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THE ARTIFICIAL ISLANDS OF VIETNAM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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ABSTRACT: The militarisation of the South China Sea has specific implications for the regional security situation. The construction of artificial islands and platforms by the states of the region leads, on the one hand, to the assertion of their possessions and the enhancement of their security and, on the other hand, contributes to rising tensions in the region. The construction of such facilities by Vietnam goes unchallenged, there is no criticism and even some support – not so with China. Most countries see Vietnam as the country most able to stand up to its large neighbour. Vietnam otherwise operates more slowly and on a smaller scale, so it is commonly seen as defensive as it builds on islands that have belonged to Hanoi for decades and are close to the mainland coast.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the South China Sea has been one of the most explosive hotspots in East Asia and, to a large extent, the world. Everyone is wondering about the situation in the region, asking themselves: will international security be maintained and will there be no military conflict? For years, all countries in the region have been arming themselves and their military potentials have been growing. Many observers and researchers wonder: How strong is the commitment of individual states in this basin? What

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are and will be the consequences of the creation of ‘artificial islands’ in the South China Sea in terms of international security? Could the South China Sea become a hotbed of international conflict? It is impossible to answer these questions unequivocally, as the experience of recent years shows that anything is possible, and the predictions and theses made by analysts about the South China Sea basin being the element that will trigger global conflict have not come true (and so be it). Of course, the militarisation of the South China Sea itself carries certain implications for the regional security situation. Many argue that China seeks to close the South China Sea. Does China really care about closing this body of water to shipping? And the answer to this question may be a clear no – China does not care, as a significant percentage of Chinese imports and exports pass through this basin (Kościelniak, 2018, p. 17–19). It can be posited that the South China Sea ‘gives life’ to the countries bordering it. And none of them care about closing off this body of water, or open warfare, as this is not conducive to business. And the fact that each of these states is ‘fighting’ for its place in the sea is another matter.

Such a kind of ‘fight for one’s own’ is the construction of artificial islands. The very example of building this type of infrastructure is very intriguing. Namely, what is the purpose of their construction, is it to expand and dominate the entire South China Sea basin, or is it rather a guarantee to secure one’s interests in this basin? This is a fundamental question being asked by analysts and countries with interests in the area. Preliminarily, we might be tempted to answer that it is a safeguarding of one’s interests. Because when China started to establish such facilities Vietnam joined the same work. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to show what Vietnam has done in this regard, how many such facilities it has and what they are presumed to be used for. Looking at Sino-Vietnamese relations and the situation in the South China Sea, one might be tempted to conclude that Vietnam is creating artificial islands in order to safeguard its interests and guarantee its own security, as these facilities are not large, are close to the mainland coast and are defensive in nature. Besides, Vietnam has shown China that it is ready to face its expansion (Jennings, 2019). These two aspects seem to be crucial in the decision-making of stakeholders regarding their actions in the South China Sea basin.

Because trade and oceans have always been an integral part of the struggle for global supremacy (Piątek, 2018, p. 77), from the UK to the US. China has been involved in these activities for some time now, as its growing economy, increased exports and imports of raw materials and energy resources, force China to create points of resistance to hedge against possible risks, which is why the construction of artificial islands and the 'string of pearls' strategy to defend Chinese interests at sea (Piątek, 2018, p. 73–74) is so important to China. In this situation, Vietnam is trying to find its way, and in order to safeguard its interests and increase its security, it has implemented a programme of building artificial islands and placing platforms in the Spratly Archipelago, with the possibility of installing military infrastructure on them.

The South China Sea has been a major 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 Vietnam failed. Vietnam's position in the South China Sea is more existential than most other countries. About 80% of Vietnam's population lives within 200 km of the South China Sea coast. Millions of fishermen make their living from this body of water. As much as 86% of trade with the outside world passes through this body of water. Almost all of the country's food reserves are in the South China Sea. Security and resources are two of Vietnam's main interests in this body of water. But maritime and territorial disputes over the area have a profound impact on the country's political and economic stability. Concerns about security, resources, stability and the legitimacy of power influence Vietnam's policies in the South China Sea. Securing the country's interests when they conflict with China's interests presents Vietnam's policymakers with the difficult task of challenging China (Vuving, 2017).

