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Michał Zareba

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7770-7395>

University of Lodz

Faculty of International and Political Studies

e-mail: michal.zareba@uni.lodz.pl

Role of military cooperation in Vietnam-Russia relations

Abstract. The primary purpose of this article is the analysis of the evolution of bilateral relations between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and the Russian Federation in the field of military cooperation. It gives answers to following research questions: 1) what is the role of defence collaboration in bilateral ties, 2) what are the most essential elements of Russia-Vietnam military relations, 3) what are the common reasons/ incentives for developing links regarding arms trade, 4) do the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and invasion of Ukraine in 2022 change goals of Vietnamese politics towards Moscow, 5) How do Chinese and US factor affect military cooperation between Russia and Vietnam? The theses of this paper assume that: 1) the government in Hanoi maintains friendly relations with Moscow on the political level in the face of the conflict in Ukraine and continues military cooperation, however Russian arms exports to Vietnam has declined, 2) Vietnam diversifies weapon trade partners expanding cooperation with Israel, Belarus, US and South Korea, but Russia still remains crucial arms importer for Hanoi.

The analysis is focused mainly on the situation from 2002 to the present, and intends to examine the evolution of military cooperation between Hanoi and Moscow after the signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership. The article includes a short overview of Russia-Vietnam relations emphasizing its strong historical background. Paper is also focused on important arms trade contracts, agreements on military cooperation, includes statistics published by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) to show the scale of collaboration, and points out major challenges for future cooperation.

Keywords: Russia, Vietnam, Russian-Vietnamese relations, military cooperation, arms trade.

Rola współpracy wojskowej w relacjach wietnamsko-rosyjskich

Streszczenie. Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza ewolucji stosunków bilateralnych między Socjalistyczną Republiką Wietnamu (SRW) a Federacją Rosyjską w zakresie współpracy wojskowej od roku 2002, kiedy to obydwaj kraje podpisały Deklarację o partnerstwie strategicznym. Udziela on odpowiedzi na następujące pytania badawcze: 1) jaka jest rola współpracy militarnej w relacjach rosyjsko-wietnamskich, 2) jakie są najistotniejsze płaszczyzny kooperacji wojskowej między Rosją a Wietnamem, 3) jakie są motywy rozwijania powiązań militarnych każdej ze stron, 4) czy rosyjska aneksja Krymu w 2014 roku i inwazja na Ukrainę w 2022 roku zmieniły cele wietnamskiej polityki wobec Moskwy, 5) w jaki sposób napięcia w relacjach chińsko-amerykańskich wpływają na współpracę wojskową między Rosją a Wietnamem? Tezy niniejszego artykułu zakładają, że: 1) rząd w Hanoi utrzymuje przyjazne stosunki polityczne z Moskwą w obliczu konfliktu na Ukrainie i kontynuuje współpracę wojskową, jednak eksport rosyjskiej broni do Wietnamu w ostatnich latach spadł, 2) Wietnam dywersyfikuje dostawców uzbrojenia rozszerzając współpracę z Izraelem, Białorusią, USA i Koreą Południową, ale Rosja nadal pozostaje kluczowym sprzedawcą broni dla Hanoi.

Artykuł zawiera krótki przegląd stosunków rosyjsko-wietnamskich, koncentruje się również na ważnych kontraktach handlowych w zakresie handlu bronią oraz umowach o współpracy wojskowej. Analiza zawiera interpretację danych publikowanych przez Sztokholmski Międzynarodowy Instytut Badań nad Pokojem (SIPRI), aby pokazać skalę powiązań militarnych, a także wskazuje główne wyzwania dla przyszłej współpracy wojskowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Wietnam, stosunki rosyjsko-wietnamskie, współpraca wojskowa, handel bronią.

Introduction

A friendly alliance between Moscow and Hanoi is dated back to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was a close ally of Vietnam. Currently, one of the key pillars of bilateral relations is military cooperation. Vietnam is one of the largest markets for Russian military equipment, and the government in Moscow remains leading importer of weapons for the Vietnamese.

