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Vietnam's New Kilo-class Submarines: Game-changer in Regional Naval Balance?

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Synopsis

The launch of Vietnam's first Kilo-class submarine is another step closer to Hanoi's dream of acquiring an undersea capability. Notwithstanding the media hype, Vietnam's new Kilos are far from being the game-changer in the regional naval balance.

Commentary

THIS WEEK, Russia's Admiralty Shipyard launched the first of six Kilo-class diesel-electric powered submarines acquired by the Vietnam People's Navy (VPN) in 2009, thus marking another milestone in Hanoi's quest for an undersea capability. Assuming production and sea trials run on schedule, the first Kilo should be delivered by the end of 2012, much earlier than 2014 as originally intended while the VPN will receive all six Kilos by 2018.

The submarine programme is an extension of an ambitious modernisation the VPN has embarked upon since the mid-1990s. When it was first announced in 2009, the procurement created waves in the media over its likely impact on the regional naval balance of power. However, from the quantitative and qualitative aspects, this deserves a closer examination.

Kilos in Sino-Vietnamese naval balance

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 the quantitative gap not just with Vietnam but with other submarine operators in the region. Qualitatively, Vietnam's new undersea capability provides a credible asymmetric counter-poise to China's growing naval might in the South China Sea. As the Chinese have operated the Kilos since the 1990s, Vietnam's boats will not present a new surprise.

However, Vietnam's Kilos will still create concerns for China's naval planners who in the past did not have to consider a Vietnamese undersea capability. Nonetheless, as far as the regional naval balance of power is concerned, this new capability will not pose too great a challenge to China's naval primacy in the South China Sea, given the growing overall edge of China's submarine capabilities.

Vietnam's Kilos and Southeast Asia's naval balance

Prior to Vietnam's Kilo buy, other Southeast Asian navies had acquired smaller numbers of submarines. Indonesia and Malaysia are still confronted with a capability shortfall despite the recent acquisition of new submarines, considering their extensive maritime expanses. By 2018, with all six Kilos projected to enter service, Vietnam could potentially muster the largest undersea force in the region. However, it appears likely that existing Southeast Asian submarine operators will continue to expand their submarine capabilities within this decade.

The Kilos are not an unfamiliar sight in the South China Sea since Chinese Kilos reportedly operate in the area. Dubbed 'black hole' of the oceans by Western naval commentators, the Kilo is equipped with excellent acoustic signature-reduction features such as hull anechoic tiles to muffle incoming sonar waves. This is not unique since submarines operated by other Southeast Asian navies possess equally capable, if not more superior, 'quieting' features.

Vietnam's Kilos are not known to be fitted with air-independent propulsion, like Singapore's boats, for extended submerged endurance without the need to snorkel, thus placing them in the same category as the Indonesian and Malaysian boats. Generally, therefore, compared to the existing types operated in the region, Vietnam's Kilos are equipped with generally equivalent onboard systems. What is notable has been the Klub-S submerged-launch cruise missiles supplied as part of the 2009 contract.

The Klub family comes in anti-ship (with terminal homing guidance) and land-attack (with inertial navigation guidance) variants. The latter deserves attention. To date, none of the Southeast Asian navies has introduced a sea-based, standoff land-attack capability which, when combined with such stealthy platform as a submarine, could allow the discreet projection of firepower into another country's hinterland. This could introduce a potential source of destabilisation into a region that is potentially volatile.

In July 2011, according to Rosoboronexport – the principal Russian arms-export corporation – the Kilos sold to Vietnam belong to the standard design while the Klub-S cruise missiles supplied with them are 'standard' variants as well. This could be construed to mean the anti-ship variant. If this is so, it does not represent a radically new capability being introduced into the region since Malaysia's Scorpenes are equipped with an equivalent capability in the French SM-39 Exocet, while the Chinese and Indian Kilos are also armed with the Klub-S anti-ship variants.

Challenges ahead for VPN

Far from being a game-changer in the regional naval balance of power, Vietnam's new Kilo-class submarines do not signify a radical shift in the regional naval balance of power.

Rather, the acquisition also demonstrates Vietnam's intent to establish a fully operational undersea capability as part of the overall effort not just to rectify pre-existing shortfalls in the moribund Soviet-era fleet but also to achieve a 'balanced' navy. The decision to procure not a token few but six Kilos demonstrates the intent to possess an operationally sustainable force-size that can offer continuous naval presence at sea, which is otherwise difficult with a smaller fleet.

This observation is reinforced by Vietnam's concerted effort to acquire not just the machines but also requisite infrastructure and human capital. In 2010, Hanoi reportedly sought Russian assistance to build submarine facilities at Cam Ranh Bay while recently it struck a training agreement with India for its Kilo crews. Similar parallels in submarine force development can be observed in the case of regional submarine operators, Malaysia and Singapore.

Notwithstanding the submarine programme, the VPN will still have to plug glaring holes in some crucial capability areas, such as maritime aerial surveillance and its ability to sustain durable naval presence in areas of national concern, such as the South China Sea. With all six Kilos fully operational by 2018, Vietnam should now also consider exploring submarine rescue capabilities and cooperate in this field with regional navies.

Building a full-fledged submarine capability in terms of operationally-ready platforms, proficient crews and relevant doctrine takes time. Ultimately, this is dependent on not just political will but also Vietnam's continued economic well-being.

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