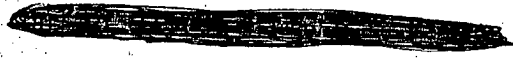


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The Paracels/Spratlys Dispute and Its  
Potential for Renewed Sino-Vietnamese Armed Conflict  
Asian 750  
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## INTRODUCTION

On 19-20 January, 1974, a sharp armed clash took place between naval, air, and ground forces of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Viet-Nam (RVN) in the XiSha (Paracel) Islands, located approximately 350 kilometers southeast of Hainan Island, in the South China Sea. (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>

According to the PRC, this battle was precipitated by RVN naval units' harrassment of Chinese fishing vessels in the Paracels on January 15-19, which resulted in several Chinese fishermen killed or wounded.<sup>2</sup>

In response, the PRC sent at least 11 naval units to the area, including 2 Yulin-based destroyers armed with the 22-mile range SS-N-2 "STYX" surface-to-surface naval missile. The RVN naval force consisted of an unknown number of destroyer escorts, coast guard cutters, and patrol boats.<sup>3</sup> During the naval action on January 19, the RVN claimed to have sunk one Chinese ship and badly damaged a second. The RVN apparently lost a frigate, reportedly sunk by a "STYX" missile, while three other ships, including two destroyers, were damaged either by missiles or missile fragments.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Chinese troops landed on Duncan Island (Dao gan qun dao) (Fig. 2)<sup>5</sup> and forced the small RVN regional forces contingent to withdraw to Robert Island (Gan quan dao). A half-company of RVN sailors was divided between Money Island (Jin-yin-dao) and Pattle Island (Shan-hu dao). On the following day, January 20, a Chinese force (possibly of battalion strength), supported by MIG-21 fighter-bombers, overran the Vietnamese

