

Paracels Islands Dispute

By *Frank Ching*,
Far Eastern Economic Review,
Feb. 10, 1994.

1) REASSESSING SOUTH VIETNAM

Few governments are prepared to admit that they have made a mistake, even when their own policies make it glaringly obvious. Take Vietnam.

Even though the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has abandoned socialism in everything but name, it remains reluctant to acknowledge this. The free-market policies it has been pursuing, however, say otherwise.



During the war years, the battles against American and South Vietnamese troops were fought in the name of socialism and received the support of the entire communist world, Beijing and Moscow in particular. Those battles exacted a heavy toll in national blood and treasure, a price the Vietnamese continue to pay to this day as they belatedly try to put economic development ahead of political ideology. For that ideology in the

past led Hanoi to adopt policies that in retrospect do not appear to have been the wisest. And the ideological contortions involved did more than just lead them into embarrassing accommodations of their principal communist allies, Moscow and Beijing. It also blinded them to the sometimes more principled stands taken by the enemy government in Saigon.

In those days, Hanoi was fond of denouncing South Vietnamese officials as puppets of the United States who had sold out the interests

of the Vietnamese people. Even then, it was clear that the charge did not always hold water. Now, 20 years later, it is clear that there were times when the Saigon administration in fact stood up for Vietnamese interests far more staunchly than did the government in Hanoi.

A case in point is the dispute over the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. The Paracels, like the Spratlys further North, are claimed by both China and Vietnam. But when Hanoi was receiving aid from Beijing, it muted its claim to the Paracels. The islands were seized by China after a military clash in January 1974, during which Chinese troops bested the South Vietnamese defenders. Since then, the islands have been under Chinese control.

After the Vietnam war ended, there was a rapid falling out between Beijing and Hanoi, and the government of the latter - recently reunified with the South - re-asserted a Vietnamese claim to the Paracels. Despite high-level talks between the two countries, this dispute remains unresolved. Specialists from the two sides are expected to meet soon to discuss specific issues, but no overall settlement is likely. In fact, a senior Vietnamese official acknowledged that the issue would have to be solved by future generations.

Without prejudging the merits of either side's claims, it is obvious that the Vietnamese case was weakened by Hanoi's silence when Chinese troops seized the Paracels. Hanoi's failure to protest in the face of foreign military action is now used against Vietnam whenever the subject is raised.

Vietnamese officials today explain their silence at the time by saying that they were dependent on China for aid in the war against the U.S., which was the principal adversary. So it is certainly ironic that, as soon as the war ended, so did the friendship between Hanoi and Beijing.

Adding to the irony are the new contortions Hanoi must go through in advancing its claims to the Paracels. Because of its past acquiescence, Hanoi is forced to refer not to its own public statements from the 1950s to the 1970s but to Saigon statements - in effect, legitimising the South Vietnamese government. For as early as 1956 the Saigon government issued a communique reaffirming its ownership of the Paracels and the Spratlys.

Saigon also issued decrees appointing administrators of the Paracels. Up until its defeat by Chinese forces in 1974 (*only months before*

South Vietnam itself fell before the communist onslaught from the North), the Saigon government continued to assert Vietnamese sovereignty over the Paracels.

Over the past few years, Indonesia had sponsored ostensibly non-governmental workshops on the South China Sea. At these periodic workshops the Vietnamese again find themselves embarrassed when asked to explain their silence back when China grabbed what Vietnam now claims was a chunk of its territory. *"During this period," they say, "there were the complex political and social situation in Vietnam as well as in the world, of which China took advantage, step by step, occupying by forces the Hoang Sa [Paracel] archipelago. And China encroached upon the whole Hoang Sa archipelago in January 1974."*

With the advantage of two decades of history, it should now be possible to assess the acts of the South Vietnamese administration with a more dispassionate eye. In the interests of healing the wounds of war if nothing else, it may be wise for Hanoi to re-examine the record and accord credit where credit may be due. And the Saigon administration's vigorous defence of Vietnam's claims to the Paracels at a time when Hanoi was busy courting China's favour stands out as an act that should be acknowledged.