DEVELOPING

It is no longer just China itself that is fortifying and reinforcing controlled islands in disputed areas of South and East Asia. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), the Vietnamese military is

investing in defence preparations in the Spratly Islands area. According to analysts, all Vietnamese military installations in the Spratly Islands, West Reef and Sin Cowe Island areas are undergoing rapid transformation (Raubo, 2021). According to an analysis of available satellite imagery, analysts working for the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative note that Vietnam has started a number of new infrastructure works. These concern the installation of coastal defence systems, as well as shelters and underground tunnels. In addition, the development of administrative buildings can be observed, presumably increasing the capacity to accommodate a larger contingent of troops on the islets. The construction of towers is also being signalled, presumably related to the needs of increasingly efficient SIGINT communications and signals intelligence systems. Vietnam



Image 1. Vietnam's South China Sea outposts

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/vietnam-builds-remote-outposts/>.

is also working to increase the camouflage of constructed facilities, through vegetation rehabilitation. Upgrades and improvements are noted not only for islands, but also for facilities located on artificial platforms fixed on reefs (Raubo, 2021).

As of 2023, Vietnam has between 49 and 51 outposts (the status of two construction projects on the South Cornwallis Reef is unclear) spread across 27 facilities in the South China Sea. This includes 21 facilities built on rocks and reefs in the Spratly Islands, plus 14 isolated Dịch vụ-Khoa (DK1 – described as economic, scientific and technological stations) platforms. And 6 more located in the south-east of the disputed island chain. Plus another 8 rocks (which Vietnam has reclaimed in recent years), where it has built several smaller outposts (Vietnam builds, 2017). A sample list of what Vietnam currently has is as follows.

Spratly Islands:

- 1) Alison Reef is a low-tide elevation located in the Spratly Islands. In addition to the main feature, there are three outposts constructed on the fringing reef. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 2) Amboy Cay is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1978,
- 3) Barque Canada Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. In addition to the main feature, there are three outposts constructed on the fringing reef. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1987,
- 4) Central Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1978,
- 5) Collins Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 6) Cornwallis South Reef is a low-tide elevation located in the Spratly Islands that hosts between two and four outposts. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 7) Discovery Great Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands that hosts three Vietnamese outposts. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 8) East Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands that hosts three Vietnamese outposts. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,

- 9) Grierson Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1978,
- 10) Ladd Reef is a low-tide elevation located in the Spratly Islands. In addition to the main feature, there are two outposts constructed on the fringing reef. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 11) Lansdowne Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 12) Namyt Island is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1973,
- 13) Pearson Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. In addition to the main feature, there is one outpost constructed on the fringing reef. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1978,
- 14) Petley Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 15) Sand Cay is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1974,
- 16) Sin Cowe Island is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1974,
- 17) South Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1988,
- 18) Southwest Cay is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1975,
- 19) Spratly Island is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1974,
- 20) Tennent Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands that hosts two Vietnamese outposts. Vietnam began dredging new land on Tennent Reef in December 2021. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1974,
- 21) West Reef is a rock located in the Spratly Islands. In addition to the main feature, there are three outposts constructed on the fringing reef. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1987 (Vietnam Island Tracker, 2023).