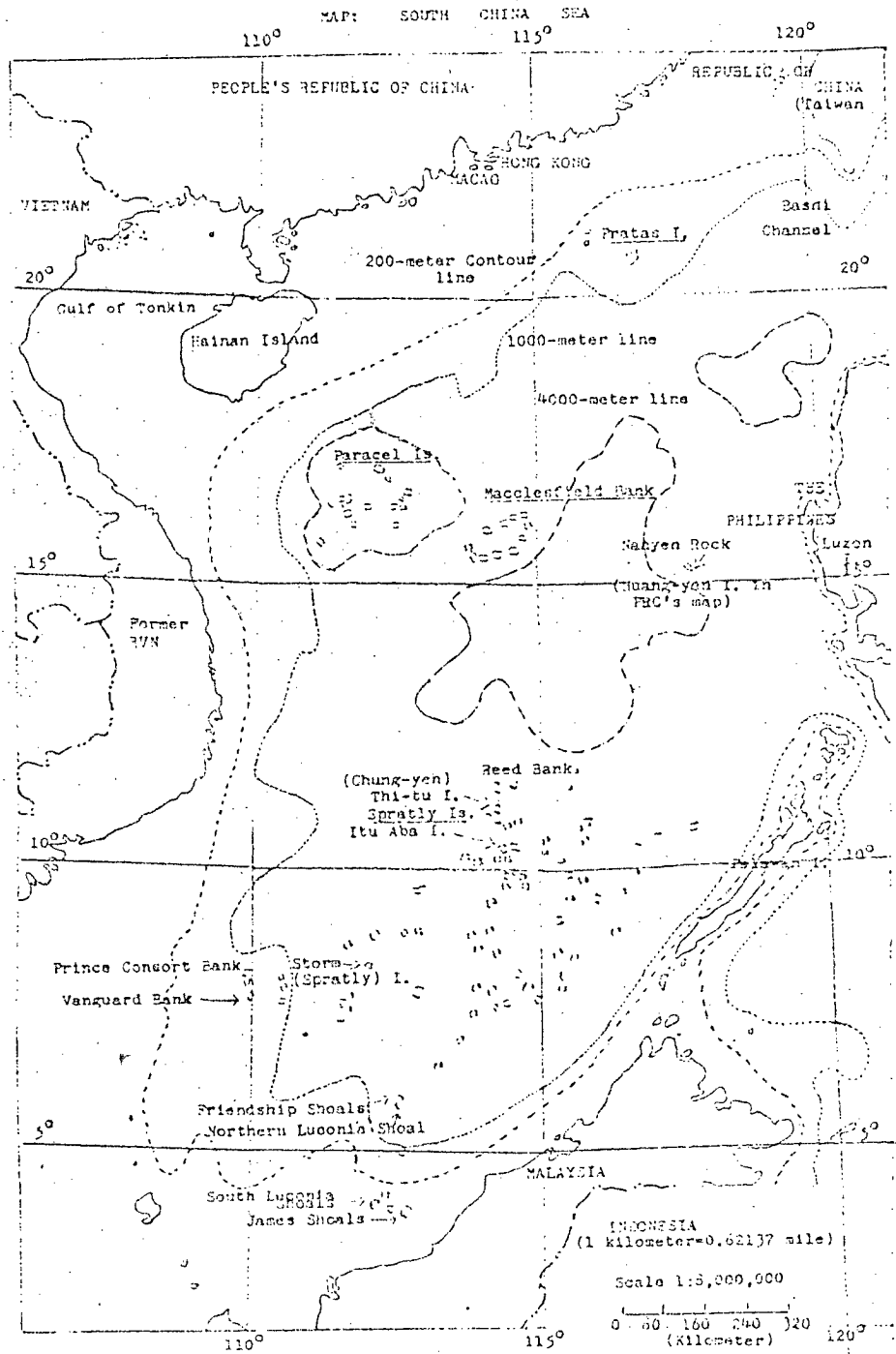


Fig.1. Islands in the South China Sea

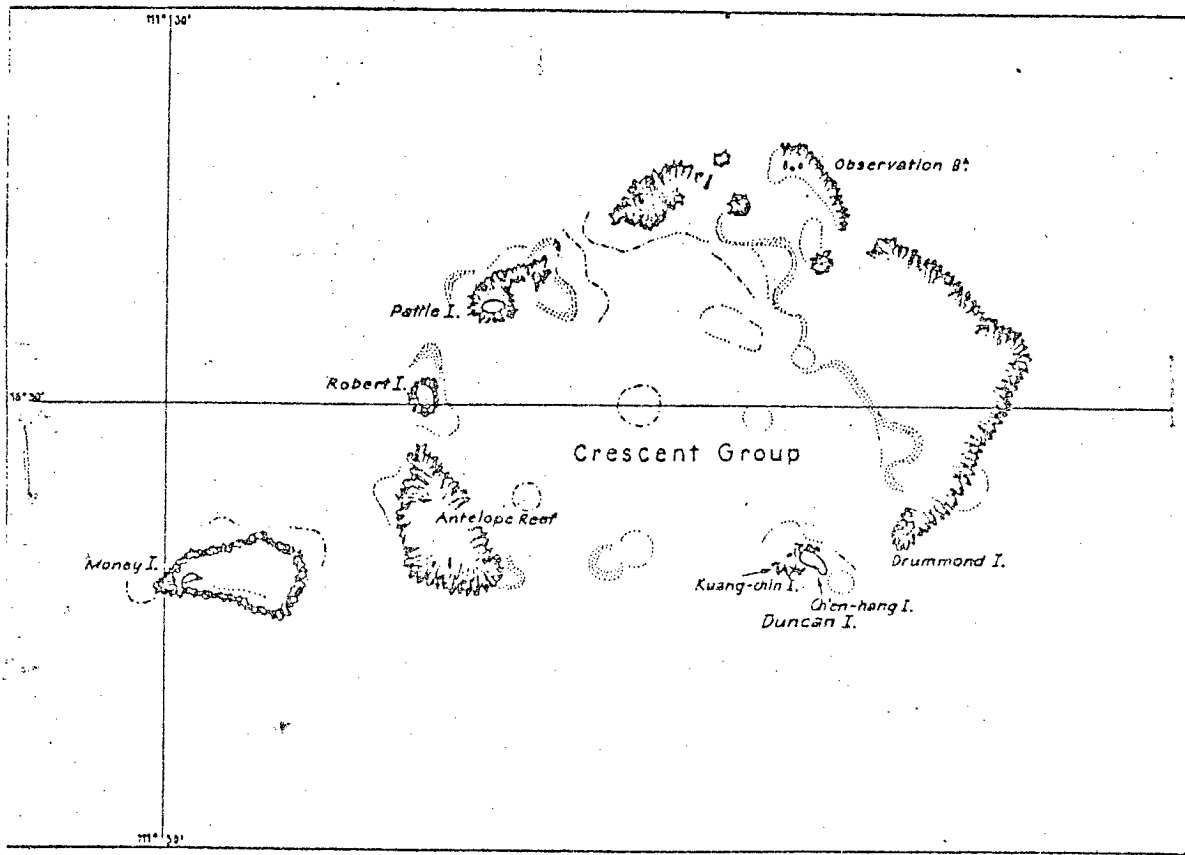


Fig.2. The Region Where Fighting Took Place on January 19 and 20, 1974:  
The Crescent Group (Paracel Islands) Scale: 1 cm = approx. 2 km

