vietnam first looked to purchase conventional submarines from the Soviet Union. Then

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<sup>21</sup> Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Southeast Asia, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of Southeast Asia: A comparative study*, 217.

Soviet President Gorbachev balked. Ironically enough, he did not want to instigate China. Soon the Soviet Union would fall and Vietnam's submarine program would go on the shelf for nearly a decade.<sup>23</sup> In 1997, Vietnam and North Korea traded "guns-for-rice", and Vietnam acquired two *Yugo*-class mini submarines. These new boats were homeported at Cam Ranh Bay. They were largely used in diver operations and according to a defense attaché stationed in Moscow, "The mini sub experience provides a basic foundation for understanding submarine operations and maintenance."<sup>24</sup> Following their initial interest in Soviet conventional submarines, to the North Korean mini-sub project, Vietnamese interest in conventional submarines was re-kindled following a Cam Ranh Bay port visit in 1997 by a Russian 636 *Kilo* class boat. In Thayer's article "Russian Subs in Vietnam", he discusses unconfirmed reports of Vietnam and Russia reaching a memorandum of agreement in 2000 that was the first mention of a possible sales program.<sup>25</sup> In 2002, Vietnam reached out to another regional partner, and asked India to assist in training naval cadets and officers in submarine warfare. In 2008, Vietnam tried to acquire a conventional submarine capability from Serbia. When this venture was unsuccessful, they turned back to Russia and reached an initial agreement to buy six Project 636M *Kilo*-class submarines. The deal was made public in April of 2009; Vietnam announced the contract for 6 boats at the price tag of approximately \$350 million for a total of over \$2 billion.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the training with India, this new contract also had the provision for training and the construction of a maintenance facility at Cam Ranh Bay.

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<sup>23</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "Russian Subs in Vietnam," *USNI News*, August 20, 2012. Accessed October 17, 2013. <http://news.usni.org/2012/08/20/russian-subs-vietnam>.

<sup>24</sup> Thayer, "Russian Subs in Vietnam," 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The *Kilo* class is not new to the world stage. It is currently maintained and operated by Russia, China, India, Iran, Poland, Romania, and Algeria. It is a highly capable multi-mission platform. It can be used in an anti-submarine or surface role, or coastal defense and general patrol and reconnaissance. The variant purchased by Vietnam comes with the deadly Club-S (SS-N-27) anti-ship cruise missile with a range of over 300km.<sup>27</sup> This strike capability along with 18 torpedoes make these *Kilos* an ideal sea denial platform.

Other regional nations' failures to reach a responsible diplomatic solution to the South China Sea have led to multiple ASEAN Navies rushing to upgrade their capabilities. Indonesia intends to buy 12 submarines the first of which are from South Korea, by 2024, Malaysia is buying boats from a French/Spanish company, Singapore has purchased Swedish submarines, Thailand has plans to buy six German submarines, and the Philippines has announced their desires for subs as well.<sup>28</sup> Other navies have recognized submarines as an invaluable area denial platform and are moving towards modernization and operational expansion into the undersea domain.

An already busy water space and airspace, occupied by fishermen and naval vessels on the surface, and patrol aircraft overhead, will become even busier in a third domain, undersea. The Vietnamese navy is now faced with a new capability in a new operating environment. China maintains a superior navy, and more specifically, a quantitatively superior submarine force. Planners and strategists will need to quickly determine how an undersized, outnumbered inferior submarine force can make a substantial difference against the Chinese.

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<sup>27</sup> Thayer, "Russian Subs in Vietnam," 2.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Williams, "Storm is brewing in the treacherous South China Sea," *The World Today*, December 2012 & January 2013, 29.