Vietnam's foreign policy strategy is based on the pillar of "struggle and cooperation" (*viet. vừa hợp tác, vừa đấu tranh*), which assumes that partner or competitor is defined by the national interest (*viet. lợi ích dân tộc*). The principle of "independence and self-reliance" (*viet. độc lập, tự lực*) is also crucial, and envisages avoiding a solid alliance with one country, which is the result of Vietnam's historical experience. In consequence, it leads to flexibility in policy towards the powers active in the region, and balancing between them.

It should be noted that Vietnam uses a hedging strategy as an approach to superpowers, which can be defined precisely as maintaining an equal distance between them and evading a coalition with one country against another state (Kuik, 2008; Goh, 2005: 2). Hedging thus fits in with the theory of neoclassical realism, which recognizes that the shape of foreign policy is the result of a place in the international system, and states' ability to act depends on its skills (Kozub-Karkut, 2014: 44).

Overview of contemporary Russian-Vietnamese relations

The USSR was the second country after the People's Republic of China which recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in January 1950, proclaimed on the 2nd of September 1945. During the tensions on the Indochina Peninsula, Moscow tried to prevent Vietnam from war. However, when the conflict escalated, the Soviets provided military support to the communist in North Vietnam in the form of equipment, personnel training and the presence of military advisers. Official Vietnamese statistics claim that in 1955–1975 Moscow delivered to the Vietnamese 1,357 rocket launching systems, over 18,300 rockets of various types, 316 fighter aircraft, 687 tanks, 601 armoured vehicles, 52 warships, 21 transport ships and 1 332 artillery tractors (Lê Hồng Hiệp, 2022).

After the conflict on the Indochina Peninsula, cooperation was cemented by signing the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in November 1978. When in December 1978 Vietnam decided to intervene in Cambodia, Western countries sought to isolate it completely in the international arena, which didn't occur thanks to the support of the USSR. Border conflict between Vietnam and China, which broke out between February and March 1979, was a test for the Vietnamese-Soviet alliance and posed an increasing threat to the government in Hanoi. Ultimately, Moscow did not react with retaliation to China's actions, but provided Vietnam with intelligence information, and military equipment *via* sea, controlled by the Pacific Fleet (Mosyakov, 2014: 128–135).

The USSR remained Vietnam's leading economic partner. Trade with the Soviets in the first half of the 1980s accounted for about 70% of economic exchange for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Moscow was also a key provider of foreign aid during this period. Every year, 1.5–2 bln USD flowed to Vietnam, which constituted approx. 20% of the state budget (Karwowski, 2010: 438). The supply of military equipment and financial aid from the Soviet Union ended with *perestroika* initiated in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev. The result of close Vietnamese-Soviet cooperation during the Cold War was preserving of a positive image of Vietnam among Russians. Many Vietnamese who studied in the USSR, including party activists, also showed a friendly attitude towards their former

allies. Numerous analytical centres have been established in Russia to conduct research on Southeast Asia region.

However, the beginning of the 1990s brought new challenges to Vietnamese-Russian relations. One of the contentious issues was Vietnamese debt, which arose in the 1980s. The misunderstanding resulted from various calculations regarding its amount, estimated at around 10 bln USD (Pietrasiak 2022: 171). In 1993, the Intergovernmental Vietnamese-Russian Commission for Economic-Trade and Scientific-Technical Cooperation was established and developed a draft of the first contract, assuming repayment of the debt in goods. However, this solution turned out to be unsatisfactory for the Russian side, as the Vietnamese were accused of delivering over-valued goods or low-quality products. Disagreements led to mutual accusations, which caused growing animosity between the two countries.

Further negotiations began in 1997 and common arrangements weren't reached until 2000. New solutions, including more favourable for Vietnam ruble to dollar ratio, ended the discussion on the scale of receivables. Moreover, the possibility of paying off the debt was spread over a period of 23 years (Karwowski, 2010: 440). The progress in negotiations on the conditions of settling the Vietnamese debt had a positive influence on the political sphere and warmed the relations between Hanoi and Moscow. The first signs of a new opening of cooperation came with the Prime Minister of Vietnam Võ Văn Kiệt's visit to Russia on 16th of June 1994. Politicians signed an agreement, which was a milestone for the development of further relations. A year later, accords on trade cooperation were concluded, however, it did not bring the expected results, placing Russia in the role of a secondary economic partner.