positions on all three islands,<sup>6</sup> capturing 48 RVN military personnel and one United States civilian.<sup>7</sup> Five "sick and wounded" South Vietnamese were released to the International Red Cross in Hong Kong within one week,<sup>8</sup> and the remaining 43 South Vietnamese and 1 American were released to I.R.C. officials on February 17.

This two-day armed clash could hardly be described as a "major conflict," but the Chinese action was significant in three respects. First, the PRC demonstrated its ability to project its naval power beyond Chinese shores, as well as the ability to conduct joint air-sea-ground offensive operations.<sup>10</sup> Second, the PRC demonstrated that it was both willing and able to back up territorial claims with armed force, lest anyone forget the lesson of the China-India border war of 1962. And third, the Chinese action in the Paracels served as a warning to Southeast Asian nations contesting Chinese claims to the Nansha (Spratly) Archipelago. As a result, attention was suddenly focused on the subject of the controversy, the islands themselves. How strong are the claims of the various claimants? What value do these islands have which could warrant the use of armed force to take and maintain them? Could tension among the claimants erupt into regional conflict, and if so, how would such a conflict affect regional stability?

In the following paper, I will first present a geographical overview of the Paracel archipelagoes, followed by a historical review of the claims by the principal claimants. I will then attempt to explain the newly awakened interest in these islands which led to the 1974 hostilities. After examining the strategic and economic significance of the islands, I will briefly review the military capabilities of the

principal claimants and assess the ability of each to use such forces  
in support of their respective claims.

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## Part I: A Geographical Overview

The semi-enclosed South China Sea covers about 3,685,000 square kilometers and is of the utmost strategic and economic importance. On the southwest, it communicates with the Indian Ocean through the vital Malacca-Singapore Straits and on the northeast with the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea. It represents a major portion of the navigation route between the Pacific and Indian Ocean for the United States and Soviet navies as well as a vital trade link, especially for Japanese merchant marine vessels and oil tankers.<sup>1</sup>

Scattered across the South China Sea are more than 170 islets, shoals, coral reefs, banks, sands, cays, and rocks which are grouped in four mid-ocean coral archipelagoes: the Pratas Reef, the Macclesfield Bank, the Paracel Islands, and the Spratly Islands (Fig. 3.).<sup>2</sup> The ownership of the Pratas Reef and the Macclesfield Bank, both situated closer to China than to either Vietnam or the Philippines, has not been contested; these are Chinese.<sup>3</sup> However, ownership of the two larger archipelagoes, the Paracels and Spratlys, has been contested by China and Vietnam for some 180 years, and in recent years three other governments, the Republic of China, the Republic of the Philippines, and Malaysia, have declared their claims to one or more of the Spratlys.

### The Paracel Archipelago

The Paracel archipelago comprises 15 islets and more than one-dozen partly or temporarily submerged reefs and banks, scattered over an area forming a large oval with a maximum diameter of about 200 km. Its center

