

Taking a stand

Jonathan London weighs the consequences of Vietnam's spirited rejection of China's aggressive territorial claims, and warns that the row could inflame nationalists and lead to open conflict

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Recent developments in the western Pacific have alarm bells ringing in capitals around the region and beyond. After being bullied one too many times, Vietnam is confronting Beijing's transgressions. At issue are Beijing's efforts to enforce its illegitimate territorial claims. These efforts have now hit a nerve. And their outcome is profoundly uncertain.

At the root of the problem is Beijing's claim of sovereignty over 90 per cent of the South China Sea, a geographical designation laden with European and Chinese imperial history. The world, Beijing insists, must accept that virtually the entirety of the region is Chinese territory. Vietnam, it further insists, must seek its permission to ply waters within Vietnam's own internationally recognised exclusive economic zone. These claims are problematic indeed.

The current storm has been brewing for some time. In 1974, Beijing illegally seized the Paracel islands in a brief but bloody skirmish with forces of the fading Republic of Vietnam. Over the past decade, Beijing has deployed an increasingly large and aggressive flotilla of fishing-military-surveillance vessels in a bid to enforce its claims through a coordinated campaign of coercion and intimidation.

This campaign has featured the periodic seizure and theft of Vietnamese craft, and the physical beating and illegal detention of scores of Vietnamese seamen, whom China detains for ransom. In the past, Hanoi has downplayed these incidents.

So, what has changed? In some respects, nothing. Vietnam is dwarfed by

China and relations between the two countries will always be asymmetric. Though China had occupied what is today northern Vietnam for a thousand years, Vietnam had always resisted Chinese projections of power.

Indeed, the misdeeds, mistakes, and crimes of France and the United States in Vietnam in the 20th century were particularly violent deviations from a much longer narrative of resistance to Chinese imperialism.

But the world is now a smaller place. There are resources in the disputed waters that governments in both countries covet. The waters in dispute are an important strategic shipping lane. And now Beijing is challenging Hanoi's right to its own exclusive economic zone.

At first glance, it would appear that Vietnam has little chance of checking Beijing's designs on the western Pacific. But Vietnam has played underdog before, one may recall. And Hanoi has at least three advantages.

First, there is international law, which would appear to favour Vietnam. No doubt, Chinese and Vietnamese have been active in some of the disputed waters for centuries. But a large part of China's claims have no basis in international law and the actions Beijing has taken to enforce its illegitimate claims are correspondingly illegal. Whether international law could be enforced is an open question. Second, Vietnam has on its side the court of international opinion. This may or may not matter. Time will tell. What is clear is that Hanoi has changed its tack with encouraging results.

Past Vietnamese leaders' reticence to call out Beijing on its illegal activities has given way to a more forceful, dignified and appropriate response. Though perilous, Vietnam's recent attempts to internationalise the conflict have been effective indeed. The United States has become an interested party to the conflict, much to Beijing's chagrin.

Third, Vietnam's emerging strategic diplomacy may counter China's threats. These include, most notably, Hanoi's warming ties with the United States and its rejuvenated military ties with Russia. Asean may well be too fragmented by its complex relations with China to help, though the Philippines has also objected strenuously to Beijing's actions. What is the tangible significance of these ties?

The Vietnamese know from history not to trust foreign powers. But the Vietnamese are also confronted with an unusual opportunity to build an effective international coalition of support in defence of its legitimate

sovereign claims. In essence, Vietnam no longer stands alone in its opposition to Chinese imperialism.

All this seems lost on Beijing, which in its self-aggrandisement misreads Vietnam and the world. Take recent comments by the Singapore-based mainland academic Wang Hanling, an expert on oceanic affairs, who had this to say: "If the big brother bullies the younger brother it is not good and is something that should not happen, [but] if the younger brother challenges or bullies the older brother, it's just ridiculous." This colourful quip may appear thoughtful at first glance. Read more closely, it reflects a paternalistic attitude of Chinese entitlement that the Vietnamese have long resisted.

So, what is next? The situation is worrisome indeed. We can expect pronouncements from Beijing about "Vietnamese transgressions" and no doubt ominous warnings of consequences that Hanoi cannot take lightly. Nor is it unlikely that Beijing will provoke further incidents and possibly sink ships. The Vietnamese may well respond in kind.

This would be followed by a fanning of street protests in both countries and demands for violent retribution. How the US, Russia or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations might respond is hard to know. It is difficult to envisage any de-escalation at this point. It is clear that Vietnam does not fear China and will act to protect its legitimate rights. But what will Beijing do? Creative multilateral solutions need to be found, but Beijing appears opposed to any that will undermine its ambitions or challenge its claims. Its most recent statement, that it would "not resort to the use of force or the threat of force" should be viewed sceptically, as it contradicts the spirit of its deeds and skirts the fundamental problem, which is its oversized and unwarranted territorial claims.

Beijing needs to rethink its policies, which are on the whole arrogant, belligerent and illegal. Alas, this seems unlikely. So the question becomes one of how open conflict and violence can be avoided. Any answers?

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