

Vietnam's maritime claim provokes standoff with China

John Chan
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Vietnam last week provocatively proclaimed its sovereignty over the disputed Spratly and Paracel island groups in the South China Sea, deliberately stirring up a diplomatic row with China.

The Vietnamese Communist Party leadership formally included the islands, which China also claims, in a new maritime law approved by the country's National Assembly last Thursday. The legislation requires that all foreign naval ships passing through the waters to notify Vietnamese authorities.

Just days before the law was announced, Hanoi angered Beijing by sending two Russian-made Su-27 fighters to conduct a "patrol flight" over the disputed Spratly Islands.

Chinese vice foreign minister Zhang Zhijun summoned the Vietnamese ambassador to China, Nguyen Van Tho, demanding that Hanoi "immediately correct" its violations of Chinese sovereignty. He labelled the Vietnamese maritime law illegal, adding: "China demands the Vietnamese side ... not do anything to harm relations or the peace and stability of the South China Sea."

In retaliation, Beijing announced that three island groups in the South China Sea—the Spratlys, the Paracels and Macclesfield Bank—had been incorporated into a new administrative entity, "Shansha City." According to the *Global Times* newspaper, China had planned the move in 2007, but shelved it then due to concerns about protests by Vietnam.

More vocal elements in the Chinese regime have demanded stronger countermeasures against Vietnam.

Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo told the Communist Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, last Thursday: "Our navy has the absolute ability and the absolute confidence to use arms to defend our country's sovereignty, territorial integrity and maritime rights ... We're just waiting for the order."

In response, Vietnam's foreign ministry spokesman Luong Thanh Nghi denounced the Chinese announcement of a new city as a violation of Vietnam's sovereignty. "Vietnam resolutely rejects China's unreasonable criticism, as well as strongly opposes the establishment of the so-called 'Shansha City'," he said.

Vietnam's Stalinist leadership has apparently decided to risk a military confrontation against its more powerful neighbour because it calculates that it has the backing of its former imperialist subjugator, the United States.

Earlier this month, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta visited Vietnam, seeking to enhance military cooperation. One key objective was to regain access to the former Vietnam War naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. Panetta declared: "It will be particularly important to be able to work with partners like Vietnam, to be able to use harbours like this, as we move our ships from our ports on the West Coast, (and) our stations here in the Pacific."

Panetta's visit followed his announcement, at an Asian security dialogue in Singapore, that the US would deploy 60 percent of its naval ships to the Asia-Pacific by 2020. This move escalates the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, designed to

strategically encircle China. Vietnam, along with formal US military allies, such as the Philippines, Japan, South Korea and Australia, is becoming part of this push.

The US also wants to return to the Philippines' Subic Bay and the former Clark air base, from which it was compelled to withdraw during the 1990s. In yet another move, the Pentagon is seeking to deploy new P-8A reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft and surveillance drones in Thailand, using a Vietnam War-era air base at U-Tapao.

These aggressive steps follow the deployment of advanced Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, and the stationing of US troops and air force facilities near Darwin, in northern Australia. Washington is building capacities in the region to cut off China's vital shipping lanes in the South China Sea and surrounding key passages, such as the Strait of Malacca, in the event of any war.

China has conflicting claims with the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan in the South China Sea, which is thought to contain rich energy reserves, as well as being vital to China's trade, especially with the Middle East and Africa.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in 2010 that the US had a "national interest" in maintaining "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Since then, Washington has encouraged Vietnam and Philippines, in particular, to assert their maritime claims against Beijing, which regards the South China Sea as part of its "core interests"—i.e., territory that it will defend militarily, if necessary.

Washington's "freedom of navigation" means nothing less than US naval dominance of the region, including the capacity to deploy surveillance ships and planes to monitor sensitive Chinese military installations.

Last week, the US, Japan and South Korea held their first joint naval drills near the South Korean island of Jeju. Japan sent three destroyers to join a US aircraft

carrier strike group centred on the USS George Washington. The trilateral drills were followed by a major US-South Korean naval exercise in the Yellow Sea, featuring the George Washington and 10 South Korean warships, and the largest ever US-South Korean live fire exercise, at Pochen—just next to the North Korean border—involving jet fighters, tanks and attack helicopters, as well as 2,000 soldiers.

Backed by the US, the Philippines has adopted a confrontational stance against China. The standoff over the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea is set to flare up once more. After a temporary agreement between the two countries in May to cool tensions, Philippines President Benigno Aquino last week threatened to re-deploy naval ships again, saying China had not withdrawn its maritime policing vessels from the area, as agreed in mid-June.

This week, Manila further angered China by announcing it would establish a children's kindergarten on one of the Spratly islands. The announcement was made after Aquino's government received a symbolic boost from the US on Monday—the docking of another nuclear-powered attack submarine, the USS Louisville, in Subic Bay—the second after the USS North Carolina visited in May. Beijing denounced the kindergarten plan as a violation of Chinese sovereignty.



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