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CHINA-VIETNAM: THE DISPUTE OVER THE PARACELS AND SPRATLYS

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses the developments in Vietnam's relations with China from the time both countries normalised relations in November 1991 to the present. It demonstrates that notwithstanding the historical baggage and the asymmetry of power of the two countries, relations have been improving incrementally over the last seven years. However, four issues affecting their relationship – all of which pertain to their shared land and sea borders – remain outstanding. There seems to be the political will on the part of both governments to resolve two of the four issues by the year 2000. They are the demarcation of the land border and the Tonkin (Bac To) Gulf. The remaining two issues – the Paracels and the Spratlys – are unlikely to be resolved any time soon. The paper concludes that relations in the short and medium term will continue to develop on an even keel.

Keywords: Tonkin, Paracel, Spratly, Li Peng, Zhou Enlai, socialism

Methods and level of study:

The unsolved differences regarding Paracels and Spratlys resources The second Vice-Ministerial meeting in August 1994 was held with tensions on the rise in the South China Sea, which had started in April 30. The Vietnamese again complained about the joint oil exploitation activities in the South China sea by Crestone Energy Corporation, which is Us based and China Offshore petroleum corporation, whose location of activity overlaps with the claimed territories of the two nations.¹ Beijing had awarded the contract to Crestone in 1992 (Vietnam had awarded a similar contract to another US-based company, Conoco, in April 1996, in the overlapping area after Crestone). In the course of events, several claims and counterclaims ensued and in 1994 it was reported that China was stepping up its naval activities in the South China Sea. At that time, 'diplomats and people in oil circles' were of the

¹ Xinhua New Agency, 19 May 1994, SWB/FE/2003/G/1-2.



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view that it was possible such a situation would lead to armed conflict.² Chinese foreign minister, Qian Qichen at the first meeting of ASEAN regional forum in Bangkok in July 1994 made with the then Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyen Manh Cam, dismissed the suggestion that an armed conflict was inevitable.³

The issue of Spratly and Paracel Islands and the aspect of who owns them was first raised and discussed during the August 1994 Castro-Vo meeting. It was reported earlier that the meeting will also address the issue of the region's joint development,⁴ during the meeting however a readout revealed that the two had certainly not 'bridged their gaps' but did appreciate that 'a good deal of time would be needed to resolve the problem.' The two sides acknowledged that their disputes could only be resolved 'reasonably through negotiations.'⁵

Then, during the visit to Hanoi of Jiang Zemin in November 1994, both parties concluded that the Spratlys question would be addressed by a working group, similar to that of the Land Border and the Tonkin Gulf. Chinese First Foreign Affairs Minister, Qian Qichen, observed that it would 'create conditions for gradually solving problems between the two countries'. A Joint Working Group was finally formed to look into the Spratlys matter and third Vice-Ministerial summit held in July 1995 addressed the structure of the Working Group.⁶ Equally, in the same month, on 1 July, Vietnam joined ASEAN, and on 11 July, the relations between Vietnam and the United States were restored. The introduction of the ASEAN Regional Forum, to which Vietnam anticipated admission and normalization of relations with US all since 1994 – how these developments, if at all, played a role in China's decision to finally engage with Vietnam on the issue of Spratly Islands is not clear. It would help, however, to recall that at different times, the Vietnamese deputy foreign minister also told journalists that the membership of the ASEAN would not be a cause for concern for China, General Secretary Do Muoi,

² Kyodo News Service, 12 May 1994, SWB/FE/1997/B/5-6; Central Broadcasting System, Taipei, 21 July 1994, SWB/FB/2055/B/2, and repeated twice in SWB/FB/2061/B/4 and SWB/FE/2062/B2.

³ Xinhua News Agency, 25 July 1994, SWB/FE/2058/G/1-2.

⁴ The Nation, Bangkok, 23 July 1994, SWB/FE/2057/B/4.

⁵ Kyodo News Service, 16 August 1994, SWB /FE/2077/B/7; Xinhua News Agency, 18 August 1994, SWB/FE/2078/B/6; Voice of Vietnam, 18 August 1994, SWB/FE/2079/B/2.

⁶ Xinhua News Agency, 22 November 1994, SWB/FE/2161/B/5.



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asserted that Vietnam will not permit any foreign navies to operate out of Cam Ranh Bay.⁷

The first session of the Joint Working Group on the Spratlys took place between the 13th and 15th of November 1995 in Hanoi. Xu Guangjian, the leader of the Chinese contingent, stated that China believed that the quarrel should be resolved in a peaceful way instead of through the use of force or the threat of force. China also argued that in situations when disputes remain unresolved for a long period, rather than engaging in active contention, the parties may agree to shelve the issues and seek for other forms of development and cooperation. During the Conference, the two parties reportedly agreed on operational modalities.⁸ The second round of talks was held in Beijing between 2-7 July 1996. It was reported that both parties exchanged views on the maritime matters of the two countries, including issues surrounding the Paracel and Spratly chains of islands. They also stipulated that they would proceed with further talks as to 'find our basic and lasting solutions capable of accommodating the interests of both sides' within the framework of international law including the Law of the Sea that was adopted in 1982.⁹

Vietnam's ratification of the Law of the Sea Convention took place on June 23, 1994, while that of China was on May 16, 1996. Nonetheless, still contentious, is the question of how China interprets the Convention itself. The Joint Working Group apparently met again in April 1997 during the Kanto 3 incident (see account below). Beijing reportedly hosted the fourth meeting from 8-10 July. It was said that the two sides touched upon the prospects for maritime relations and reiterated their desire to resolve their differences amicably through negotiations. The next meeting is to take place in Hanoi in 1999.

Conclusion

The symbolism is that recently, two historical sites on the Chinese side of the border were repaired and renovated, and opened to tourists. They were supposed to mark the close ties between Vietnam and China. They were the Ho Chi Minh Pavilion (previously called the Dongxing Six Angle Pavilion) and a boundary tablet erected

⁷ The Nikkei Weekly, 30 October 1995.

⁸ Xinhua News Agency, 15 November 1995.

⁹ VNA, 10 July 1996, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts.



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in 1890 by the Qing Dynasty and the French demarcating the China-Vietnam border.⁹¹ The Vietnamese is unlikely to object to the former but the latter is bound to be contentious. Such is the nature of the relations between the two countries.

References

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- 2.Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley, Red Brotherhood at war, (London: Verso, 1984) pp 132-134.
- 3.See 'China, Vietnam to Normalize Relations' in Beijing Review, 23-29 September 1991, pp. 4-5.
- 4.Xinhua News Agency, 10 November 1991, SWB/FE/1227/A3/1.
- 5.The second meeting was from 14-18 August 1994 also in Hanoi the third was from 11-13 July 1995 in Beijing, the fourth, from 17-20 September 1996 in Beijing. The fifth meeting took place from 13-15 August 1997 in Beijing pp 20.
- 6 VNA, FBIS.EAS-92-230, 30 November 1992 pp 34 .
- 7.Xinhua News Agency, 28 August 1993, SWB/FE/1780/G/pp 2-3