Vietnamese DK1 Stations:

- 1) Alexandra Bank is an entirely submerged feature in the southern portion of the South China Sea that hosts one Vietnamese outpost. Vietnam first took possession of the feature in 1991,
- 2) Grainger Bank is an entirely submerged feature in the southern portion of the South China Sea that hosts two Vietnamese outposts. The Vietnamese first took possession of the feature in 1991,
- 3) Prince Consort Bank is an entirely submerged feature in the southern portion of the South China Sea that hosts one Vietnamese outpost,
- 4) Prince of Wales Bank is an entirely submerged feature in the southern portion of the South China Sea that hosts four Vietnamese outposts,
- 5) Rifleman Bank is an entirely submerged feature in the southern portion of the South China Sea that hosts three Vietnamese outposts,
- 6) Vanguard Bank is an entirely submerged feature in the southern portion of the South China Sea that hosts three Vietnamese outposts (Vietnam Island Tracker, 2023).

Hanoi built DK1 structures in the late 1980s and 1990s in response to China's seizure of six reefs in the Spratlys and the declaration of oil and gas blocks overlapping with Vietnam's in Vanguard Bank. Several of the original structures were destroyed by storms, but 14 remain (along with one in the Gulf of Thailand). The standard design of DK1 facilities includes a one- or two-storey building on steel trusses, housing a small garrison of soldiers. Some are topped with helipads and a few include a lighthouse. Since 2014, a second, multi-storey structure with a larger helipad has been added to eight of them, connected to the original structure by a bridge (Vietnam Island Tracker, 2023).

Vietnam is also seeking to raise its deterrence potential by ensuring that it can hit Chinese installations lying on nearby islands. The greatest progress can be seen in the Da Den Shallow area, where the Vietnamese have drained dozens of acres of land, and on Sinh Ton Island. Vietnam is building three types of concrete platforms with the following characteristics: the first, elongated ones arranged in triangular formations, are

probably intended for air defence. The second type are semi-circular installations, convenient for the deployment of coastal defence systems. The last type are circular platforms that are smaller than these. Thus, Vietnam can deploy Israeli EXTRA (EXTenden Range Artillery) missile systems on them, with a range of 150 kilometres (80 nautical miles) EXTRA missile batteries are capable of flaunting targets on all the islands in the archipelago controlled by China, a significant deterrent (Concrete Platforms, 2021).

The Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said that work in the Spratly Islands, which is also claimed by China and other countries, has created about 170 hectares of new land and brought the total area reclaimed by Vietnam over the past decade to 220 hectares. AMTI said the effort included expanded landfill works at four sites and new dredging at five others. The scale of Vietnam's work represents a significant step towards strengthening its position in the



Image 2. Spratly Island in 2014

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/spratly-island/>.



Image 3. Spratly Island in 2020

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/spratly-island/>.

Spratly Islands. AMTI reported that Vietnam's medium-sized outposts on Namyit, Pearson Reef and Sand Cay are undergoing major expansions, and a dredged port capable of accommodating larger vessels is already taking shape on Namyit and Pearson islands. Namyit Island (47 ha) and Pearson Reef (48 ha) are now larger than Spratly Island (39 ha), which was Vietnam's largest outpost. According to the report, Tennent Reef now has 26 ha of artificial land (Vietnam carries, 2022).

The project, led by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence and Navy, involves the construction and expansion of military and other facilities at Pearson Reef and Pigeon Reef, over which Hanoi has effective control. The



Image 4. West Reef in 2014

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/west-reef/>.

plan, which has an estimated budget of 6.4 trillion dong (US\$270 million), includes dredging and dumping to create land for a huge dock, as well as upgrading missile and anti-aircraft installations. Hanoi intends to build housing not only for military personnel, but also for civilians, along with transport infrastructure, energy systems and facilities for sewage treatment and waste disposal. Thousands of trees will be planted on the islands to conceal the fortifications. Vietnamese work on the Spratly Islands accelerated in the second half of 2022 (Shiga, Nitta, 2023).