The late Ho Chi Minh was once asked whether he was pro-Soviet or pro-China. He responded that he was pro-Vietnam. It is now time for Hanoi to acknowledge that there were times when the Saigon administration was more pro-Vietnam than the government in the North.

2) Background on the claims of the said islands:

What happened after Ho has Mao's army and cadres taken the power in NVN.

1. Selling the Paracel and Spratly islands:

Vietnam claimed sovereignty over the "Hoang Sa and Truong Sa Archipelagoes" basing on old documents and especially, Ly Qui Don's "**Phu Bien Tap Luc**". Vietnam called them Hoàng Sa (Paracels) and Trường Sa (Spratleys); China called them Tây Sa (the Xisha) and Nam Sa (Nansha) islands. Vietnamese clashed with the People's Republic of China on 19/1/1974 whereby a former South Vietnam Navy's big boat

was sunk and 40 Viet men were captured. In 3/1988, PRC came and sunk 3 Viet boats; 72 men were killed and 9 captured. On 25/2/1992, PRC declared Truong Sa or Spratly Islands were theirs.

The main reason for China to do this was known before as part of the plan called "Survival Space" (*Không gian sinh tồn*) because resources of the two areas, Manchuria and Tian Shan (Tan Cuong), would be depleted soon. To do this, China started with the easiest part - what Viet communists did promise before. It means China based on a secret deal in the past. In Reuter's news of 30/12/93, Viet commies denied this secret deal but didn't give any explanation why not. Le Duc Anh visited China and got delay of the conflict for 50 years. Did China stand Anh's ungratitude and past promise ?

3) Vietnamese communists sell the Paracel and Spratly islands, but now want to say no.

According to Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs's **"China's Indisputable Sovereignty Over the Xisha and Nansha Islands"** (Beijing Review, Feb. 18, 1980), Hanoi has "settled" this matter with the Chinese in the past. They basically claimed:

- *In June 1956, two years after Ho Chi Minh's government was re-established in Hanoi, North Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister Ung Van Khien said to Li Zhimin, Charge d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in North Vietnam, that "according to Vietnamese data, the Xisha (Tây Sa = Hoàng Sa = Paracels) and Nansha (Nam Sa = Trường Sa = Spratleys) islands are historically part of Chinese territory."*
- *On September 4, 1958, the Chinese Government proclaimed the breadth of its territorial sea to be twelve nautical miles which applied to all territories of the PRC, "including ... the Dongsha Islands, the Xisha Islands, the Zhongsha Islands, the Nansha Islands..." Ten days later, Pham Van Dong stated in his note to Zhou Enlai that "the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam recognizes and supports the declaration of the Government of the People's Republic of China on China's territorial sea made on September 4, 1958."*

Here's Vietnamese governmental note Pham Van Dong sent to Zhou Enlai on 14/9/1958 to support for Chinese claim as follows:



THỦ TƯỚNG NHỎ
HUỖT VIỆT-NAM NHÂN-DÂN CHỦ-CỘNG-HOÀ

Tư vấn Tổng lý,

Chúng tôi xin trân trọng báo tin để Tổng
 chỉ Tổng lý rõ :

Chính phủ nước Việt-nam Dân chủ Cộng hoà
 gọi nhận và tên thành bản tuyên bố, ngày 4
 tháng 9 năm 1958, của Chính phủ nước-Cộng hoà
 Nhân dân Trung-hoa, quyết định và hải phận của
 Trung-quốc.

Chính phủ nước Việt-nam Dân chủ Cộng hoà
 tôn trọng quyết định ấy và sẽ chỉ thị cho các
 cơ quan Nhà nước có trách nhiệm triệt để tôn
 trọng hải phận 12 hải lý của Trung-quốc, trong
 mọi quan hệ với nước Cộng hoà Nhân dân Trung
 hoa trên mặt biển.

