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Background Briefing:

Russia: A Military Base at Cam Ranh Bay?

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On October 7, 2016 Reuters reported, "Russia is considering plans to restore military bases in Vietnam and Cuba that had served as pivots of Soviet global military power during the Cold War (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-military-bases-idUSKCN1270PN>). Has there been any recent movement on Russian plans for Cam Ranh?

ANALYSIS: Cam Ranh Bay is a very large bay that accommodates a military port, special facilities where Russia is assisting Vietnam to integrate its *Varshavyanka* (or Kilo)-class conventional submarines, and a commercial facility, Cam Ranh International Port.

Vietnam has a defence policy of three no's: no foreign bases on Vietnamese soil, no alliances with foreign countries, and no using a second party against a third party. While the third point may be honoured in the breach more than in practice, the other two no's are strictly observed.

All foreign countries, with the exception of Russia, are permitted one friendly military port visit a year and this can include two or more warships at the same time. All Russia has to do is give prior notice that it wishes to visit Cam Ranh Bay. Russian visits are usually ships returning from anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. Two years ago Russia based aerial refuelling aircraft at the military airbase at Cam Ranh. These refuelled Russian bombers that flew close to Guam. The U.S. protested. It is unclear whether this is still the case and U.S. diplomats have made no further mention of this. A Vietnamese source responded to a question from me with the rather elliptical words "our guests are no longer with us."

Cam Ranh International Port is a commercial facility offering ship repair to civilian as well as military ships. Since opening it has received naval visits from Singapore, Japan, India, France, the United States, China and Australia.

Russian military commentators have called for a return to Cam Ranh on several occasions, including the source you cite. Vietnam invariably makes its three no's policy clear. In other words, Vietnam will not give Russia a military base in Vietnam. It should be recalled that during the Cold War when the Soviet Union has a large military base at Cam Ranh, they denied it and said it was "a material supply point."

Two other points. First, although Vietnam remains heavily dependent on Russia for big ticket military equipment and weapons as well as Russian logistics, I can find no evidence that any major arms deals were signed in 2016. It could be that finance is a problem; absorbing the Kilo submarines is expensive. Vietnam is in the market for a ground strike aircraft and is reportedly looking at the Sweden's Gripen, a South Korean fighter, the US F-16 and the Eurofighter. Vietnam is also trying to acquire the India-Russia joint BrahMos cruise missile. India is willing but Russia has demurred

Second, and possibly related to the first point, Russia has taken China's side on the South China Sea dispute insofar as Russia has denounced the Arbitral Tribunal that heard the case against China brought by the Philippines. Public comments were made by Foreign Minister Lavrov as well as Putin himself. China may have put pressure on Russia not to agree to sell Vietnam the BrahMos. The Chinese and Russian navies conducted joint exercises in the South China Sea last September. Given these underlying tensions I doubt Vietnam would be amenable to giving Russia greater military access to facilities in Vietnam without some substantial quid pro quo.

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