In this context, the main reference is to the possible location in the disputed area of rocket artillery systems equipped with Israeli EXTRA missiles. Vietnam, along with Azerbaijan and of course Israel itself, is to be the recipient of the product offered by the IMI (Israeli Military Industries) concern. The missiles are to allow them to hit targets 150 km away, using a 125 kg warhead. It should be recalled that the Vietnamese were



Image 5. West Reef in 2022

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/west-reef/>.

also training for the rapid dislocation to the disputed island regions of Russian K-300P Bastion-P complexes, capable of striking surface targets at distances of up to 300 km (Raubo, 2021). It has also been noted that the Vietnamese have increased the number of positions capable of serving as dislocation sites for air defence systems. It is suggested that the Vietnamese side's equipment in this case is to be primarily the older S-125 Pechora-2TM (SA-3 Goa) complexes, which were to be subject to the modernisation processes carried out in recent years. The saturation of facilities and military facilities there with unmanned aerial vehicles remains an open question. The Vietnamese armed forces have so far been expected to experiment with UAVs of Israeli and Belarusian origin, but also trying to develop their own designs based on cooperation with Belarusians (Raubo, 2021).

Vietnam's system for securing its possessions also includes the expansion of its surface, submarine and air fleet (Kościelniak, 2014, p. 402–408). The biggest reinforcement for Vietnam was the purchase of six Project 636 submarines (according to NATO Type Kilo) from Russia. The contract was signed in 2009 and the last, sixth, ship arrived in the Vietnamese Navy in 2017. Vietnam also purchased 20 Su-30 aircraft, thus strengthening its air force. These purchases were in response to an increase in Chinese attacks on Vietnamese assets and citizens in the South China Sea in 2009. Another such procurement spike occurred after 2014, when China placed a large HYSY-981 oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. As a result, Vietnam strengthened its naval forces (Vuving, 2017).

As of 2021, Vietnam has 65 ships at its disposal, including six modern submarines and four corvettes, while China has as many as 714 vessels including 76 submarines and more than 33 destroyers. In this case, however, comparing numbers is not important. The Vietnamese, for example, have only six submarines, but this submarine fleet is still considered one of the most modern in the region. In theory, therefore, it could block Chinese naval transport. Vietnam also has numerous coastal missile launchers, which, apart from the 'Bastions', are now obsolete, but by sheer numbers can cause a great deal of confusion at sea. Vietnam's greatest strength, however, is its people. Officially, it is estimated that the Vietnamese armed forces can call up nearly 5.5 million soldiers under arms. Of course, the standing army numbers 482,000, but the reserve system, estimated at 5 million, is extremely rich, and the will to defend one's homeland in Vietnam is developed from childhood. The Chinese can, of course, overcome Vietnam's resistance, but this will involve heavy human losses (Armies of the World, 2021). And nobody is likely to care about that. If possible, the states of the region will not seek direct military confrontation. This body of water is very easy to cut off from the rest of the world by blockading the straits. Each of these states is faced with the same issues and therefore tries not to make ill-considered moves so that the other players do not interpret this as aggression. And then, of course, there is the principle of the 'stronger', and in this case that role falls to China, which is moving forward in small steps to achieve a dominant position in this basin and in this region. But Vietnam stands in their way.

CONCLUSIONS

The People's Republic of China, the Republic of China and Vietnam claim the territory of the entire Spratly archipelago, the rest of the states to administer individual islands. Currently, every major island in the Spratly archipelago is under the administrative administration of one of the countries involved in the dispute. The Republic of China controls the largest of the islands, Taiping, the Philippines controls the islands of Thitu and West York, and Vietnam controls the island of Spratly. In addition, control has also been extended over the overhanging coral reefs and atolls of Northwest Cay – Philippines, Southwest Cay – Vietnam, Grierson Cay – Vietnam, Swallow Reef – Malaysia (Frelich, 2021).

Over the past decade, Vietnam has significantly expanded its infrastructure in the Spratly archipelago in the South China Sea. This is part of a competition with China, which claims the entire archipelago and most of the South China Sea. On the Vietnamese-controlled islands of the Spratly archipelago, among other things, shelters, concrete platforms designed for anti-aircraft guns and coastal defence missiles and listening infrastructure have been built.

