Row over Internet "war plans" highlights China-Vietnam tensions

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Relations between Vietnam and China deteriorated over the past fortnight after Hanoi formally protested at online discussions in China about a war with Vietnam. While only a small layer of Chinese nationalist fanatics made the web postings, the incident underscores the ongoing tensions between the two countries, which have conflicting strategic and economic interests, including in the South China Sea.

According to the *South China Morning Post* on September 5, Hanoi has twice summoned senior Chinese diplomats to express concerns about the "war plans" that have been appearing on Chinese web sites since August. The plans supposedly outline a full-scale invasion of Vietnam, starting with five days of missile strikes. Following a naval blockade and electronic jamming of Vietnam's communications, 310,000 Chinese troops would sweep into northern Vietnam from the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi and from the South China Sea.

The postings were made on *Sina.com*, a major news portal in China, and several other sites. One declared: "Vietnam... is a major threat to the safety of Chinese territories, and the biggest obstacle to the peaceful emergence of China... Vietnam is the strategic hub of the whole of Southeast Asia. Vietnam has to be conquered first if Southeast Asia is to be under [China's] control again."

While these ultra nationalists have no direct influence in Beijing's policy-making, the fact that such debates were published without any interference from China's notorious Internet police indicated a degree of official approval. Beijing has been consciously promoting nationalism to create a new base of support among China's emerging middle classes, which view their future as bound up with the rise of China as a major power.

Beijing and Hanoi moved quickly to dampen down the dispute. Le Dung, Vietnam's foreign ministry spokesman, announced that China had promised to block "negative articles" that were harmful to bilateral relations between the two countries. A Chinese government spokesman said the postings were the individual opinions of a handful of people, "which by no means represented China's stance".

Speaking to the *South China Morning Post*, Song Xiaojun, a Chinese military expert, dismissed the "war plans" as a "joke". However, while calling on the Chinese government to guide public opinion so as to avoid harmful conspiracy theories, Song admitted that tensions with Vietnam existed. "China and Vietnam have similar political systems and should unite to counter the US, which is the common enemy for both countries. Clearly the US tries to play Vietnam off against rising China," he said.

Song's comments reflect broader concerns in official circles that the US is developing ties with Vietnam, as part of its strategic encirclement of China. Tensions have been rising over the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. In July, Beijing protested an agreement signed by Hanoi with US oil giant Exxon Mobil to develop oil and gas reserves in disputed maritime areas of the South China Sea. Last year the Vietnamese foreign ministry declared sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, following by invitations to Western and Asian oil corporations to bid for gas field and pipeline projects.

Like Beijing, Hanoi has been encouraging patriotism. Hundreds of Vietnamese students staged anti-Chinese protests last December after Beijing officially incorporated the Spratly and Paracel Islands into the Chinese province of Hainan. The protesters demanded that Hanoi stand up to "Chinese aggression".

The history of relations between the two Stalinist regimes has been one of considerable bitterness.

Until the early 1960s, the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist Parties were formally within the Soviet bloc. However, like Moscow, Beijing treated the anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam as a pawn in their dealings with the imperialist powers, forcing Ho Chi Minh to accept the French-proposed partition of Vietnam in 1953. The deal paved the way for the US to displace France in propping up a corrupt South Vietnamese dictatorship, which ultimately led to direct US military intervention in 1965 and the death of millions of Vietnamese.

In the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, North Vietnam sided with Moscow, angering Beijing. Sharpening tensions with the Soviet Union, as well as economic problems at home, led to Mao Zedong's rapprochement with the US in 1972. For the Nixon administration, a major factor in reaching the deal was to secure China's support in containing the fallout in Asia from the defeat of the US military in Vietnam.

In February 1979, the Chinese regime launched war on Vietnam in response to its toppling of the pro-Beijing Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. More than 200,000 Chinese troops invaded northern Vietnam, leading to bitter fighting in which tens of thousands of soldiers and even more Vietnamese civilians died. Beijing launched the war just two months after Deng Xiaoping initiated his "market reforms" and just weeks after he visited Washington.

