

# Why China leaked rumors of Soviet bases in Vietnam

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Pentagon intelligence officers are increasingly apprehensive about reports that the Soviet Union may be seeking air or naval "base rights" in South Vietnam.

To date the allegations — made by the government of China and carried in a dispatch out of Peking by Japan's Kyodo News Service — have not been confirmed by either the Soviet Union or Saigon.

Some State Department analysts speculate that the report may have been deliberately "floated" by China to prevent such a base agreement at some future time.

But if Moscow did get Vietnamese bases, intelligence sources here note, the political and military repercussions would be felt throughout East Asia:

- China would be directly "flanked" on two sides by the Soviets, who already have major army and naval installations at Vladivostok in the North Pacific. The port, however, is closed by ice in winter.
- The Soviets would have a military "presence" close to the Philippines and Indonesia. Japan, it is believed, would feel threatened by such a base in the South China Sea.
- Assuming that base rights included a naval port such as the giant naval facility left by the Americans at Cam Ranh Bay the Soviets would have a major refueling post on the 25,000-mile run from Vladivostok to the Indian Ocean.

"I think the Soviets would be anxious to get anything in the way of base rights if they could," says an Indian Ocean-Soviet expert at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"If they did get base rights in South Vietnam, when the Suez Canal opens they would then have support facilities to the Indian Ocean from two directions — from the north via the Black Sea and from Vladivostok in the east."

Moscow, intelligence experts note, now maintains roughly 20 vessels in the Indian Ocean region. At one point the number reached 35.

Some State Department officials, on the other hand, remain skeptical about Soviet intentions.

"Such a (Vietnamese) base-rights bid at this time would seem to put Hanoi in a very difficult position and could conceivably jeopardize the thin edge that North Vietnam wants between the Soviets and the Chinese," one official says. "The Chinese would certainly see such base rights as a threat."

At present, State Department sources say, while Soviet aid to Hanoi heavily outweighs Chinese aid in overall dollar figures, China is far out front in quantity.

North Vietnam's AK-47 rifle is supplied by China.

But at the same time, according to State Department analysts, Soviets might be tempted to beg the question of military "base rights," by seeking "fishing rights" for Soviet ships which could be used occasionally to allow Soviet vessels to make port calls.

While the Soviets have traded heavily through Haiphong Harbor in North Vietnam during the Vietnam war period, it is not believed here that the Soviets had actual bunkering facilities on land. Haiphong Harbor can usually accommodate only a small number of vessels.

In recent weeks, it is noted, the Soviet Union has sent a number of cargo vessels to South Vietnamese ports.

In the Kyodo news dispatch, the Chinese were reported to have said that the Soviets had asked Vietnam for use of former U.S. military bases "in compensation for the huge amount of aid" that Moscow gave North Vietnam and the Viet Cong throughout the Vietnam war.

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