## COUNTER ARGUMENT

Skeptics view Vietnam's purchase submarines as a step in the right direction, but overall, the submarines will have minimal impact in the region and they will not influence Chinese behavior. The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore publishes a series of commentaries discussing regional international relations issues. Writing for the RSIS Commentary series, in his article *Vietnam's New Kilo-class Submarines: Game-changer in Regional Naval Balance?* Koh Swee Lean Collin says that while Hanoi has reached its goal of operating in a third at-sea domain, "notwithstanding the media hype, Vietnam's new Kilos are far from being the game changer in the regional naval balance."<sup>29</sup> Collin then argues that the acquisition needs to be viewed through both qualitative and quantitative lenses. "Quantitatively, the VPN cannot possibly hope to keep pace with China's growing naval might due to the latter's economic preponderance. China possesses a huge submarine fleet that stands poised to further widen that quantitative gap not just with Vietnam but with other submarine operators in the Navy."<sup>30</sup> Collin views the previously mentioned strike capability that will be inherent in the VPN's *Kilos* as a potential destabilizing force in the region that is already teetering on the edge of full on hostilities.<sup>31</sup> Counter to this paper's thesis, Collin emphatically states that Vietnam's "new *Kilo*-class submarines **do not** signify a radical shift in the regional naval balance of power."<sup>32</sup> Collin also recognizes that this is a long-term project and a far-reaching departure from current VPN norms.

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<sup>29</sup> Koh Swee Lean Collin, "Vietnam's New Kilo-class Submarines: Game-changer in Regional Naval Balance?" *Eurasia Review News & Analysis*, September 4, 2012, Accessed September 6, 2013. <http://www.eurasiareview.com/04092012-vietnams-new-kilo-class-submarines-game-changer-in-regional-naval-balance-analysis/>

<sup>30</sup> Koh Swee Lean Collin, "Vietnam's New Kilo-class Submarines: Game-changer in Regional Naval Balance?", 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Pacifists and anti-militarization sentiment also argue that adding more weaponry to the South China Sea will be detrimental to progress. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbradt, a China analyst with the International Crisis Group claims that, “The more militarized the region becomes, the harder it is to resolve conflicts.”<sup>33</sup> Recent evidence shows the Chinese willingness to deploy naval warships to the southernmost portions of their claims in the South China Sea to perform training exercises. Shortly after appointment of a new State President, they deployed two guided missile frigates and a guided missile destroyer sending a message that they are willing to deploy traditional naval assets vice coast guard type patrol craft to the region.<sup>34</sup> The Chinese Navy boasts over 60 submarines. They recently acquired their first aircraft carrier and expect to grow to up to five carriers over the next two decades. Skeptics to regional navies increasing capability both quantitatively and qualitatively say Vietnam will never be able to counter the Chinese.

### **CAN SIX SUBMARINES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

The environment in the South China Sea has been framed. So far, background has described the complex problem of territorial, maritime, and resource claims. Vietnam has an in depth understanding of both the operating environment and the problem the environment presents them. They now need an operational approach built towards a rebalance in the South China Sea. This approach needs to address how a small regional Navy can have a deterrent effect on one of the most powerful and capable navies in the world. Two concepts of naval strategy and employment show how a smaller adversary can have an impact on

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<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbradt, quoted in “Battle for the Pacific; A perilous arms race is unfolding as regional rivals vie for control of trade routes, fish stocks - and oil and gas deposits,” *The Toronto Star*, July 14, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Usman Ghani, “Troubled Waters of South China Sea,” *Pakistan Observer*, July 4, 2013, Accessed September 20, 2013.  
<http://usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1381921952?accountid=322>

limited waterspace and a superior adversary. In his book *Operational Warfare at Sea, Theory and Practice*, Dr. Milan Vego asserts that “the term sea control was a result of the gradual realization that the new technological advances, specifically mines, **torpedoes**, **submarines**, and aircraft, made it difficult, even for the stronger navy, to obtain full command of the sea for any extended time over a large part of the theater.”<sup>35</sup> Sea control can be defined as complete freedom to operate as you wish. This can come in varying degrees of control and it can be either temporary or permanent. Evidence to date shows that the Chinese have enjoyed near permanent control of the South China Sea, and other regional Navies have almost no ability to exert influence. Or one might argue that the Chinese currently maintain a working control; that is “they are generally able to operate with a high degree of freedom. The enemy (in this case, Vietnam) can only operate with high risk.”<sup>36</sup> The counter to China’s working sea control is the concept of sea denial. Current Director of the Corbett Center for Maritime Policy at King’s College in London, Geoffrey Till, uses the British definition of the counter to sea control; sea denial is “the condition short of full sea control that exists when an opponent is prevented from using an area of sea for his purposes.”<sup>37</sup> Till states that with sea denial the objective isn’t sea control for yourself, but prevention of sea control for your enemy.<sup>38</sup> He sees sea denial as “an alternative to sea control.” He further states that “for some countries, the ability to prevent an enemy from using the sea to do them harm is all that is required...Many smaller, defensively oriented navies may feel this applies to them too, especially when up against far stronger forces.”<sup>39</sup> Till then gets directly at the topic of

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<sup>35</sup> Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare at Sea; Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 25 (emphasis added).