Chúng tôi xin kính gửi Tổng chỉ Tổng lý
 lời chào rất trân trọng./.

Hà-nội, ngày 14 tháng 9 năm 1958



Phạm Văn Đồng

PHẠM VĂN ĐỒNG

Thủ tướng Chính phủ

Nước Việt-nam Dân chủ Cộng hoà

Kính gửi :
 Ông chỉ CHU AN LAT
 Tổng lý quốc vụ viện
 nước Cộng hoà Nhân dân Trung-hoa
 tại
BẮC-KINH.

Nguyên bản Công-hàm của Phạm Văn Đồng xác-nhận hải-phận lãnh-thổ
 12 hải-lý, gửi Chu Ân Lat ngày 14 tháng 9 năm 1958.

VIỆT-NAM TẬP-CHÍ 42

**THỦ TƯỚNG PHỦ
NƯỚC VIỆT NAM DÂN CHỦ CỘNG HÒA**

Thư Đồng chí Tổng lý,

Chúng tôi xin trân trọng báo tin để Đồng chí Tổng lý rõ:

Chính phủ nước Việt-nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa ghi nhận và tán thành bản tuyên bố ngày 4 tháng 9 năm 1958, của Chính phủ nước Cộng hòa Nhân dân Trung-hoa, quyết định về hải phận của Trung Quốc.

Chính phủ nước Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa tôn trọng quyết định ấy và sẽ chỉ thị cho các cơ quan Nhà nước có trách nhiệm triệt để tôn trọng hải phận 12 hải lý của Trung-quốc, trong mọi quan hệ với nước Cộng hòa Nhân dân Trung hoa trên mặt bể.

Chúng tôi xin kính gửi Đồng chí Tổng lý lời chào rất trân trọng./.

Hà-nội, ngày 14 tháng 9 năm 1958

Phạm Văn Đồng

***Thủ tướng Chính phủ
Nước Việt-nam Dân chủ Cộng Hòa***

One more thing to notice is that PRC threatened only the territories Vietnamese claimed and left open claims of other countries. It was very clear that Mr Ho Chi Minh, through Phạm Văn Đồng, gave PRC "a big pie" because at that time Mr Ho Chi Minh was preparing for invading South Vietnam. Mr Ho needed colossal aids and closed eyes to accept all conditions of Beijing. It was easy for him to sell "only on paper" two archipelagoes which still belonged to South Vietnam by

then.

For this, Vietnamese communists waited for a meeting of ASEAN countries in Manila, used this opportunity as a safe buoy and signed right away a paper requiring these countries to help Vietnam to solve this problem "fairly".

To its part, after taking islands of communist Vietnam, China showed amicability to Malaysia and Philippines and said that China was ready to negotiate resourceful areas with these two countries, brushing VC aside. China did say that it would not accept any foreign countries to get involved in this matter between it and communist Vietnam.

Later, Pham Van Dong denied his past wrongdoing in an issue of Far Eastern Economic Review, March 16, 1979. Basically, he said the reason he did was because it was "wartime". Here's excerpt from this article on p. 11 : *"According to Li (Chinese Vice-Premier Li Xiannian), China was ready to share the gulf's water "half and half" with the Vietnamese, but at the negotiating table, Hanoi drew the line of Vietnamese control close to Hainan island. Li also said that in 1956 (or 1958?), Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong supported a Chinese statement about sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel islands, but since late 1975, Vietnam has been in control of part of the Spratly group - the Paracels being under Chinese control. In 1977, Dong reportedly said of his 1956 stance: "That was the war period and I had to say that".*

Because of eagerness to create disastrous war for both areas North and South, and to contribute to international communism, Mr Ho Chi Minh did promise, without dignity, a "future" land for Chinese to grab, not knowing for sure that whether or not the South Vietnam would be swallowed. As Dong said, *"That was the war period and I had to say that"*. Who created the Vietnam War and ready to do all it could to get South Vietnam even to sell land? Selling land during the war time and when it was over Pham Van Dong Dong denied it by just laying falsely the blame on the war.

