

Country Briefing - Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Political Briefing

Introduction

Vietnam sits in a position strange in East Asia, neither siding with the West or with China. Over the last few years, there has been a growing tension with China and other nations over the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands and despite our economic dependence and shared cultural ties with China, we try to rely on the United States, India, Japan, and the ASEAN allies to counter any potential domination by our larger neighbor.

In previous years these frictions with China in the East Sea (called the South China Sea by others) have come to the fore; in 2014 we entered a standoff with China over an oil rig planted into our exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In 2017 our outposts drilling for oil and gas in the Spratlys were being threatened in territories historically belonging to us, and in 2019 we were forced to withdraw our drilling activity from the same continental shelf due to the increasing hostility of China. Consequently, we view upholding peace and stability on the East Sea as essential to prevent detrimental Chinese actions and cannot turn a blind eye to balancing against the threat imposed on our territorial integrity by the growing number of artificial militarized islands in the Spratly archipelago.

Still, we would be fools not to acknowledge both the tremendous hurt China could apply to us, and the massive benefit they can bring. Relying on a multifaceted approach incorporating deterrence, dialogue, and deepening strategic cooperation seems to be the only way forward to preserve our interests in the East Sea and our autonomy.

Strategic Objectives

Our relationship with China is best understood as cooperation with competition. While remaining open to cooperation with China on economic matters, our priorities remain tied to deterring any intrusion into our territorial waters and defense of our national sovereignty. Maintaining the current status quo is the most favorable option unless an opportunity is presented for gaining legitimacy for our claims on the Spratly or Paracel Islands (by diplomacy or force). Our China policy comes to three strategic dimensions: peaceful settlement of territorial disputes, continued access to fishing sites, and ensuring the safety of our oil and gas drilling facilities.

National strategy

The three pillars provide overarching guidance to our strategy in the East Sea; our historical and legal right to the Paracels and the Spratlys (and the surrounding EEZ) need to prevail over the unfounded claims of China; we oppose resorting to force and promote the use of UNCLOS to resolve territorial disagreements; and preserving regional stability. These three goals align with our defence strategy's three prohibitions; no joining of military alliances, no alignment with any one state, and no foreign bases to threaten the sovereignty of others. In our framework, fending off Chinese domination through maintaining deterrence falls not only upon our armed forces, but also our diplomats and our ties to other major regional actors.

For us China's actions have thrown the region into flux, exhibiting that it remains both our blessing and our curse, yet the new situation offers opportunities. If we act with deft swiftness, it will reward us dearly, for our indispensable neutrality provides us a double-edged sword - both offense and defense reside within it.