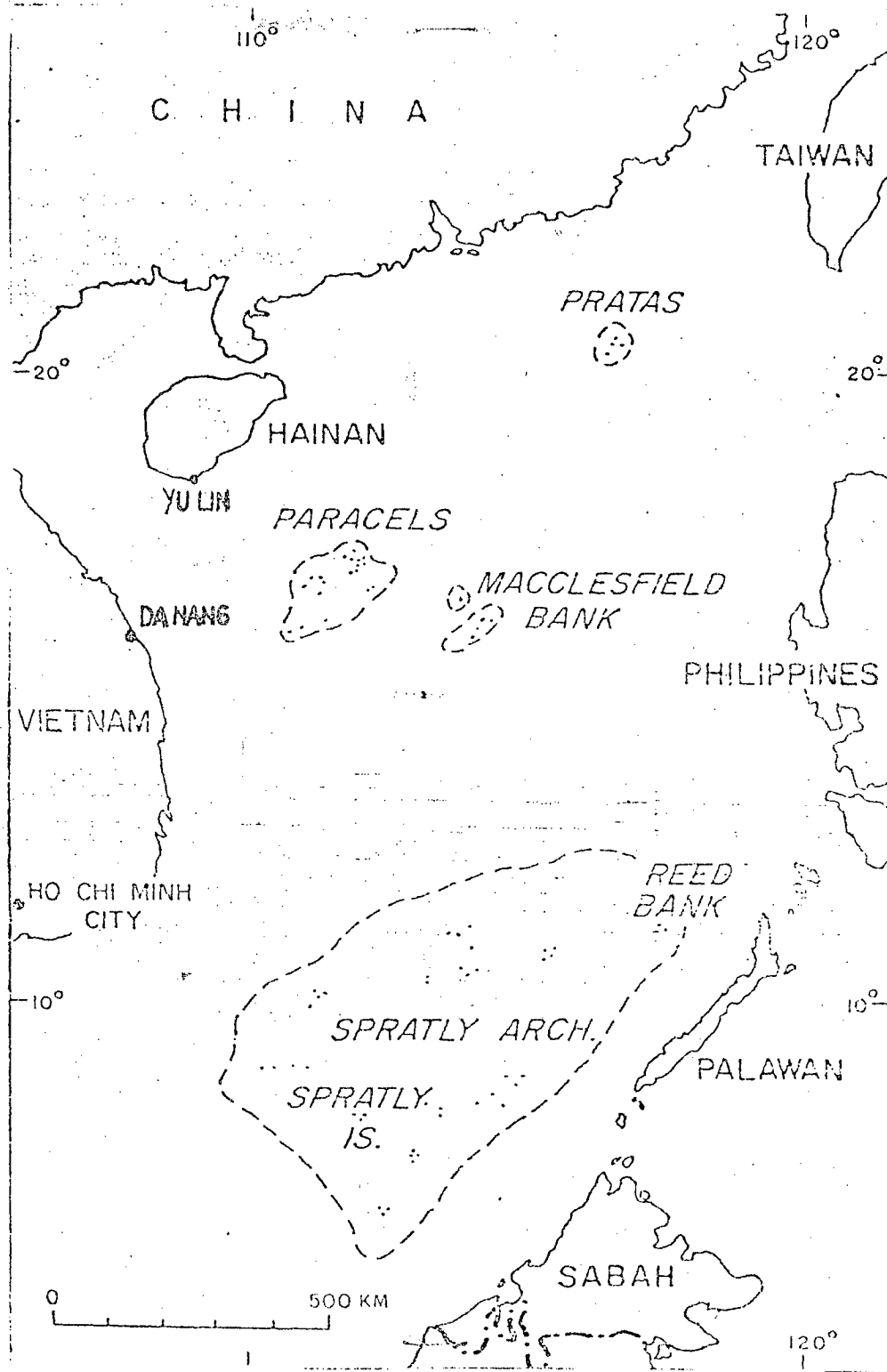


Fig.3. Archipelagos in the South China Sea

is approximately midway between the southern coast of Hainan Island (about 350 km southeast of Yulin) and the central Vietnam coast (about 400 km east of Da Nang).<sup>4</sup> The Paracels are generally subdivided into two principal groups, the Amphtrite Group, located in the northeastern part of the archipelago and comprising seven islands, eight cays, and one reef (Fig. 4)<sup>5</sup>, and the Crescent Group which is located in the southwestern part of the archipelago and comprises eight islands, four partly submerged reefs, and a sand cay (Fig. 5).<sup>6</sup> Since the Paracels are claimed by both the PRC and the SRV, most of the islands have three names. The chart in Fig. 6 lists each by its English, Chinese, and Vietnamese names as well as its size (where known).<sup>9</sup>

#### The Spratly Archipelago

The Spratly Islands are an archipelago in the South China Sea composed of more than 100 islands, shoals, reefs, banks, and cays, stretching over an area of 180,000 sq. km.<sup>7</sup> The center of the group is located approximately 1,450 km. southwest of Taiwan, 1,000 km. south of Hainan Island, 700 km. south of the Paracels, 500 km. southeast of Vietnam, and 400 km. west of Palawan Island in the Philippines.<sup>8</sup> The principal regions in the Spratlys, with their islands, reefs and cays are detailed in Fig. 7<sup>10</sup> and shown on map in Fig. 8.<sup>11</sup>

All of the islands are located in the tropical zone. The average annual temperature in this region varies between 15 and 28° C. Annual rainfall averages 2,500 mm. The islands' flora consists primarily of pineapple, coconut palms, tung oil, quince, and banana trees.