As the country that would lose the most if war broke out in the South China Sea, Vietnam needs peace more than any other in the region. At the same time, its strong anti-Chinese nationalism suggests that Vietnam is in a position to offer the greatest resistance to China among the contenders for the South China Sea. Strong support for Vietnam's policies (e.g. by the US or Japan, or even the Vietnamese people themselves) will not escalate tensions to the point of destabilising the region. On the contrary, it will help restore regional equilibrium and discourage China from taking aggressive actions (Vuving, 2017).

From a military point of view, the deployment of military bases on artificial islands, very small and limiting the room for manoeuvre, can result, in the event of conflict, in their isolation or annihilation. However, on the other hand, these outposts can work perfectly well as advanced observation points that also constitute the first line of defence. An adversary wishing to attack any of the states with artificial facilities at sea must first deal with these small garrisons and expend on them part of his military

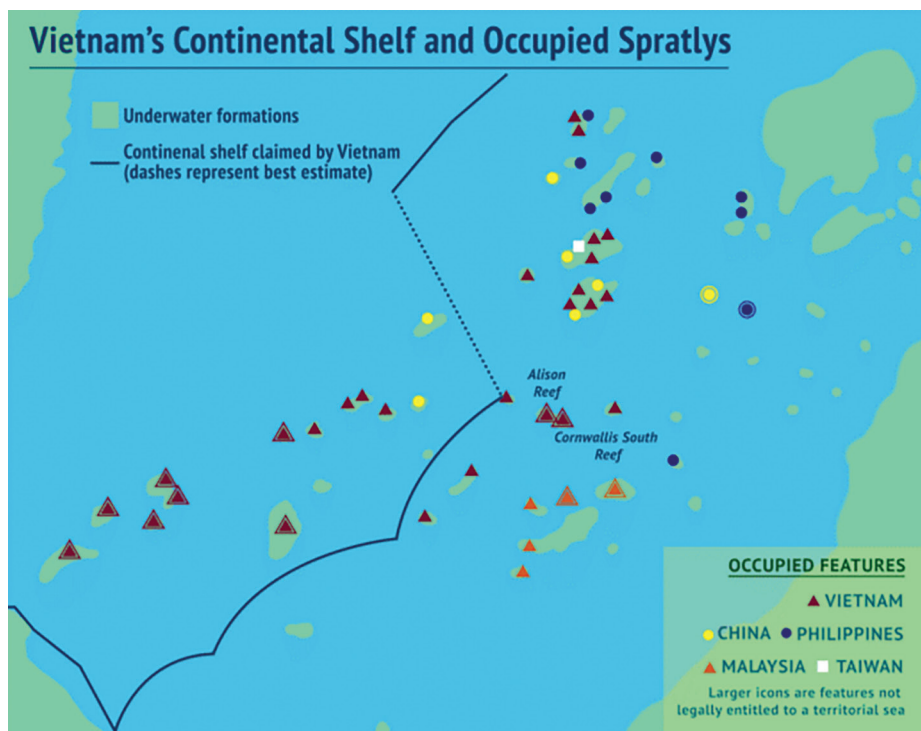


Image 6. Vietnam's Continental Shelf and Occupied Spratlys

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/typhoon-spotlights-island-building/>.

potential, which he could successfully use on main targets located on the continent, more valuable than these artificial islands (Stach, 2018, p. 55–56).

It is noteworthy that many states in the region today operate in so-called grey zones. To operate in them is to operate through ambiguities that consequently allow them to pursue their interests while remaining below the threshold that could contribute to an open military response. Vietnam's immediate objective is to maintain the territorial status quo and defend its waters so that it can carry out normal economic activities such as fishing and oil and gas drilling without interference. Vietnam, like other countries in the South China Sea basin, cannot and does not want open conflict with China either, which is why it has implemented similar measures to Beijing, namely Hanoi has started to build its own artificial islands to safeguard its interests.

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