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Soviet MiG-23s seen in Vietnam

By Walter Andrews
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The United States has confirmed that the Soviet Union has stationed a squadron of 14 frontline MiG-23 interceptor jet aircraft at Cam Ranh Bay in southern Vietnam, perhaps the most advanced weapons system thus far at the important naval base, administration sources said yesterday.

Last week, the State Department said it could not confirm the existence of the jets, which had been reported by the secretary general of Thailand's national security council, Prasong Soonsiri.

The stationing of the MiG-23s provides the strongest evidence to date that the Soviets are in the Vietnamese base to stay, the sources said. They said the contingent is part of the Soviet air force and does not represent aircraft being turned over to the Vietnamese forces.

The Cam Ranh naval facility, much of which was built by the United States during the Vietnam War, provides the Soviets with an ability to strike at critical sea lanes throughout Southeast Asia, threatening the economic life lines of the area's nations, the sources said.

While declining to confirm the presence of the MiG-23s, the State Department last week said it was deeply concerned about the reported Soviet buildup in Vietnam, saying the increase in Soviet weapons has a destabilizing effect on the area.

Last June, Richard L. Armitage, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said, "The port and airfield facilities in Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam are an important forward base for deployed Soviet naval forces."

On any given day, the assistant secretary said, 20 to 25 naval surface ships and four to six submarines could be deployed at the base. Mr. Armitage also said nine Soviet Tu-16 bombers had been moved into the base around mid-year. Those were used for naval reconnaissance, he said.