The islands have been, and still are, economically important as bases for fishing vessels and as sites of valuable guano deposits.

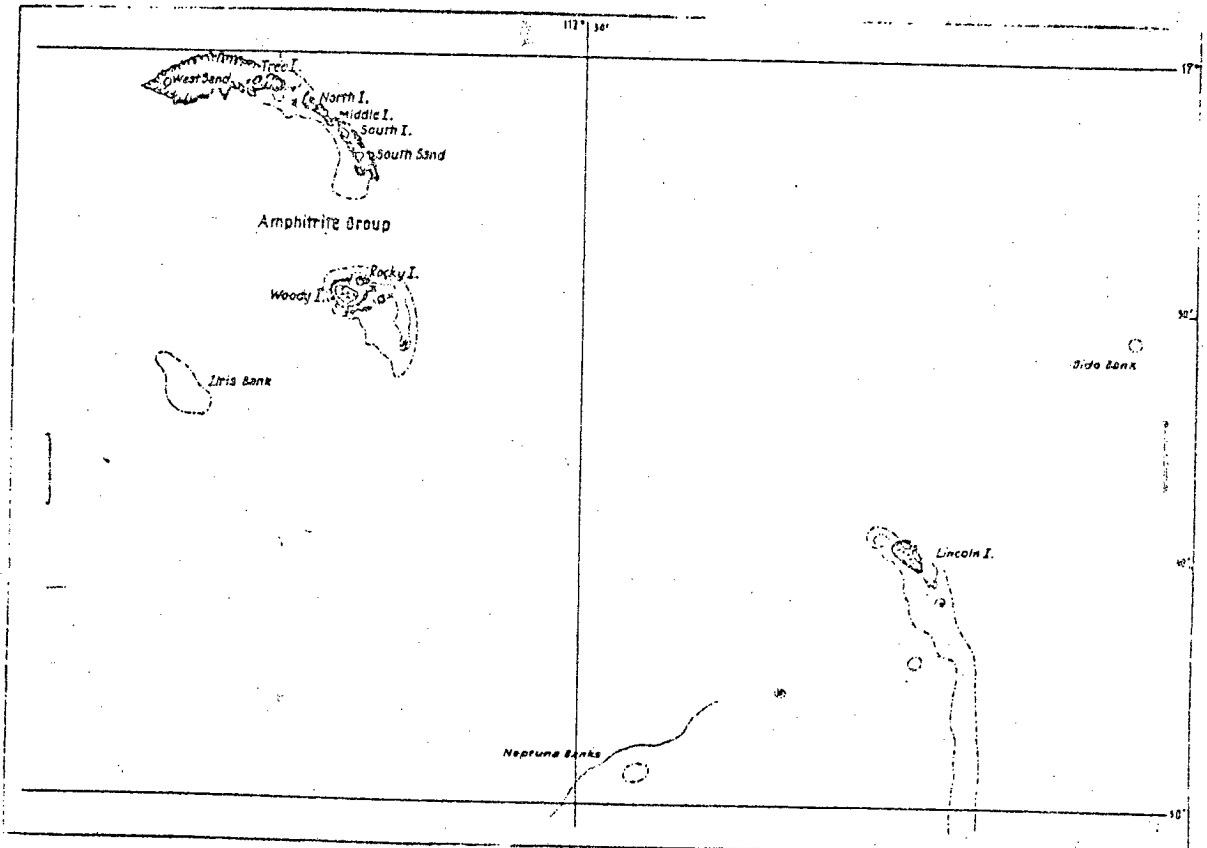


Fig.4. The Amphitrite Group (Paracel Islands)

