

Leveraging Vietnam to Enable Agile Combat Employment

Options in the South China Sea

Future Force Employment Informed by Lessons from the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War

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14. ABSTRACT Given its geostrategic significance in the South China Sea, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam will be a critical component of any United States or coalition effort should tensions drive conflict in the region. This paper leverages lessons learned from the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War to advocate for more robust military engagement with Vietnam. Specifically, the paper calls for a U.S. focus on airfield development and contingency access agreements with Vietnam to establish air power agile combat employment and distributed operations options in theater. Securing this capability could represent a critical factor in how China views its probability of success in a SCS conflict. This paper provides a specific plan for engagement, as well as a thorough assessment of the current relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam that lends itself to more robust partnership. It represents a development in the nascent U.S. Air Force Agile Combat Employment concept by applying it in practical terms to a pressing national security issue. Building on this argument will not only help reverse negative trends in the South China Sea over the last decade but also help advance a promising force employment concept for a future fight in a complex environment.					
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INTRODUCTION

Located in arguably the most important geostrategic location in the Pacific Theater, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is uniquely situated to counter China's militarization of the South China Sea (SCS).¹ Based on lessons learned from the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) can leverage a more robust military engagement with Vietnam to provide new United States (U.S.) military options should tensions drive conflict in the region. Specifically, USINDOPACOM should increase military engagement with Vietnam aimed at developing airfield knowledge, capabilities, and contingency access, to enable U.S. Air Force Agile Combat Employment (ACE) options. The ACE concept, "calls for the [Air Force] to be able to launch, recover and maintain planes away from its main air bases and instead at unorthodox locations like partner nations' military airfields or civilian airports."² Given this capability, "rapid and variable deployment of ready forces can deter conflict and foment confusion and paralysis in adversaries, making it a powerful tool to be wielded in global competitions with China, Russia, and others."³ Securing this flexible tactical air power capability in Vietnam could represent a critical factor in how China views its probability of success in a SCS conflict.

Based on diplomatic, economic, and military trends, timing is ideal for significant growth in military relations between the U.S. and Vietnam. However, while military engagement with Vietnam has increased recently, there have not been significant improvements to U.S. military

¹ Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence* (Ha Noi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House Ha Noi, 2019).

² Valerie Insinna, "The US Air Force Has Unconventional Plans to Win A War in the Asia-Pacific," *DefenseNews*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/singapore-airshow/2020/02/11/the-us-air-force-has-unconventional-plans-to-win-a-war-in-the-asia-pacific>.

³ Tyson Wetzel, "Dynamic Force Employment: A Vital Tool in Winning Strategic Global Competitions," *Real Clear Defense*, 18 September 2018, [http://https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/09/18/dynamic_force_employment_a_vital_tool_in_winning_strategic_global_competitions_113809.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/09/18/dynamic_force_employment_a_vital_tool_in_winning_strategic_global_competitions_113809.html).

options in the region. Initiatives like port calls and Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS), while necessary to maintain customary international norms, are not intended to secure tangible footholds in a particular area of responsibility. Applying targeted engagement and investment, the U.S. can secure key requirements to generate an ACE capability for USINDOPACOM. Development of this concept would model elements of the successful approach Vietnam took against China in 1979 and contribute, “strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable,” force employment options as dictated in the latest U.S. defense strategy.⁴

Critics of the this approach will cite Vietnam’s longstanding “three no’s” principle limiting foreign defense cooperation and alliances, and highlight China’s ability to target airfields.⁵ However, building an ACE capability will require minimal permanent infrastructure and only contingency basing agreements that are consistent with Vietnam’s stated exclusion.⁶ While the flexible capability will not represent an impervious option against attack, the added flexibility and distributed forces will alter the theater dynamic and challenge Chinese intelligence and targeting capabilities.⁷

⁴ Jim Mattis, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the U.S. of America,” (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁵ Bich T. Tran, "From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership," *Asia-Pacific Issues*, no. 141 (November 2019): 2.

