



## Vietnam and China: Conflict over islands arouses Vietnamese patriotism

By T.T. Nhu

I lived in Hanoi from 2004 until 2009, down the street from the Chinese Embassy. Demonstrations were rare, if not forbidden by Vietnam's controlling government. That's why in December 2007, I was startled to see people gathered with banners outside the embassy protesting the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands. The protests were quiet, somewhat half hearted. Security police were smoking, playing badminton, laughing and being generally inattentive.

Subsequent actions by China over the years have provoked greater reaction from increasingly aggravated Vietnamese worldwide. Even my artist and writer friends and relatives usually disdainful of politics became incensed and became sudden patriots hotly defending Vietnam's possession of the islands.

China's recent decision to send a \$1 billion oil rig into Vietnamese-claimed waters, accompanied by actions such as ramming Vietnamese fishing ships and building on atolls far from China's mainland, have stirred up ancient memories of 1,000 years of Chinese rule, uniting and enraging Vietnamese across the globe. China claims oil and fishing rights far beyond its borders into the South China Sea (or, as Vietnamese say "the East Sea"), affecting not only Vietnam, but five other countries: Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.

The violation of Vietnam's territorial claims sparked protest from Vietnamese worldwide. In Vietnam, demonstrations got out of hand, and manufacturing plants owned by Chinese, as well as Taiwanese and Japanese, were attacked. Four Chinese workers were killed. A Vietnamese woman immolated herself to protest the Chinese incursions into Vietnamese waters.

Westerners see the relationship between China and Vietnam as a decades-old communist alliance. This view ignores the strong distrust Vietnamese leadership has of its giant neighbor. Indeed, the blurred relationship between patron state and colonizer may have led Ho Chi Minh to initially reject Chinese assistance in the fight against colonial French forces, with the nationalist leader reportedly saying, "I would rather sniff French merde for five years than eat Chinese merde for one thousand."

Vietnam has recently become strategically important to the U.S. in its "turn to the Pacific." Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, stated during a recent visit to Vietnam last month: "We should have a steady improvement in our relationship with the Vietnamese military. I would suggest, as goes Vietnam in managing its maritime resources and territorial disputes, so goes the South China Sea."

What a change from the time the American phase of the war began in earnest with the Tonkin Gulf resolution 50 years ago. After millions of deaths in the futile war, now the U.S. sees Vietnam as a valuable ally.

China, however, has demanded increasingly costly concessions. Of particular note was the demand in 1958 that Vietnam sign a document stating that the disputed Spratly and Paracel islands belonged to China. Under duress, facing a powerful army, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Dong reluctantly signed.

Nevertheless, dispassionate observers agree that China's territorial claims have little basis in international law or historical documentation. Meanwhile, despite withdrawing the oil rig, China has succeeded in doing what was previously unthinkable: Bringing the international community of Vietnamese together in defense of their country and the United States back to a position it held, briefly, in 1945 before the death of President Roosevelt.

Note: "*Dangerous Waters: A forum on the South China Sea Conflict*" will be held Thursday at the U.C. Berkeley Alumni House from 9 am until 1 pm. The public is invited. For information see: [www.dangerouswaters.org](http://www.dangerouswaters.org).

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