



**Sigur Center  
for Asian Studies**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

## **Vietnam's Strategy in the South China Sea and Its Implications**

Among China's rivals in the South China Sea, Vietnam stands out with the most intense experiences and the greatest interests. If the South China Sea did only in the last decade emerge as a major regional hotspot, it has been a main bone of contention between Vietnam and China since the mid-1970s. The two countries fought over the Paracel Islands in 1974 and over the Spratly Islands in 1988, both times ended in Vietnam's loss of land, lives, and assets.

### **Vietnam's High Stakes**

Vietnam's stakes in the South China Sea are more critical and of an existential nature than most others. About 80% of its population lives within 100 miles from the South China Sea coast. Millions of its fishermen live from this body of water. Eighty six percent of its trade with the world outside passes through this domain. Nearly all of its hydrocarbon reserves are in the South China Sea. Security and resources are two of Vietnam's major interests in the South China Sea. But the territorial and maritime disputes over this area also profoundly affect the country's political and economic stability and the ruling regime's legitimacy. Concerns over security, resources, stability, and legitimacy interact to jointly drive Vietnam's policy in the South China Sea.

More often than not, these concerns entail contradictory inputs for policy. Concerns over territorial security, resources and legitimacy tend to push policymakers toward the hard lines, but concerns over political and economic stability pull them back to a softer

line. Securing the country's interests when they are at odds with those of a giant and increasingly more powerful neighbor places Vietnam's policymakers before the daunting task of challenging an unchallengeable power. As a result, Vietnam has adopted a broad-spectrum strategy that is informed by six distinct logics. On the hard side of the spectrum are the logics of self-help, international coalition-building, and enmeshment, while on the soft side Vietnam pursues engagement, deference, and solidarity toward China.

## **Mixed Strategy**

Modernization of the Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard represents a major effort of Vietnam's self-help in the South China Sea. Boosting the presence and activities of the fisheries and oil and gas industries is also seen as a means to augment the country's position. Mindful that itself alone is no match to China, Vietnam strengthens ties with several major powers, most notably the United States, Russia, Japan, and India, to secure their support. Leveraging international law and organizations

to enmesh other disputants in a complex web of legal regimes and political agreements is also a key direction of Vietnam's policy. In this respect, Vietnam has played an active role in ASEAN, endorsed the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), supported the use of legal action to settle the dispute, and aligned its position to that of the United States.

In combination with these "hardline" logics, "softline" logics are also part and parcel of Vietnam's strategy. Vietnam engages China economically and politically to promote cooperation and limit conflict. It uses deference, self-restraint, and even self-constraint to signal its benign intentions toward China. Capitalizing on ideological ties with China's ruling Communist Party, Vietnam not only nurtures party-to-party channels but it also tries to subordinate the sea dispute to the solidarity of two Communist regimes.

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## **Mixed Internal Support: Energy, Defense and Nationalism**

These various strategic logics receive mixed and uneven support from major groups and sectors in the Vietnamese government and

society. While the military has a vested interest in military buildup, its leaders often emphasize solidarity with and deference to China because they view the military not just as the protector of national sovereignty and territorial integrity but also, and sometimes more importantly, as the guardian of the Communist regime. The energy sector has a large interest in hardline efforts such as pushing out to the sea, reaching out to China-resistant partners, and taking legal action against China, but it also spearheads deep economic engagement with China in the Vietnamese mainland.

The relative weight of different logics in Vietnam's South China Sea strategy reflects less of the logrolling among parochial interest groups and more of a response to events in the South China Sea. China's deployment of the giant HYSY-981 oilrig to waters within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in 2014 has triggered a significant boost in Vietnam's buildup of its naval and law enforcement forces. An earlier boost occurred in 2009 and 2010, when Vietnam signed contracts to buy six Kilo-class attack submarines and 20 Su-30 air superiority aircraft from Russia. This shopping spree was a response to the 2009 surge of China's attacks on Vietnamese citizens and assets in the South China Sea. China's aggressive actions have enlivened anti-China nationalist sentiments that are popular among the intellectual elite and the populace. The chief advocates of this nationalism are strategic entrepreneurs that operate across sectors and institutions in the social media, the state-sanctioned press, the government, and the business.

Vietnam's nationalism has two main versions, one is anti-China and another is anti-Western. China's recent assertiveness in the South China Sea has tremendously strengthened Vietnam's anti-China nationalism at the expense of the anti-Western version. This nationalism expresses itself in strong concerns over national existence, power, territory, and identity. It is these concerns that subsume those over resources and energy security, not the other way around, in Vietnam's concept of maritime security.

## **Implications for the US**

Vietnam's South China Sea strategy has important implications for the United States. As the country that would lose the most if war broke out in the South China Sea, Vietnam needs peace more than any others in the region. At the same time, its strong anti-China nationalism suggests that Vietnam has the capacity to put up the toughest resistance to China among the South China Sea claimants. A strong support for Vietnam will not escalate tension to the extent that it will destabilize the region. On the contrary, it will help restore regional equilibrium and deter China from taking aggressive actions.

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An effective strategy to counter Chinese expansion in the South China Sea can only emanate from an international coalition that is able to match China's power regionally. Such a coalition requires the participation of the United States, Vietnam, Japan, and India at the least.

This coalition must not pursue a pro-status quo approach; instead it must take international law as a rallying point. Not only will this place it on a moral high ground, but this also helps it to avoid falling into the trap created by China's gray zone and salami slicing tactics. China has been successful in making a new normal without triggering sufficient resistance because its opponents have kept clinging to the changing status quo. With this pro-status quo approach, China's rivals have accepted Beijing's *fait accompli*, enabling China to expand without having to fire a single bullet. A tenet of the pro-law coalition's strategy therefore must be the determination not to accept *fait accompli*.

The United States will serve its interests well if it takes the lead in forging a pro-law coalition of key stakeholders in the South China Sea that are determined not to accept *fait accompli* by an aggressor.

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The views expressed are the author's own.

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### ***About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies***

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