⁶ Derek Grossman and Dung Hunyh. “Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes’.” *The Rand Blog*, 21 January 2019: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/01/vietnams-defense-policy-of-no-quietly-saves-room-for.html>.

⁷ Priebe, et al, “Distributed Operations in a Contested Environment: Implications for USAF Force Presentation,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 17, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2959.html.

LESSONS FROM THE 1979 SINO-VIETNAMESE WAR

Although close allies throughout war with the U.S., relations between the neighboring Socialist countries of Vietnam and China quickly deteriorated following the war. Despite China's strong materiel and personnel support, Vietnam tested relations with the Soviet Union and developed an element of independence that, "wounded the sense of Chinese superiority."⁸ Strains in the relationship deepened when China took control of the Paracel Islands in 1974 and Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978 to challenge the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge regime.⁹ In order to restore order and hierarchy in the region, China surprised Vietnam by initiating war in 1979 with the intent to, "teach Vietnam a lesson."¹⁰ To avoid negative international opinion and minimize cost in blood and treasure, China intended a two-week limited war aimed at capturing key Vietnamese cities within 50 kilometers of the border.¹¹ Once captured, the Chinese aimed to cease hostilities and return home. Further, the Chinese committed to a limited campaign by restricting air power involvement to within their own airspace.¹²

Throughout the relatively brief war with Vietnam, China captured three provincial capitals, numerous border cities, and killed or wounded over 50,000 Vietnamese troops.¹³ While the month-long campaign was more challenging than expected, the Chinese remained steadfast in their commitment to refrain from the use of air support. Additionally, central leadership ceased operations and pulled Chinese troops back as soon as they completed their limited

⁸ Xiaoming Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," *The China Quarterly*, no. 184 (December 2005): 854.

⁹ Peter Tsouras, "War of the Dragons: The Sino-Vietnamese War, 1979," *HistoryNet*, <https://www.historynet.com/war-of-the-dragons-the-sino-vietnamese-war-1979.htm>.

¹⁰ Xiaoming Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," *The China Quarterly*, no. 184 (December 2005): 861.

¹¹ James Maclaren, "The Sino-Vietnam War and China's Long Route to Winning," *The Diplomat*, 24 May 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/the-sino-vietnam-war-and-chinas-long-route-to-winning/>.

¹² Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," 862.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 866.

objectives.¹⁴ China certainly achieved its intent to teach Vietnam a lesson. However, their insistence on limited war, as well as Vietnam's unexpected success impeding the numerically superior Chinese force, provides lessons than can be applied to future conflict in the SCS.

In its largest military operation since the Korean War, China revealed several tendencies that bear relevance today. Most notably, China's war plan was heavily influenced by perceived international opinions. They wanted to send a strong message to Vietnam but put controls in place to ensure a limited conflict, even at the potential expense of Chinese lives. "The Chinese sense of military victory lay more in their evaluation of the geopolitical outcomes than in their judgment of operational performance on the battlefield."¹⁵ Despite its limited intent, China focused on mass, operational initiative, and tempo; surprising the Vietnamese with a 300,000-person assault focused on quick achievement of their objectives.¹⁶ Finally, Vietnam reduced China's advantage in conventional forces through employment of guerrilla tactics in the mountainous terrain which denied decisive battles and delayed the Chinese advance.¹⁷ All three lessons support development of flexible U.S. airpower options in Vietnam against potential conflict with China. Not only does ACE model "hit and run" guerrilla tactics, but it would prevent China from massing against a singular effort.¹⁸ Further, China would have to weigh a total war against Vietnam to remove the capability for the U.S. military.

¹⁴ Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," 860.

¹⁵ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (2015), 139, <https://www.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469621241.001.0001/upso-9781469621241>.

¹⁶ Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," 865.

¹⁷ James Maclaren, "The Sino-Vietnam War and China's Long Route to Winning.," "Guerrilla Warfare" as defined by www.dictionary.com is, "the use of hit-and-run tactics by small, mobile groups of irregular forces operating in territory controlled by a hostile, regular force."