In 1997 Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Viktor Chernomyrdin, who was visiting Hanoi, indicated that Vietnam was seen as a strategic partner of Moscow (Pietrasiak, 2002: 197). Two years earlier, the SRV joined the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), and Russian politicians began to perceive Hanoi as a bridge connecting Moscow with the entire region. Another important high-level visit took place in August 1998, when the President of Vietnam, Trần Đức Lương, arrived in the Russian capital. During the meeting with Boris Yeltsin, politicians established permanent diplomatic channels and expressed their readiness to collaborate within regional and international structures. As a result of warming relations, the Vietnamese side shared the Russian position on Moscow's actions in Chechnya, while the Russians began to use neutral language concerning the dispute over the South China Sea.

Political cooperation also led to the increasing investments in strategic sectors such as energy and raw material extraction. In the 1990s, the Vietsovpetro company, present in the Vietnamese market since 1981, was very active and successful. In 2000, the firm was responsible for the extraction of 80% of crude oil, becoming an important player in the energy resources market in the region (Pietrasiak, 2002: 197). Successful cooperation and the discovery of new deposits led to the

establishment of another company, Vietross, in November 1998, responsible for the extraction of energy resources in central Vietnam.

A breakthrough moment for Vietnamese-Russian relations was the year 2001, when Russian President Vladimir Putin met his Vietnamese counterpart Trần Đức Lương in Hanoi. As a result, on the 1st of March, the Declaration on Strategic Partnership was signed, which assumed the deepening economic and political cooperation. Attention was also paid to security issues in the context of global threats, such as terrorism. The principle of non-interference in internal affairs in bilateral relations was also emphasized. Vietnam began paying off its debt, which eventually amounted to 1.7 bln USD. The authorities in Hanoi undertook to pay 10% of the sum in cash, and the rest was planned to be returned in the form of goods and investments in Vietnam (Karwowski, 2010: 440). In the first half of the 21st century, cooperation in energy field continued. Subsequent plans included expanding Vietsovetpetro activities, but the company lost its significance to Gazprom and PetroVietnam, which signed in September 2007 a joint contract to build a modern refinery in Vietnam. Cooperation in the field of hydropower also flourished. It began at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s with the construction of the Hòa Bình dam. In 2005, the Russians started constructing the Sơn La hydropower plant in northwestern Vietnam with an installed capacity of 2,400 MW. It is the largest country's facility of this type, launched seven years later (Karwowski, 2009: 109).

In 2012, during a one-day trip to Hanoi, Vladimir Putin defined Vietnam in his speech as one of the most important partners of Moscow. Russia's pivot to Asia has resulted in more frequent high-level visits between leaders in Hanoi and Moscow. When President Trương Tấn Sang visited Sochi on the 27th of July the same year, the level of relations was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Vietnam-Russia Comprehensive..., 2018). In November a return visit took place. The politicians primarily raised issues related to the effects of the financial crisis and the need to build a new structure of the world order based on multipolarity. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the occupation of eastern Ukraine did not adversely affect Hanoi's policy towards Moscow. In 2015, Vietnam signed a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which entered into force in November a year later. This step was perceived as a Hanoi's will to participate in multilateral economic initiatives, which is in favour of Russian foreign policy strategy.

In recent years, bilateral relations have been affected by the Russian approach to the South China Sea dispute. Although Russia called for an end of the conflict trying to remain neutral. Finally Putin decided to support the PRC's position on the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague decision, which was critical towards Chinese claims. Moreover, Russia took part in a military exercise organized by Beijing the same year, which Hanoi received with dissatisfaction. However, this element did not shake the foundations of Vietnamese-Russian relations. The government in Hanoi is a critical player in Southeast Asia for Moscow, as

evidenced by the establishment of a strategic partnership and cooperation within the EAEU structures. For Vietnam, on the other hand, close cooperation with Russia is one of the elements of diversifying foreign partners and balancing the influence of great powers in the Asia-Pacific region.

