

# India signals support for Vietnam in South China Sea dispute

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India has signaled support for Vietnam in its latest flare-up with China over their competing territorial claims in the South China Sea.

On May 7 Hanoi charged that Chinese vessels had recently rammed several of its ships in an oil-rich zone claimed by both countries. Almost a week later the situation remains extremely tense, with both countries deploying large numbers of ships in the waters off the Paracel Islands.

India's support is cautiously-worded. Nevertheless, it is inflammatory under conditions where Washington has been encouraging its East Asian allies, including Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, to press their claims against Beijing as part of its strategy to isolate and militarily encircle China.

Hanoi, for its part, is seeking to curry favor with New Delhi so as to further draw India into its dispute with China.

The latest flare up of tensions between Hanoi and Beijing began when the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation started setting up a \$1 billion oil drilling rig near the Paracel Islands. The islands are claimed by both countries, but occupied by China.

While Vietnam has accused Chinese ships of ramming its vessels and using water cannon to drive them off, China has counter-charged that its vessels were rammed more than 171 times by armed Vietnamese vessels between May 3 and 7.

Two days after Hanoi made a very public protest about the events in the waters off the Paracel Islands, an Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson voiced New Delhi's "concern" over "recent developments in the South China Sea."

In what clearly were vetted remarks, the spokesperson told a media briefing that India "maintains that freedom of navigation in the South

China Sea should not be impeded", and is urging "cooperation" so as to ensure "security of sea-lanes and strengthening of maritime security." Calling the "maintenance of peace, stability, growth and prosperity in the region" vital for "the international community," the Indian spokesperson urged the dispute be resolved "through peaceful measures in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law."

The Indian diplomat's statement avoided mention of either China or Vietnam. However, its references to "freedom of navigation," "security of sea lanes," interests of "international community" and "international law" echo the US's hypocritical stance on the disputes China has with its East Asian neighbours. While feigning neutrality and support for international law, Washington has been encouraging China's neighbours to rake up their territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas, and then paint Beijing as the aggressor.

With the maritime territorial disputes serving as a convenient pretext, Washington has recently dramatically increased its military cooperation with Japan and the Philippines—longstanding allies—and it is aggressively courting Vietnam. Last week, the Obama administration sent to the US Senate the proposed text of a nuclear cooperation agreement with Hanoi.

India, through the state-owned oil company ONGC Videsh (OVL), is already collaborating with Vietnam in parts of the South China Sea that China claims as its own and doing so over Beijing's express objections.

In 2006, Hanoi awarded OVL oil-exploration rights to two blocks in disputed territory and while one was later abandoned as unviable, OVL signed a new oil exploration agreement with Vietnam last November.

China's moves to initiate oil drilling off the disputed Paracel Islands come just days after Hanoi offered OVL

two more oil exploration blocks.

India's navy, which now routinely carries out joint exercises with the Pentagon, has recently become active in the South China Sea. In December 2012, India's then chief of the navy, Admiral D.K. Joshi, publicly proclaimed that India's navy was preparing for possible action in the South China Sea. "Are we preparing for it," he asked. "The short answer is yes."

In the wake of the latest flare up with China, Hanoi is intensifying its efforts to enmesh India in the conflict.

In a round table meeting in Melbourne sponsored by the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV) on May 9, DAV President, Ambassador Dang Dinh Quy, denounced "Chinese assertiveness," accused the Chinese navy of "acting without provocation," and charged that it was doing so on orders of "the Chinese leadership at the highest level."

Notwithstanding the US's provocative anti-China stance, Quy went on to complain that the Obama administration has shown insufficient "clarity" on Vietnam's dispute with China, then added, "That is why we want India should rise quickly. We have great expectations from India."

Responding to Quy's remark, Amitabh Mattoo, the inaugural director of the Australia-India Institute and a stalwart of India's national-security establishment, lashed out against China.

"Chinese assertiveness," declared Mattoo, "is bordering on aggressiveness." He termed Beijing's behavior "short sighted and counter-productive."

Mattoo has served as foreign policy advisor to both Congress Party and BJP-led Indian governments. He was a member of India's National Security Council's Advisory Board under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and a member of the task force on Global Strategic Developments struck by the current Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.

Mattoo is far from alone in calling for India, which has a longstanding territorial dispute with China and is competing with it for oil and other resources, to take a more aggressive stand against China and do so in concert with Washington.

In an article titled "Chinese expansionism continues unabated" published in the May 7 issue of the *Times of India*, S.D. Pradhan complained that the "Chinese policy of aggrandizement in its neighbouring areas" is "raising the serious risk of a conflict in the South China

Sea." He contended that China's "aggressive behaviour towards Vietnam" was part of a "grand strategy" directed against Japan and India and advocated India "join hands" with the "US, Japan, ASEAN, Russia, [and] Australia ... in pressurising China to give up its aggressive policies in the neighbouring countries."

"They should be prepared," Pradhan said, "to impose consequences on China when it violates international laws and norms," although he refrained from spelling out what "penalties" he envisaged.

Even more than Mattoo, Pradhan is a voice of India's national security establishment. The positions he has previously held include chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, deputy national security adviser, and chairman of the Task Force on Intelligence Mechanism, which reviewed the functioning and interaction of India's various intelligence agencies.

India has formed a "global strategic partnership" with the US and otherwise tilted its foreign policy toward Washington since the beginning of the century. Nonetheless, large sections of India's corporate elite and military-intelligence establishment have criticized the outgoing Congress Party-led government for not aligning more closely with Washington as a purported "insurance policy" against China. The reality is US imperialism is determined to make India the third pillar of its Indo-Pacific anti-China strategy, alongside Japan and Australia, through a combination of threats and inducements.



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