The scorched earth policy that accompanied the withdrawal of

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Chinese troops only compounded the acrimony between the two countries. Fear of a Chinese invasion is a major reason why Vietnam continues to maintain one of the largest standing armies in the world. Border skirmishes continued into the 1980s but subsided after Hanoi's turn to market reform and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In 1989, Hanoi was one of the few governments in the world to publicly back Beijing's massacre of protestors in Tiananmen Square, out of fear that Vietnamese workers and students would follow the example. Relations between the two countries were normalised in 1991.

While bilateral trade between the two countries is booming, tensions have remained. Now that China has emerged as a new economic power, sections of the ruling elite in Beijing view Vietnam's continued control of the Spratly Islands as a strategic obstacle. In January, China's leading defence magazine, *Ordnance Knowledge*, which has close connections with the military, blamed the lack of a true Chinese "deep water" navy for the unresolved disputes in the South China Sea.

China controls 7 islets in the Spratly group, while Vietnam has the largest group of 29, with some 2,000 troops stationed to protect them. The Philippines controls 8 islands, Malaysia 5 and Taiwan 1. Brunei and Indonesia both have maritime claims in the area as well.

Rivalry in the South China Sea goes back decades. In 1974, China took the advantage of the imminent collapse of the South Vietnamese regime to occupy the Paracel Islands. In 1988, the Chinese and Vietnamese navies clashed after China took over the Johnson Reef in the Spratly archipelago. Vietnam has countered China through its membership of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which in 1995 ruled out bilateral negotiations in favour of a collective response to Beijing over disputes in the South China Sea.

Relations between Beijing and Hanoi have improved in recent years, as China has sought closer ties with ASEAN countries through free trade agreements and joint economic zones. In 2002, Beijing signed a deal with the ASEAN, agreeing not to complicate conflict in the region, including the South China Sea.

Deep suspicion remains, however. *Ordnance Knowledge* accused Vietnam, Malaysia and other countries of holding military exercises and purchasing new hardware such as frigates, fighters and patrol boats to strengthen their grip over the islets. China is also concerned about US influence following its normalisation of relations with Vietnam in 1995. Washington has been sending warships to visit Vietnam since 2003, raising fears in Beijing that the US is seeking closer military ties as part of its broader plans to encircle China.

Substantial economic and strategic interests are at stake in the South China Sea. More than 500 oil and gas wells have been developed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei around the Spratlys, including some 100 within waters claimed by China. Total annual output has reached 50 million tonnes and oil exports have become an important source of revenue for both Vietnam and Philippines. The South China Sea is estimated to have 35 billion tonnes of oil and natural gas, of which 22.5 billion tonnes are within Chinese-claimed areas.

Just as significantly, some of the world's most important naval routes-especially from the Middle East to North East Asia-pass through the South China Sea. *Ordnance Knowledge* pointed out that the Spratly Islands are at the heart of China's foreign trade and oil "lifelines". Of China's 39 sea lanes, the 21 passing through the Spratlys account for 60 percent of China's foreign trade. Some 60 percent of ships passing through the Strait of Malacca are Chinese, accounting for 80 percent of China's imported oil from the Middle East and Africa.

The magazine wrote: "As foreign trade and the sea-base economy develop, our national interests are rapidly expanding towards overseas. The navy, which bears the major responsibility of protecting maritime and overseas interests, must ensure smooth and efficient passages... Effectively controlling the Spratlys will be an important basis for our navy to break through the constraints of the island chains, moving east to the Pacific and west to the Indian Ocean."

Ordnance Knowledge also viewed the islands as a weapon against potential rivals such as Japan. "Effective control of the Spratlys and the surrounding areas can enhance [China's] deterrent power, taking the strategic initiative by directly constraining and influencing international oil lifelines. It can be a sharp blade to directly threaten hostile forces, further deterring the presence of the Western powers around the South China Sea," the magazine wrote.

Several Western analysts noted in April that China was building a major naval base on the southern island of Hainan, adjacent to the South China Sea, that would allow for a large fleet, including 20 submarines and, in the future, an aircraft carrier or amphibious battle groups. In protecting its own trade routes and oil supplies, China is inevitably threatening those of its rivals.

While the "plans" of the Chinese bloggers to invade Vietnam may not be very serious or influential, disputes over control of the South China Sea and other tensions have the potential to trigger a conflict that could quickly draw in neighbouring countries and the major powers.

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