4) In "The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute" by Pao-min Chang in The Washington Papers/118, foreword by Douglas Pike, published with The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

Apart from the geographical distance, both island groups lay off the South Vietnamese coast still under jurisdiction of the hostile Saigon regime. Hanoi was simply in no position to challenge both Chinese claims and US Sea power at the same time. Thus, on June 15, 1956, Premier Pham Van Dong reportedly said to China: *"From the historical point of view, these islands are Chinese territory"* (*Beijing Review* March 30, 1979, p.20 -- Also in *Far East Economic Review* March 16, 1979, p. 11).

In 9/1958, when China, in its declaration extending the breadth of Chinese territorial waters to 12 nautical miles, specified that the decision applied to all Chinese territories, including the Paracels and the Spratlies, Hanoi again went on record to recognize China's sovereignty over the 2 archipelagoes. PVD stated in a note to Chinese leader Zhou Enlai on 14/9/1958: "The Government of the Democratic Republic of VN recognizes and supports the declaration of the Government of the People's Republic of China on its decision concerning China territorial sea made on 4/9/1958 (see *Beijing Review* 19/6/1958, p.21 -- *Beijing Review* 25/8/1979, p.25 -- The existence of such a statement and its contents were acknowledged in VN in BBC/FE, no. 6189, 9/8/1979, p. 1).

5) Why ?

Carlyle A. Thayer, author of **"Vietnam's Strategic Readjustment,"** in Stuart Harris and Gary Klintworth, eds., **China as a Great Power in the Asia Pacific** (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty Ltd., forthcoming 1994):

In pursuing its national interests, Vietnam has undertaken actions which appear highly provocative from China's point of view. For example, during Vietnam's long struggle for independence it made no public protests over Chinese claims to territory in the South China Sea and indeed supported them. Yet after unification Vietnam reversed its stance. In 1975 Vietnam occupied a number of islands in the Spratly archipelago and subsequently pressed territorial claims to the entire South China Sea. As Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam has admitted:

"Our leaders' previous declaration on the Hoang Sa (Paracel) and Truong Sa (Spratly) archipelagoes was made in the following context: At that time, under the 1954 Geneva agreement on Indochina, the territories from the 17th parallel southward including the two archipelagoes were under the control of the South Vietnam administration. Moreover,

Vietnam then had to concentrate all its force on the highest goal of resisting the US aggressive war to defend national independence. It had to gain support of friends all over the world. Meanwhile, Sino-Vietnamese relations were very close and the two countries trusted each other. China was according to Vietnam a very great support and valuable assistance. In that context and stemming from the above-said urgent requirement, our leaders' declaration [supporting China's claims to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly islands] was necessary because it directly served the fight for the defence of national independence and the freedom of the motherland. More specifically, it aimed at meeting the then immediate need to prevent the US imperialists from using these islands to attack us. It has nothing to do with the historical and legal foundations of Vietnam's sovereignty over the, Truong Sa and Hoang Sa archipelagoes (remarks to a press conference in Hanoi on 2 December 1992 carried by Vietnam News Agency, 3 December 1992)."

These statements show that all what Chinese have alledged above are true. What happen today related to these 2 islands are merely consequences of the wicked settlement of these 2 communist brothers in the past. No one in the world community want to step in to settle the dispute between Communist Vietnam and PRC. The reason is very clear : diplomatic note and recognition by Vietnamese Communists can't be erased by a small country like VN who has wanted to play a trick cheating China. Moreover, Vietnamese Communists can't stay away from China while they have to follow Chinese "doi moi" to go forward to socialism.

*By **Frank Ching**,
[Far Eastern Economic Review](#)*