¹⁸ Robert Longley, "What Is Guerrilla Warfare? Definition, Tactics, and Examples," *ThoughtCo*, 27 February 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/guerrilla-warfare-definition-tactics-examples-4586462>.

GROWING U.S.-VIETNAM RELATIONSHIP

Positive relationship trends across the whole of government indicate a favorable environment for an increase in military engagement between the U.S. and Vietnam. As the U.S. considers possible conflict in the Pacific, Vietnam possesses strategic terrain with thousands of miles of coastline predominately along the SCS. Not only is Vietnam a country on the rise, but its relationship with China is souring while its multifaceted relationship with the U.S. is beginning to flourish.

Vietnam and China have not recovered full trust from the 1979 war or decade of attrition that followed. The relatively brief war concluded with a “scorched-earth campaign,” that left a path of death and destruction as Chinese troops withdrew.¹⁹ Further, the war began a decade of border conflict between the two countries as China persisted in “bleeding” Vietnam into order.²⁰ While they have developed strong trade ties since normalizing relations in 1991, competing claims in the SCS have led to a series of confrontations in the years since.²¹ “The Chinese Coast Guard’s sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat, Beijing’s declaration of the establishment of administrative control over the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands, and Chinese intrusions into Hanoi’s Exclusive Economic Zone, have forced Vietnamese leaders to review their position with respect to China.”²² Additionally, Vietnam has become apprehensive of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and criticized impacts of dam projects on water availability downstream in Vietnam.²³ The competing issues have challenged Vietnam’s ability to balance “cooperation and

¹⁹ Sebastien Roblin, “Forgotten War: How China Was Crushed by Vietnam in a 1979 Conflict.” *The National Interest*, 25 September 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/forgotten-war-how-china-was-crushed-vietnam-1979-conflict-83341?page=0%2C1>.

²⁰ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991*.

²¹ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 13 (2017): 185.

²² Derek Grossman, “What Does Vietnam Think About America’s Indo-Pacific Strategy?” *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2020, <http://thediplomat.com/2020/08/what-does-vietnam-think-about-americas-indo-pacific-strategy>.

²³ Ibid.

partnership” with “distrust and opposition”, which naturally creates a potential inroad for involvement with the U.S.²⁴

Vietnam’s outlook on relations with the U.S. bears stark contrast to its relationship with China. Diplomatic ties between the two nations have flourished since normalizing relations in 1995 and signing a comprehensive partnership agreement in 2013.²⁵ Both the Obama and Trump Administrations placed strong emphasis on relations with Vietnam, and Vietnam has begun to raise its stature in the region as well. It is currently head of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and will be a United Nations Security Council non-permanent member this year.²⁶ Based on recent bilateral talks, the U.S. and Vietnam have agreed to, “strengthen high-ranking delegation exchanges, boost trade and investment and promote cooperation in energy, defense-security and overcoming consequences of the war.”²⁷ It is clear the U.S. values Vietnam as a significant player in the SCS and recognizes strategic benefits from nurturing the relationship.²⁸

Increased diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam have accompanied strong economic growth as well. Since the 1990s, Vietnam’s Gross Domestic Product has experienced consistent seven percent growth with exports including garments, footwear, seafood and agricultural products.²⁹ Bilateral trade with the U.S. has grown 261% between 2013 and 2019, to

²⁴ Thayer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence,” 184.

²⁵ Tran, "From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership," 1.

²⁶ Ibid.; The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a regional grouping that promotes economic, political, and security cooperation among its ten members: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland, “What Is ASEAN?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 December 2019, <http://www.cfr.org/background/what-asean>.

²⁷ “U.S. Attaches Importance to Comprehensive Partnership with VN,” *MENA Report*, 26 June 2018, final edition.

