



Asia's Great Game Vietnam and China at War on the High Seas

The standoff between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea is getting alarmingly tense. Near a China-owned drilling rig between the Paracel Islands and the Vietnamese coast, a Vietnamese fishing boat sank under uncertain circumstances. China says the boat capsized after “harassing and colliding with” a Chinese vessel. Hanoi says the Vietnamese boat was “deliberately encircled by 40 fishing vessels from China before it was attacked by a Chinese ship” and sunk. Whom to believe?

Officials from both countries have traded blame for the incident, which could easily happen again, given that dozens of coast guard ships are still staring each other down around the rig. China’s foreign ministry spokesman then said Vietnam’s claim on the territory is “ridiculous.” Hanoi responded emphatically: “Historical and legal evidence shows that Vietnam has absolute sovereignty in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos.”

In the fight over the South China Sea, a system of alliances is emerging, as the *AI* wrote last week. Vietnam and the Philippines have been the most vocal in opposing China’s claim on the Sea so far. Last week, Indonesia appeared to join them. The presidents of both countries met in Manila and agreed to redraw their maritime boundaries so they no longer overlapped. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono even got in a dig at China, telling reporters that “disputes including maritime border tension can be resolved peacefully.” Benigno Aquino concurred.



Picture under © the-red-alert.blogspot.com

On the other side is China and not too many other countries. The failure of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to collectively condemn China’s actions proves that Beijing has at least one or two friends within the southeast Asian alliance. But who else is there? Surprisingly, Taiwan might be on China’s side. Reuters reports:

Taiwan is building a \$100 million port next to an airstrip on the lone island it occupies in the disputed South China Sea, a move that is drawing hardly any flak from [...] China.

The reason, say military strategists, is that Itu Aba could one day be in China’s hands should it ever take over Taiwan, which it regards as a renegade province. While Itu Aba, also called Tai Ping, is small, no other disputed island has such sophisticated facilities. Its runway is the biggest of only two in the Spratly archipelago that straddles the South China Sea, and the island has its own fresh water source.

“Taipei knows it is the only claimant that (China) will not bother, so it is free to upgrade its facilities on Tai Ping without fear of criticism from China,” said Denny Roy, a senior fellow at the Hawaii-based East-West Center think tank. “China would protect Taiwan’s garrisons if necessary.”

The battle for the South China Sea is taking shape, and fast.