Military cooperation as a pillar of Russian-Vietnamese relations

Changes in Vietnamese foreign policy entailed the withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in September 1989 and led to the demobilization of half of the army. It should be emphasized that this move was also a prerequisite normalizing relations with China and ASEAN countries. The government in Hanoi began to pursue a more restrained policy, trying to avoid the escalation of a potential conflict in the South China Sea region, according to the adopted principles of defence policy for 1991–1995 (Thayer, 2016: 206–208). However, China's growing assertiveness forced Vietnam to strengthen its naval and air forces.

In 1993, the government in Hanoi bought the first 6 Su-27 planes from the Russians, and another 6 were imported two years later (Buszyński, 2006: 281). In the 1990s, 6 1241RE project corvettes (type Molnyia/Tarantul) were also purchased, strengthening Vietnam People's Navy. At the same time, the status of the Cam Ranh base in southern Vietnam, a symbol of military cooperation between Moscow and Hanoi during the Cold War, was discussed. The Soviet, later Russian, armed forces had been operating there since 1979, under the contract including free use of the port and infrastructure for 25 years (Acharya, 1988: 287–288). USSR expanded Cam Ranh, constructing fuel and weapon storage facilities, barracks and created the possibility of receiving nuclear submarines. The number of personnel, initially estimated at approx. 5,000 before 1989, decreased by half in the 1990s (Storey, Thayer, 2002: 456). Ultimately, Russian troops withdrew their personnel in May 2002, as Moscow refused Hanoi's conditions, demanding around 200 mln USD annual lease (Rogozińska, Olech, 2020: 59).

In 2003, Vietnam purchased from Russia 4 Su-30MK2 multirole strike fighters and 2 S-300PMU-1 anti-aircraft missile systems, which were delivered two years later. In 2005, it was decided to import 2 K-300P Bastion-P coastal defence missile systems, which arrived in Vietnam after seven years, and 12 missiles 1241.8 project corvettes. Two were handed over in 2007–2008, and the rest were built under a Russian license at Vietnamese shipyards within two years. In 2002–2012, Vietnam also received 6 Svetlyak-class patrol boats (10,412 project). In 2006, Hanoi authorities purchased two Gepard-class frigates (116,61E project), which were handed over to the Vietnamese Navy in 2011.

Military cooperation was improving, and caused the signing of a memorandum on cooperation in October 2008. In December a year later, an agreement on the

construction of 6 submarines of the Varshavyanka (Kilo-class) 636 project for Vietnam at Russian shipyards was inked. It was one of the largest contracts in bilateral military relations, which was finally implemented in February 2014 when the last ship was laid down. In 2009, 2 K-300P Bastion-P systems were purchased from Russia and the terms of delivery of 8 Su-30MK2 aircraft were agreed. A year later, a contract for the import of another 12 jets was signed. In 2013, Vietnam purchased 12 Su-30MK2 aircraft and 2 Gepard-class frigates, delivered in 2016 and 2017 (Thayer, 2013; Lê Hồng Hiệp, 2013).

In November 2014, during the visit of General Secretary of Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Nguyễn Phú Trọng to Sochi, the rules for the use of the Cam Ranh military base were accepted. Russian ships only needed to notify in advance before entering the bay, while units from other countries could only make one visit a year (Nguyễn Thế Phương, 2015). At the same time, Vietnam declared that, in line with the foreign policy doctrine, it would retain complete control of the Cam Ranh base. The agreement was signed in an era of escalating tensions between Russia and the West after the occupation of eastern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula. As a result, Moscow intensified its air operations in the Asia-Pacific region. Thanks to the access to Cam Ranh, the Russians had the opportunity to refuel Tu-95 bombers, which carried out flights near American installations and bases (Brunnstrom, 2015).

In 2016, Vietnam signed a contract with Russia to purchase 64 T-90 tanks, which was completed by 2019. In January 2020, the authorities in Hanoi decided to buy 12 Yak-130 jet trainers and light combat aircraft for 350 mln USD (Cranny-Evans, 2019). The experts interpreted the contract as a prelude to the purchase of SU-35 fighters in the near future, and perhaps even the SU-57 5th generation combat jets (Storey, 2021: 6).

