

China-Vietnam talks fail to end tensions over oil rig

Ben McGrath**24 June 2014**

Tensions in the South China Sea have continued to worsen despite talks between Chinese and Vietnamese officials last Wednesday in Hanoi to discuss territorial disputes. The meeting yielded few results. Both Beijing and Hanoi accused the other of stoking disputes in the region.

The high-level talks were the first since a Chinese state-owned company placed an oil rig near the disputed Paracel Islands, which China controls and administers. Vietnam contends that the rig is within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The Chinese delegation, led by state councilor Yang Jiechi, defended Beijing's decision to place the rig in the disputed waters, calling the move "completely legal." Yang met with leading Vietnamese officials, including Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

However, in a sign that little had changed, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang last Saturday criticized China saying: "Our Vietnamese people, party and state have enough will and resolve as well as a sufficient historical and legal basis to fight in safeguarding our national sovereignty. It is unacceptable that strong countries can defy morality and justice."

Tensions flared after China first installed the rig in early May. Clashes have broken out between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels, with both sides accusing the other of ramming opposing ships. This led to the sinking of a Vietnamese vessel in May. Since then, China has positioned four new rigs in the South China Sea, including one near Vietnam's EEZ.

Despite the conflicts, both sides have called for further discussions. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham demanded China withdraw the first oil rig, while adding: "We wish to have dialogue to resolve the

current complicated situation in the East Sea [the Vietnamese name for the South China Sea]."

Yang made similar comments while emphasizing Beijing's desire to hold one-on-one talks with Hanoi. "Both sides should uphold the conduct of bilateral communications to stabilize the situation as soon as possible," he said. Yang also demanded that Hanoi "stop hyping up the issue and stop whipping up disagreement to create new disputes."

Beijing is critical of Vietnamese plans to take the dispute to an international court. While Hanoi has not announced a final decision, according to Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh, China has repeatedly asked that Vietnam refrain from involving third party arbiters.

Vietnam has suggested that it could follow the Philippines, which filed a complaint in March with the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration. China and the Philippines are involved in a territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal. Vietnamese National Assembly chairman Nguyen Hanh Phuc stated in a May 21 interview that Hanoi is gathering the requisite material to file a claim if China does not remove the oil rig.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei stated in early June: "China's position that it will not accept or participate in the tribunal case involving the Philippines hasn't changed." Beijing would take a similar stance in relation to any Vietnamese case. Both Vietnam and China have submitted dossiers to UN general secretary Ban Ki-moon outlining their respective claims to the Paracel Islands.

The chief responsibility for inflaming territorial disputes in the South China Sea lies with the Obama administration, which, as part of its "pivot to Asia," has directly intervened into what were previously relatively

minor regional issues. While proclaiming neutrality on the territorial disputes, the US has encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam to more aggressively pursue their claims, including through international courts.

Since the beginning of the year, Washington has stepped up its condemnations of Chinese activities in the South China Sea, branding them as “provocative and unhelpful.” The US has also begun to drop its posture of neutrality, openly questioning Chinese claims in the disputed waters. Its support for the Philippine legal case is designed to brand China as an outlaw, so as to justify further US provocations and a military build-up throughout the region aimed against Beijing.

In a speech on Saturday, Yang Jiechi, China’s top foreign affairs official, took aim indirectly at the United States saying: “China is committed to work for a peaceful solution to the territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interest disputes with relevant countries.”

Others in Beijing have been more direct. Chinese state media quoted a military thinktank last Wednesday: “The United States keeps pushing its pivot to the Asia Pacific strategy, provoking relevant countries to rely on US strength and use violence to scheme at sea, which worsens the problem and increases antagonism.”

The US is seeking to deepen military ties with Vietnam. Ted Osius, nominee to become the new US ambassador to Vietnam, stated on June 17 during his Senate confirmation hearing: “People in Vietnam are calling for stronger engagement with the United States to counter China. It would be a caution to China against making more aggressive moves in the South China Sea.”

This statement came as Osius suggested lifting a prohibition on US sales of military weaponry to Vietnam. Since 2007, when the US approved the sale to Vietnam of non-lethal defense items only, the Vietnamese leadership has pushed for the removal of this ban.

This is just one aspect of the growing military relationship between the former wartime enemies. In April, the two countries’ navies engaged in military exercises near Danang, close to the disputed Paracel Islands. The US sent two ships, including a missile destroyer and 400 sailors. It was the fifth year such exercises have been held.

However, the lifting of a ban on weapons sales has been held up by claims that Hanoi must address “human rights” issues. As in the case of Burma and other countries, the US cynically exploits the issues of “human rights” in Vietnam to push for concessions, including permission for more US warships to dock at Vietnamese ports.

Above all, Washington pressing Vietnam to align more closely with the US is further exacerbating tensions with China.



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