²⁸ Joseph M. Siracusa and Hang Thi Thuy Nguyen, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations in the Trump Era,” *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 4 (2019): 604.

²⁹ Siracusa and Nguyen, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations in the Trump Era,” 606.

\$77.6B.³⁰ As a result, Vietnam is now the fastest growing market for American exports, while the U.S. has become Vietnam's largest export market and third largest overall trading partner.³¹ Additionally, in 2016, the U.S. removed all remaining U.S.-Vietnam War era restrictions on weapon sales to Vietnam, which ushered in a new opportunity for military technology transfer.³²

Foreign military sales started slowly following removal of the remaining trade embargo restrictions but has accelerated recently. Initially, the U.S. leveraged the Excess Defense Article program to provide Vietnam with a refurbished Coast Guard cutter in 2017.³³ Maritime security concerns also led to an agreed transfer of 18 "Metal Shark" patrol boats, the first of which were delivered in 2019.³⁴ Additionally, Vietnam received the first of six Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) for maritime surveillance in 2020 and discussions are underway for twelve T-6 aviation trainers, complete with a five-year maintenance and training agreement.³⁵ Growing military sales coupled with the other elements of growth in the Vietnam-U.S. partnership will serve to enhance security cooperation and provide a foundation for more tangible developments in the future.

³⁰ Tran, "From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership," 1-8.

³¹ John Kerry, "U.S. – Vietnam: A Partnership that Will Endure," United States Department of State, 13 January 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/01/266936.htm>.

³² Thayer, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence," 188.

³³ Siracusa and Nguyen, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations in the Trump Era," 612.

³⁴ Tran, "From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership," 1.

³⁵ Personal interview with the Pacific Air Forces Southeast Asia Country Director, Maj Tuan Tran, on 14 August 2020.

MILITARY COOPERATION

In direct response to China's militarization of disputed islands in the SCS, Vietnam is pursuing military partnerships across the air, sea, and land domains.³⁶ Feeding off the seeds of improving diplomatic and economic conditions, U.S.-Vietnam military engagement is postured to capitalize on this emphasis. In addition to favorable land and maritime engagement, the two countries have developed a robust partnership program that has recently started to develop in the air domain as well. While stronger military engagement is beneficial to U.S. standing in the SCS, the U.S. needs to leverage this blossoming relationship to pursue tangible development that will provide the foundation for ACE in Vietnam.

Maritime presence and ensuring freedom of navigation have been primary tools for U.S. military engagement in the Pacific. In response to the Chinese militarization of SCS features, the U.S. regularly conducts FONOPS through contested waters. FONOPS support the counter claims of partner nations by maintaining customary international norms and not allowing China to gain control through tacit acceptance of its nine-dashed line. To bolster naval partnership specifically with Vietnam, the U.S. conducted historic aircraft carrier visits in 2018 and 2020. The recent USS Carl Vinson visit, “constituted the largest U.S. military presence in Vietnam since U.S. forces left Vietnam at the end of the war in 1975.”³⁷ Additionally, Vietnam has become a regular participant in the Rim of the Pacific naval exercise with plans to participate in more multilateral exercises in the future.³⁸

Most recently, Vietnam and the U.S. have begun expanding their partnership in the military aviation realm as well. In addition to the pending UAS procurement and T-6 trainer

³⁶ Ralph Jennings, “Vietnam Explores Increasing Foreign Military Cooperation to Resist China,” *Voice of America*, 25 January 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/vietnam-explores-increasing-foreign-military-cooperation-resist-china>.

³⁷ Siracusa and Nguyen, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations in the Trump Era,” 612.