In January 2018, Vietnamese Minister of Defense Ngô Xuân Lịch met in Hanoi with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu. Next consultations took place in the first half of February 2020, when both politicians emphasized military cooperation as a key element of bilateral relations (Rogozzińska, Olech, 2020: 60). A year later, in July, the successor of Minister Lịch, General Phan Văn Giang, talked with Shoigu about strengthening cooperation. In December it resulted in an agreement aimed at extending the declining volume of trade in weapons and technology (Grevatt, 2021). It happened on the sidelines of a Vietnamese delegation's visit to Moscow, headed by the President of Vietnam Nguyễn Xuân Phúc.

Arms trade and Vietnam-Russia military cooperation

Weapons sales make a significant contribution to the state budget of Russia. Although it is ranked 2nd in the arms trade statistics, right after the United States. Its share in 2017–2021 decreased by 7.6 percentage points comparing to the 2002–2006

period (Table 1). An important goal for Russian policy is to maintain military equipment supplies to countries that are permanent partners of military cooperation.

Table 1. Russian arms export (position, volume, share)

| Years | Rank | Mln USD | % |
|-----------|------|---------|------|
| 2017–2021 | 2. | 25,293 | 18.6 |
| 2012–2016 | 2. | 34,375 | 24.1 |
| 2007–2011 | 2. | 31,593 | 24.1 |
| 2002–2006 | 2. | 27,396 | 26.2 |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

Recently, the main recipients of Russian weapons have been primarily India and China. Russia also sells a lot of military equipment to African countries such as Algiers and Egypt, whose importance in Russian arms exports has grown significantly in the recent 2017–2021 period (Table 2). Statistics show that the government in Hanoi is also an essential partner for Moscow, lagging behind the aforementioned countries.

Table 2. Russian major weapon recipients (position and share)

| Years | Vietnam rank (%) | 1st (%) | 2nd (%) | 3rd (%) |
|-----------|------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| 2017–2021 | 5. (4) | India (28) | China (21) | Egypt (12.6) |
| 2012–2016 | 2. (10.4) | India (38.8) | Vietnam (10.4) | Algeria (10) |
| 2007–2011 | 5. (4.3) | India (29.9) | China (16.7) | Algeria (14.9) |
| 2002–2006 | 7. (2) | China (47.5) | India (25.4) | Yemen (3.7) |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

One of the crucial regions for Russian weapons sales is Southeast Asia. Moscow's bargaining power lies primarily in the ability to purchase relatively cheap equipment that ASEAN states can afford. Moreover, the political situation in a given country and the form of government are not under the consideration. For this reason, Burma/Myanmar or Cambodia are not excluded from the group of partners, as they have to face sanctions imposed by Western states.

Russia is the leading supplier of military equipment to Southeast Asia, ahead of the United States, France, Germany and China respectively (Strangio, 2022). Vietnam remains the largest recipient of Russian weapons (over 60%), but a enormous part is also transferred to Burma/Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia (Table 3).

However, sales of Russian weapons to Southeast Asia have plummeted in the past seven years, from 1.2 bln USD in 2014 to only 89 mln in 2021. The reasons for this phenomenon can be seen in four factors, i.e. 1) sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, 2) suspension of the modernization of the

Vietnamese army, caused by fears that Moscow is not able to fulfil its commitments, 3) growing competition with new players from US, Israel, Europe and Asia, such as South Korea, 4) the enactment by the US Congress of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), giving Washington the right to impose sanctions on a country having links with the Russian army industry (Storey, 2022). Moreover, another package of severe restrictions after the invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 rises the logical implication that Russian arms exports to the region would be reduced, although the Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Singapore, have not strongly condemned the aggression.

Table 3. Russian major weapon recipients in Southeast Asia 2002–2021 (volume, share)

| Country | Mln USD | % |
|-----------|---------|------|
| Vietnam | 6,452 | 60.5 |
| Myanmar | 1,599 | 15 |
| Malaysia | 1,273 | 11.9 |
| Indonesia | 1,153 | 10.8 |
| Laos | 122 | 1.1 |
| Thailand | 70 | 0.65 |
| Cambodia | 5 | 0.05 |
| Total | 10,674 | 100 |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

Due to the tensions in the South China Sea and China's growing power in the Indo-Pacific, the government in Hanoi decided to increase the arms supply. It was especially noticeable in 2012–2016 (Table 4) when tensions arose. That period was full of incidents and events such as the Scarborough Reef clashes between Chinese ships and Philippines units (April 2012), 15 appeals of the government in Manila to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague against China (January 2013), anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam, triggered by Chinese drilling in the area of Paracel Islands (May 2015) or the intensification of artificial islands construction by Beijing (since May 2015).

