



THE RISE OF VIETNAM PEOPLE'S NAVY

With a steady economic growth of around 5%, Vietnam, like any emerging country, is seeking to consolidate its strategic position by acquiring military assets in line with its financial resources. The regional geopolitical situation - including rivalries in the Spratly islands - tends to favour the development of naval forces. The Vietnamese navy is developing and seeks to take a new position on the board of the Asian Southeast.

GEO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND MILITARY CONTEXT

The analysis of the development of a naval force is generally indicative of a state's intentions. Until 2010, Vietnam maintained only a coast guard and river monitoring fleet supported by the Russian friend and the Indian ally. The overall Chinese expansionism, confrontations in the Spratly Islands, and oil and gas reserves discovered in the EEZ have changed that. The convenient rapprochement with the US and the proximity of what is becoming the largest Chinese naval base on Hainan Island that hosts the submarines of the Middle Kingdom as well.

TENSIONS IN SOUTHERN CHINA SEA

The main topic of friction with Beijing remains territorial conflicts in the South China Sea. For the record, China has laid hands on the Paracel Islands on the occasion of the fall of South Vietnam before nibbling the Spratly islands, occupying 7 small islands. New disputes related to fisheries resources and of course to oil and gas discoveries add to the ancient ones. Last year, the installation of a Chinese oil platform in the disputed waters south of the Paracels has led each State to defend its interests in the area, with the deployment of thirty Vietnamese ships and 80 Chinese vessels.

Vietnam already has a large army, historical consequence of thirty years of war, and an air force that is being upgraded. It has now chosen to invest heavily in its navy. The most significant fact is the acquisition by Hanoi of light frigates and recent technology submarines: China troubles.

VIETNAMESE NAVAL FORCE

Long clamped in their abilities, offshore resources were until recently limited to five venerable corvettes of PETYA II and III type dating from the seventies. In the last fifteen years, the Vietnamese navy made an impressive capability leap. Since 2008, she has acquired eight *Tarantul V* class missile launcher corvettes, equipped with *SSN-25 Switchblade* missiles with 130 km range. Four *Gepard* class light frigates were commissioned since 2011, equipped with *SSN-25* missiles. The first two, of anti-ship version, were built in Russia while the following two - dedicated to anti-submarine warfare - come out of a local shipyard.

Regarding naval aviation, the Vietnamese navy received 10 *KA-29A Helix* helicopters - embarked on *Gepard* frigates - and 12 *M-28-05 Skytruck* maritime surveillance planes.

But the most striking fact remains the acquisition of six *KILO 636 MV* type submarines, latest version produced by the Admiralty Shipyard in Saint Petersburg. They are equipped with two missile types: *Klub S 3M-14E* long range sea-to-ground missiles - making Vietnam the first country in Southeast Asia to have the ability to hit at 300 km range - and *SSN-27* type anti-ship missiles (*3M-54E*). These submarines are based at Cam Ranh: this port was modernized with the support of Moscow. It can welcome and support the Russian vessels. It is also noted that crews are trained in India, which operates an older model of *KILO* class (877).

The Vietnamese posture is primarily defensive. Hanoi is anxious to preserve its maritime space for economic reasons and does not have conquering ambitions. However, the exponential growth of Chinese naval forces is felt as a threat to the balance of the South China Sea. It requires both a strengthening of maritime power in Vietnam, a confirmation of existing partnerships (Russia, India), a rapprochement with the United States and Japan in terms of armaments and finally flawless vigilance in the operational theatre (Thailand, Myanmar ...).



Southeast Asia: Chief of Staff of the French Navy in official visit to Vietnam - © Marine nationale