³⁸ Tran, “From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership,” 1.

deals, Vietnam recently sent a cadet to the U.S. Air Force Academy. Further, they have begun sending officers to undergraduate pilot training where they graduated two pilots this year. Pilot exchanges and other aviation training have been discussed and are also expected in the coming years.³⁹ Finally, U.S. Pacific Air Forces has plans to expand air force partnership opportunities as Vietnam becomes more welcoming to the engagement.⁴⁰

Air force and naval engagement complement numerous land-based initiatives, primarily focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) programs. Most notably, Vietnam has hosted the Pacific Angel Exercise nine times, an exercise primarily focused on emergency medical support during crises. The Oregon National Guard has also partnered with Vietnam through the State Partnership Program since 2012. Their engagement has revolved largely around building Vietnamese HA/DR capacity, medical and Search and Rescue training, as well as limited construction in less developed areas.⁴¹ Finally, the U.S. has partnered with Vietnam for many years in the removal of unexploded ordnance and remediation of Agent Orange dioxins from the U.S.-Vietnam War, as well as repatriation of the remains of fallen servicemembers. Addressing these critical issues from the U.S.-Vietnam War has been a significant lever for building trust between the two nations.

All told, the U.S. and Vietnam have a strong military partnership on an upward trajectory. However, no amount of port calls, air and navy training, or humanitarian assistance, will provide potential lines of operation that can be factored into operational planning. Like Vietnam's success in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, U.S. planners need military options that preclude or dissuade China from engaging in a limited regional conflict.

³⁹ Personal interview with Maj Tuan Tran on 14 August 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, "Viet Nam and the U.S. Promote the State Partnership Program," 2 August 2019, <http://vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/2019/08/viet-nam-and-united-states-promote-state-partnership-program>.

AGILE COMBAT EMPLOYMENT

Applying targeted engagement and investment, the U.S. can secure key requirements to support Air Force ACE in the SCS. ACE models elements of the successful guerrilla warfare approach Vietnam took against China in 1979 by focusing, “on the ability to disperse, recover and rapidly resume operations in a contested or austere environment.”⁴² The U.S. Air Force has prioritized development of flexible employment options in recent years, with an emphasis on ACE and distributed operations. Gaining this capability in Vietnam would disrupt the theater geometry and factor into China’s decision to pursue SCS military conflict.

Pacific Air Forces first tested the ACE concept in 2017 to counter Chinese activities in the East and SCSs.⁴³ Since then, the initiative has grown with focus on applicability against both Pacific and European theater threats.⁴⁴ Air Force Global Strike Command has even shifted its preference for long-term forward deployed bomber presence in favor of a less predictable, more flexible approach to employing bomber capabilities. Overall, the concept draws on guerrilla tactics with reliance on, “mobility, elusiveness, and surprise,” from an air power employment perspective.⁴⁵ Air forces leverage a series of drop-in bases and forward arming and refueling points (FARP) to, “maneuver air forces and deny completion of an adversary’s kill chain.”⁴⁶ These forward locations require significantly less infrastructure and force protection than a traditional air base and afford penetrating air power options for Combatant Commanders.

⁴² Brian Killough, “The Complicated Combat Future of the U.S. Air Force.” *The National Interest*, 9 February 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/profile/maj-gen-brian-m-killough>.

⁴³ Jennifer Hlad and Amy McCullough, “ACE-ing the Test,” *Air Force Magazine*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/ace-ing-the-test>.

⁴⁴ Amy McCullough, “USAFE Puts Agile Combat Employment to the Test,” *Air Force Magazine*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.airforcemag.com/usafe-puts-agile-combat-employment-to-the-test>.

⁴⁵ United States Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Counterinsurgency*. Joint Publication (JP) 3-24. (April 2018); V-7.

⁴⁶ Killough, “The Complicated Combat Future of the U.S. Air Force.”

Posturing to employ the concept using airfields in Vietnam would maximize the advantage of its strategic location and reduce China's geostrategic stranglehold on the SCS.