Table 4. Vietnam's arms import (position, volume, share)

| Years | Rank | Mln USD | % |
|-----------|------|---------|------|
| 2017–2021 | 20. | 1,822 | 1.34 |
| 2012–2016 | 11. | 4,118 | 2.9 |
| 2007–2011 | 30. | 1,410 | 1 |
| 2002–2006 | 37. | 637 | 0.6 |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

Table 5. Vietnam's main arms suppliers (share, volume)

| Country | 2012–2016 | | Country | 2017–2021 | |
|---------|-----------|---------|---------------|-----------|---------|
| | % | mln USD | | % | mln USD |
| Russia | 86.6 | 3,564 | Russia | 56 | 1,016 |
| Israel | 4.4 | 181 | Israel | 19 | 352 |
| Belarus | 3.5 | 150 | South Korea | 6.6 | 120 |
| Ukraine | 2.8 | 100 | Belarus | 6.2 | 113 |
| Czechia | 1.2 | 48 | United States | 6 | 108 |
| | 2002–2006 | | | 2007–2011 | |
| Russia | 83.2 | 530 | Russia | 95 | 1,342 |
| Czechia | 7.2 | 46 | Ukraine | 2.3 | 33 |
| Ukraine | 6.6 | 42 | Israel | 1.3 | 18 |
| Poland | 3 | 19 | France | 1 | 15 |
| | | | Romania | 0.4 | 2 |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

Russia has been a critical partner for the government in Hanoi for years in terms of weapons trade. The largest sale of Russian military equipment to Vietnam was recorded in 2014, when weapon worth 1,056 bln USD was delivered (Table 6). This was mainly due to the incidents in the vicinity of the Spratly and Paracel Islands, and showed that Vietnam took care of its national interest, regardless of the Russian actions against Ukraine and the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula. In 2012–2016, the import of Russian equipment accounted for over 86% of the sum spent on armaments in Vietnam. In the next period of 2017–2011, however, there is a clear decline in the importance of trade in military equipment with Russia, the share of which is currently around 56%. The reduction in the amount spent on weapon in Vietnam has been visible since 2015 (Chart 1). It was caused by the aforementioned reasons, such as sanctions or a slowdown in the modernization of the Vietnamese army. In the face of a possible Russian defeat in the war and the decreasing significance of Moscow in the international arena, the government in Hanoi is forced to diversify its partners. One of them is Israel, whose share increased by approx. 15 percentage points compared to the previous 5-year period. New players, such as South Korea and the USA, also appeared after lifting the arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016.

Table 6. Vietnam's arms import from Russia

| Year | Mln USD | Year | Mln USD | Year | Mln USD | Year | Mln USD |
|------|---------|------|---------|------|---------|------|---------|
| 2021 | 72 | 2016 | 702 | 2011 | 974 | 2006 | 16 |
| 2020 | 9 | 2015 | 735 | 2010 | 149 | 2005 | 164 |
| 2019 | 137 | 2014 | 1,056 | 2009 | 53 | 2004 | 294 |
| 2018 | 333 | 2013 | 313 | 2008 | 164 | 2003 | 2 |
| 2017 | 465 | 2012 | 760 | 2007 | 2 | 2002 | 54 |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