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Till, *Seapower; A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 152.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

containing China and how smaller regional navies are pushing their sphere of influence away from their coastlines. “With the growth of their maritime dependence on the resources that can be derived from the ocean and on the shipping that crosses it, such nations have shown an increasing tendency to want to control their own areas of sea more rigorously and to push their capacity to defend their interest outwards.”<sup>40</sup> This concept of denying an adversary full range of operations at sea, and perhaps even vying for their own working sea control, is exactly how a small burgeoning undersea force from Vietnam can have a lasting, and stabilizing effect on the region. Despite being adamant that the submarines and their strike capability will be destabilizing, Collin states that qualitatively, the new capability will provide a “credible asymmetric counter-poise to China’s growing naval might in the South China Sea.”<sup>41</sup> These concepts of sea control and sea denial are academically used in the context of wartime and armed conflict at sea. However, in the case of the South China Sea, and the drastic imbalance of force between Vietnam and China, these concepts are particularly applicable, even if the conflict never departs from peacetime to the full range of naval warfare. Vietnamese submarines will provide an excellent sea denial platform aimed at preventing total Chinese sea control in the South China Sea. Conceptually, the simple presence of these platforms around the disputed resource areas and islands will prevent the Chinese from enforcing fishing bans or apprehending commercial fishermen. In addition, the presence of anti-ship strike capable weapons may deter aggression, and ideally will bring the Chinese back to the negotiating table. Operationally, this new capability may give the Chinese pause over further exertions well south of their internationally recognized economic exclusion zone.

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<sup>40</sup> Till, *Seapower; A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 153

<sup>41</sup> Koh Swee Lean Collin, “Vietnam’s New Kilo-class Submarines: Game-changer in Regional Naval Balance?”, 2.

## CONCLUSIONS

The South China Sea remains a hotbed of territorial disputes. Multilateral and bilateral efforts of normalization and resource sharing between Vietnam, China, and other regional ASEAN member states have stalled. Talks of cooperation and conciliation are overlapped by constant intimidation and unlawful engagements over resources and land claims. Evidence suggests that diplomacy and talk will continue to fall short. Vietnam's recourse has been to modernize its military; more specifically out growth of a dated and underwhelming navy. The 2009 Defense White Paper emphasized the need for a revitalized maritime strategy that can push the operating area of the Navy out to the limits of the South China Sea that can defend commercial interests in the region. Particularly, the purchase of the six *Kilo* class submarines from the Russians shows the region and China that Vietnam is serious in its defense of its interests. A small submarine force will be able to make a credible difference in countering one of the largest navies and submarine forces in the world. Using sea denial operational concepts, the Vietnamese submarine force will present an asymmetric threat to China and will give them pause in future indiscriminate armed engagements with unarmed commercial vessels. With increased cooperation with neighbor ASEAN states that are pursuing similar capability, Vietnam will undoubtedly be able to increase balance and stability in the region.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- In addition to training with the Indian Navy, Vietnam should pursue military to military engagements with U.S. Navy, more specifically liaison with the U.S. submarine force. This could lead to follow on exercise opportunities with Seventh Fleet surface/subsurface/aviation assets. Vietnam will only build capacity, expertise, and

corporate knowledge through a comprehensive training and deployment regimen that should include the U.S.

- In keeping with Secretary Clinton's urging at the 2010 ASEAN regional forum, U.S. ships and aircraft must continue to insist on freedom of navigation rights within the South China Sea, more specifically within China's EEZ. This will indirectly relieve pressure on other regional states that are in direct competition with China over rights in the region.
- In 2010, USS JOHN MCCAIN, an Arleigh Burke class U.S. Navy destroyer, visited Da Nang. In August 2011, the USNS RICHARD E. BURKE (T-AKE-4) was the first U.S. Navy ship to pull into Cam Ranh Bay in 38 years. Continued theater security cooperation operations between the two countries are critical in rebuilding the two militaries' relationship.

PACOM, through enhanced military to military engagements with Vietnam, more frequent port visits, exercise opportunities with Vietnam and other regional partner militaries, and continued freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, can further build a relationship with the Vietnamese military, and more specifically the VPN, indirectly leading to balance and a stabilized region.

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