According to Mark Gunzinger, Director of Future Aerospace Concepts and Capabilities Assessments for the Air Force Association Mitchell Institute, "ACE combines adaptive basing, the operational maneuver of air forces, assured command and control, mission-type orders, and other elements to ensure [the force] can generate and sustain combat sorties."⁴⁷ The intent it is to keep the force light, lean, lethal, and operationally unpredictable. By training cross-functional Airman and posturing essential sustainment at a variety of airfields, air power can "leapfrog" around the theater delivering combat power while keeping the enemy guessing as to the next staging location. As now Air Force Chief of Staff General C.Q. Brown said in 2020, "all you need is a runway, a ramp, fuel bladder, a trailer full of munitions, a pallet of MREs, and some multifunctional Airmen. We should be able to operate from anywhere, any location in the world."⁴⁸

Airfield access in the contested area with adequate sustainment infrastructure is the largest hurdle to employing the ACE concept.⁴⁹ The U.S. can overcome this challenge in peacetime by strengthening military engagement with Vietnam, focused on increasing specific airfield capabilities (i.e., fuel, munitions) and working towards contingency access agreements. U.S. investment should focus on developing FARP-capable airfields along the northern Vietnamese SCS coastline and drop-in airfields in the western and southern areas of the country. This would enable movement and maneuver for tactical air power closest to the SCS while maximizing protection for the more robust drop-in airfield requirements. It would also limit sustainment requirements in more contested areas given the minimal resources needed at FARP

⁴⁷ Jennifer Hlad and Amy McCullough, "ACE-ing the Test."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Priebe, et al, "Distributed Operations in a Contested Environment: Implications for USAF Force Presentation," 22.

locations. USINDOPACOM could reduce sustainment requirements further by garnering funding for regionalized pre-positioned supply kits that would include essential expeditionary support equipment like generators and airfield repair material.⁵⁰

The U.S. can establish ACE capability at Vietnamese airfields with minimal additional effort. First, the U.S. should modify its current HA/DR partnership engagements by adding engineering elements. While developing relationships with the Vietnamese military, engineers can survey key components of strategic airfields. Engineers can also focus training events around airfield defense and recovery after attack. This would not only give them useful airfield familiarity but also help build Vietnam's organic capability to protect its critical power projection platform from Chinese threats. As training engagements develop over time, the U.S. can invest in limited infrastructure at these airfields, including munitions and fuel storage. In parallel, the U.S. can leverage the upcoming T-6 trainer beddown plan, along with training and maintenance agreements, to develop airfield support infrastructure as well. Vietnam would likely welcome this infrastructure investment as they currently lack sophisticated port and airfield infrastructure needed to improve military and economic activities.⁵¹

Developing ACE capabilities for tactical air power would represent a significant gain for the joint force. Through unchecked militarization of SCS features in recent years, China has developed interior lines of communication and operation that allow them to own the battlespace. Attacking China's strategic position would be challenging from halfway around the globe. However, leveraging Vietnamese airfields would permit the joint force to bring air power to bear in flexible, unpredictable ways, creating, "temporary windows of localized air-maritime

⁵⁰ Valerie Insinna, "The US Air Force Has Unconventional Plans to Win A War in the Asia-Pacific," *DefenseNews*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/singapore-airshow/2020/02/11/the-us-air-force-has-unconventional-plans-to-win-a-war-in-the-asia-pacific>.

⁵¹ United States Government Accountability Office, "Southeast Asia: Trends in U.S. and Chinese Economic Engagement in Indonesia and Vietnam," *Current Politics and Economics of South, Southeastern, and Central Asia* 25, no. 3: 231.

superiority, enabling maneuver.”⁵² Ultimately, the joint force would gain significant fighter capabilities that otherwise would not be possible given the tyranny of distance and lack of permissive air space in the region. This added capability will fundamentally change the military options for a U.S. response to Chinese provocation in the SCS and likely persuade China against pursuing conflict in the region.⁵³

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

Critics of this approach will claim that Vietnam’s longstanding “three no’s” principle prohibiting military alliances, taking sides with one country against another, and foreign military bases in Vietnam, would preclude this level of engagement.⁵⁴ Additionally, they will highlight China’s ability to target airfields as a direct threat to viability of this strategy.⁵⁵ However, building an ACE capability will require minimal permanent infrastructure and only contingency basing agreements that should fit well within Vietnam’s stated “three no’s” exclusion.⁵⁶ Further, while the capability will not represent an impenetrable option against Chinese military capabilities, the added flexibility would change the theater dynamic and represent a wise investment for USINDOPACOM.