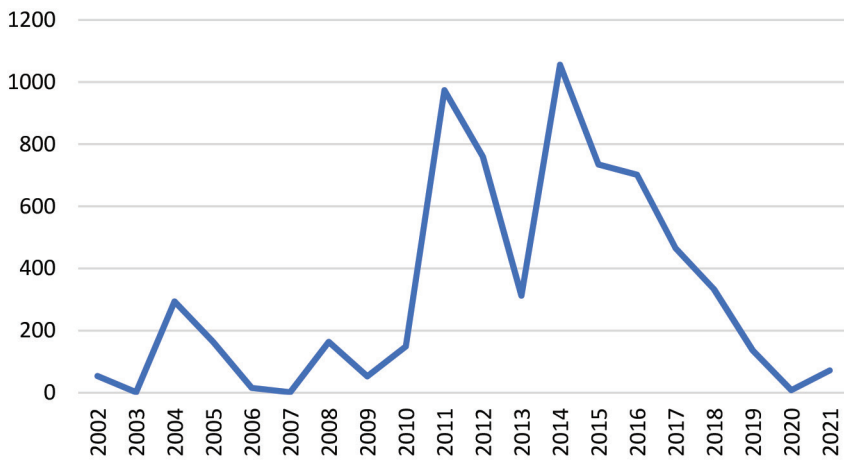


Chart 1. Vietnam's arms import from Russia 2002–2021 (mln USD)

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Arms Transfers Database.

Challenges for Vietnamese-Russian military cooperation during the era of war in Ukraine

Military cooperation between Vietnam and Russia creates a certain counterweight to the Chinese threat in the region. Thanks to the purchase of military equipment from Russia, the Vietnamese strengthened their position in the South China Sea, gaining a greater strike capacity. Due to the close relations with Vietnam, Russia also gives a subtle signal of its presence in the Asia-Pacific to China and other powers involved in the region (Baev, Tønneson, 2015: 317). Collaboration with Hanoi and Russian engagement in the South China Sea is undoubtedly a better alternative for Beijing than the growing importance of the United States in Vietnam's security strategy. Moreover, Russia remains one of China's essential allies regarding arms trade and political dimensions.

The sanctions imposed by the United States on Russia in August 2017 during the administration of Donald Trump may pose a problem for military cooperation and arms trade. The CAATSA law was intended to counter Moscow's aggressive stance, but sanctions could also have been imposed on countries doing business with the Russian arms industry, like Vietnam. This option was used in September 2018 against China, which purchased Su-35 fighters and the S400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia. The fact that the US allies could also be punished created room for a solution. President, with the consent of Congress, was able to waive CAATSA if it was in accordance with the American national interest, and the partners would limit the supply of Russian weapons. Nevertheless, in December 2020, the sanctions affected Turkey, a NATO member, which had obtained the S400 system from Moscow three years earlier (Macias, 2020).

Growing China's threat has brought Vietnam closer to the US. The *2022 State of Southeast Asia Survey* reflects that the Vietnamese elite sees Washington as a world leader maintaining order based on international law. 83% of respondents (the highest number among ASEAN countries) support the political influence of the United States, and around 80% are concerned about the growing role of China (Phan Xuân Dũng, 2022). The Ukrainian-Russian war could reduce the presence of the US in the Indo-Pacific, and weakened leverage balancing Chinese expansionism. Moreover, it seems that Russia's possible successes in the war could set a precedent for Beijing to take more decisive steps towards the South China Sea.

This situation illustrates that in the era of US-Vietnamese rapprochement, Hanoi will have to limit supplies from Russia and diversify partners. The first signs of such action can be found in Israel's increasing share of arms imports to Vietnam, the growing importance of South Korea and the US to a lesser extent. In 2016, the United States lifted the arms embargo imposed on Vietnam, opening up military cooperation opportunities between Washington and Hanoi. However Vietnam's reorientation towards the US may be costly because of dependence on Russian military equipment and the price of US weapons.

Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has shown that the traditional ties between Moscow and Hanoi remain strong. Vietnam did not condemn the Russian aggression of February 2022 even though recognized the use of force and the threat against another country as one of the principles of national security policy. This rule was declared in the White Paper published in 2019 (Grossman, 2022: 5). The Vietnamese abstained from two United Nations General Assembly resolutions condemning the invasion and voted against suspending Russia membership in the UN Human Rights Council.

An ideology also links both countries, which is underlined by the agreement between the Communist Party of Vietnam and the United Russia party. Despite the ever-closer relations of the authorities in Hanoi with the Western world, there is a certain distrust and fear of supporting changes leading to democratization,

which the CPV certainly wants to avoid. Close contacts were manifested through the meeting of Foreign Ministers Sergei Lavrov and Bùi Thanh Sơn, which took place in July 2022 in Hanoi. Lavrov was also received by the Secretary General of the CPV Nguyễn Phú Trọng and the Prime Minister of Vietnam Phạm Minh Chính, which made this visit even more significant. Moreover, in April this year, the Russian media released information, distanced by Vietnam, that both countries are planning joint military manoeuvres “Continental Union – 2022” (Nguyễn Hồng Hải, 2022).

The state-controlled media presented a neutral tone towards the war in Ukraine, and focused on creating an image of Vietnam as an impartial country. Many Vietnamese intellectuals and liberal society condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Contradictory narratives also appeared on the Internet showing different views of the Vietnamese. It is worth noting that the Internet users who supported Russia and Putin were as active and engaged as those who opposed the war and sympathized with Ukraine. The propaganda machine used various tools, like social media, to justify the state’s position on the conflict. The emerging pro-Russian sentiments, rooted mainly in the older part of society, were intended to balance the votes supporting Ukraine. In this way, the Vietnamese attitude to the war became more blurred, which gave the government more flexibility towards Russian aggression (Dror, 2022).

Conclusions

Military cooperation is a crucial pillar of Vietnamese-Russian relations. For years, Russia has been an important partner for Vietnam regarding arms purchases. The government in Hanoi was mainly focused on importing Russian missile systems, ships and aircraft, strengthening the air force and navy in the wake of the escalating dispute over the South China Sea archipelagos. However, imports of Russian weapons have dropped significantly in recent years. The reasons can be attributed to the numerous sanctions imposed on Moscow after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the aggression in February 2022. The government in Hanoi is concerned that military cooperation with Russia may induce Western countries to take steps against Vietnam, which is possible by applying the CAATSA. Hanoi didn’t halt the purchase of Russian weapons after the annexation of Crimea, but this event was crucial for military cooperation. Since then on, arms import from Russia has dropped significantly. The Vietnamese authorities also decided to slow down the process of Vietnam People’s Army modernization based on Russia, due to doubts whether Moscow’s involvement in Ukraine would cause problems with the implementation of contracts. Moreover, it could also be connected with the problem of buying spare parts for Russian military equipment due to the growing

needs of the army engaged in war activities. Gaining new partners in arms trade seems to be in the interest of Vietnam, as the condition of the Russian defence industry in the near future is questionable.

Diversification is based on collaboration with Israel, Belarus, and South Korea. Rising arms import from these countries is visible since 2014. The United States is becoming more important partner after lifting the embargo on lethal arms sales to Vietnam. Moreover, US military equipment is more technically advanced and modern than Russian. It is also needed to underline that despite the growing defence budget in Vietnam, which rose from 5 bln USD in 2018 to 7 bln in 2022, only 20% is dedicated to replace older equipment with modern ones (Nguyễn Thế Phương, 2021). Vietnamese authorities also declare that the budget is limited, and sectors such as education, infrastructure or health need more attention and money. Indeed, the slow modernization of the army results from the shift towards internal affairs, the significance of regime security, and internal stability. It seems that the Communist Party of Vietnam wants to prioritize domestic issues, especially in the face of struggle within the party over the future leadership. Growing Beijing's assertiveness and lack of financial resources to narrow the gap between Chinese and Vietnamese military potential may force Vietnam to expand defence cooperation with new partners and take more diplomatic actions towards China.

Vietnam has not unequivocally condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, maintaining close relations with Moscow. Ties with Russia may become problematic due to the approach of the West towards Russian aggression, which can indirectly affect Vietnam. The government in Hanoi is forced to revise its policy towards Russia, also due to the Vietnamese stance underlying the supremacy of international law in conflict resolution. Military cooperation with Russia will be continued, but its share in arms import will probably decrease. The effects of the war in Ukraine may initiate changes in the global world order, which can be less beneficial to small and medium-sized countries such as Vietnam. The stable international environment has allowed the government in Hanoi to deepen regional integration, reap the benefits of multilateral agreements and gain more friends than enemies (*viet. thêm bạn, bớt thù*). The escalation of tensions between Russia and Western countries increases the likelihood of a conflict between the great powers and poses a threat to global stability. Consequences of the war will be harmful for Vietnam both in the diplomatic and economic spheres.

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