Vietnam’s 2019 defense white paper includes an important caveat: “depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate

⁵² United States Indo-Pacific Command, “Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy Fiscal Years 2022-2026,” <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf>.

⁵³ Wetzel, “Dynamic Force Employment: A Vital Tool in Winning Strategic Global Competitions.”

⁵⁴ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence,” 185.

⁵⁵ Tran, “From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership,” 2.

⁵⁶ Tran, “From 'Rebalance to Asia' to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': The Development of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership,” 1-8.

defense and military relations with other countries”.⁵⁷ Given Vietnam’s recent tension with China, the U.S. could carefully exploit this caveat to pursue a limited foothold in Vietnam. Specifically, the U.S. can sidestep the foreign military base prohibition with the promise of limited airfield investment and only contingency use agreements. ACE would require no permanent basing of U.S. forces, but provide a critical capability that supports aligning Vietnamese and American interests.

The Chinese military clearly possesses the capability to put all airfields in Vietnam at risk. However, as they walk a delicate balance of control and diplomacy in the SCS, conflict is most likely to be limited in nature. China is likely to target opposing air forces, but a preemptive universal attack on Vietnamese airfields would risk a total war capable of drastically altering international opinion. Despite their formidable missile capability, China’s supply is still, “insufficient to persistently attack and deny all airfields in a theater at all times.”⁵⁸ Additionally, by taking an interior approach to the SCS, China would be preoccupied protecting its features and unable to focus on airfields used unpredictably by U.S. air forces. Finally, USINDOPACOM engineer engagement will help Vietnam develop an airfield recovery capability that can rapidly restore airfields after Chinese attack.

CONCLUSION

While Vietnam has a long history of leveraging relationships with superpowers to their benefit, the current environment tends towards a preference for a strong U.S. presence in theater. Given Vietnam’s geostrategic importance relative to the SCS, is it imperative for the U.S. to capitalize on this opportunity to halt Chinese aggression and militarization of the region. The

⁵⁷ Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*. 27.

⁵⁸ Killough, “The Complicated Combat Future of the U.S. Air Force.”

best way to achieve this goal is to develop ACE options for air power through development of and contingency access to Vietnamese airfields.

USINDOPACOM has advocated for a balance between lethality and survivability by employing, “forward-deployed forces across the breadth and depth of the battle space.”⁵⁹ Not only is timing right across all instruments of national power but focusing on developing Vietnamese airfields for ACE is an effective and efficient use of USINDOPACOM’s limited bandwidth and resources. Further, tangible progress is feasible through engineering partnership in the near term followed by modest investment in infrastructure and pre-positioned sustainment kits in the longer term.

It is critical for the U.S. to act now to develop FARP and drop-in airfield options and secure vital contingency access agreements to Vietnamese airfields. Securing access during wartime becomes more problematic, so preparing in peacetime is prudent to ensure access when needed.⁶⁰ Gaining the potential for a flexible, agile air power capability in Vietnam would represent a significant improvement to the joint force for movement and maneuver in the SCS. While not immune to potential Chinese attacks, the strategic uncertainty of ACE will provide a valuable tool to stymie Chinese intelligence and targeting capabilities while countering their current geometric advantage in the region. Ultimately, leveraging this innovative air power concept will add a favorable element of uncertainty for U.S. military options in an increasingly complex SCS environment.

⁵⁹ United States Indo-Pacific Command, “Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy Fiscal Years 2022-2026,” 3.

⁶⁰ Priebe, et al, “Distributed Operations in a Contested Environment: Implications for USAF Force Presentation,” xi.

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