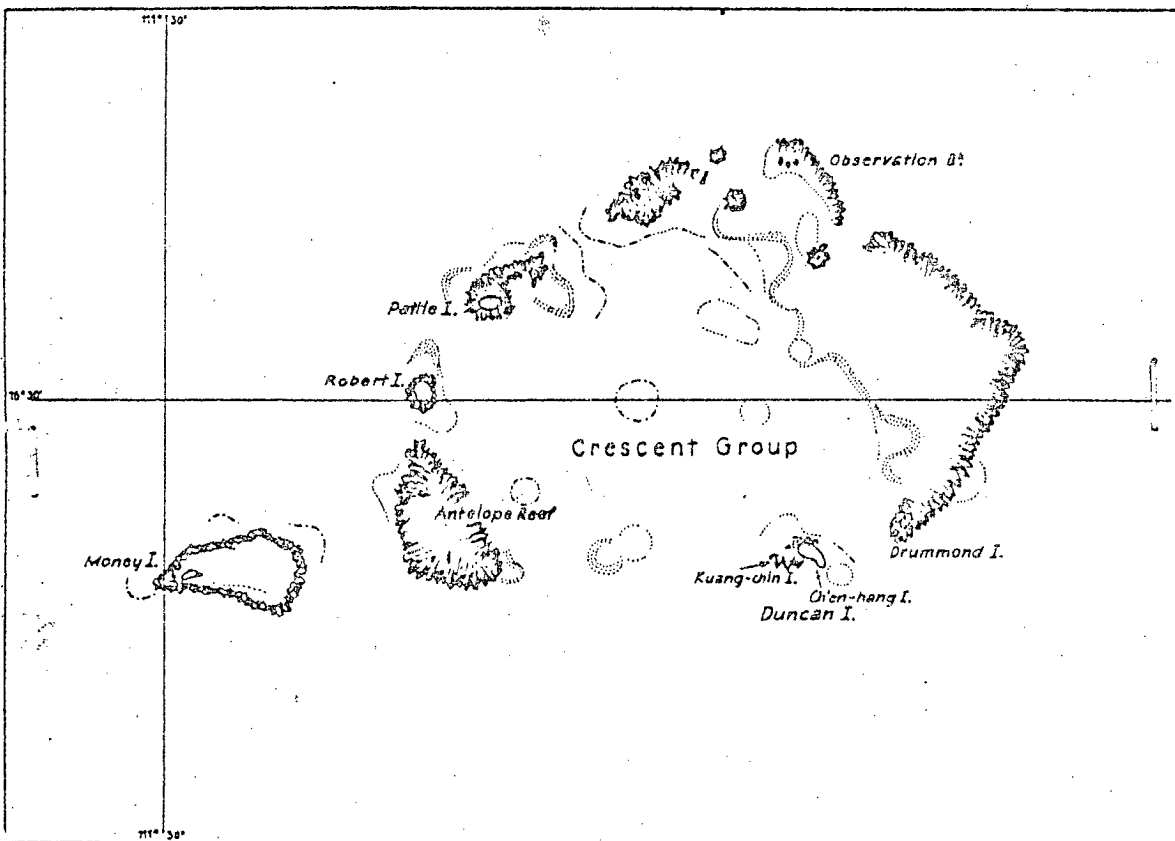


Fig.5. The Crescent Group (Paracel Islands) Scale: 1 cm = approx. 2 km

Fig. 6. The Paracel Archipelago

English Name	Chinese Name	Vietnamese Name	
I. Paracel Islands	Xi Sha Qun Dao	Tuan Dao Hoang Sa	Between 15°46' and 17°8'N Lat. and 111°11' and 112°54' E Long. 350 km SE Yulin, Hainan and 400 km E Da Nang, SRV
A. Amphitrite Group	Xuan-de qun dao	Nhom Tuyen Duc	Comprises eight islands
1. Woody Island	Yung-xing dao	Dao Phu Lam	1.8 km. long, 1.1 km. wide
2. Rocky Island	Shi dao	Hon Da	375 m. long, 340 m. wide
3. Lincoln Island	Wa-he dao	Dao Linh Con	2.3 km. long, 800 m. wide
4. South Island	Nan dao	Dao Nam	
5. Middle Island	Zhong dao	Dao Trung	
6. North Island	Bei dao	Dao Bac	
7. Tree Island	Zhao-shu dao	Dao Cu Moc	
B. Crescent Group	Yung-le Qun dao	Nhom Nguyet Thiem	Comprises eight islands
1. Robert Islands	Gan quan dao	Dao Cam Tuyen	750 m. long, 400 m. wide
2. Pattle Island	Shan-hu dao	Hoang Sa	1 km. long, 500 m. wide
3. Triton Island	Zhong-jiang tao	Dao Tri-ton	1.75 km. long, 1.5 km. wide
4. Duncan Island	Dao gan quan dao	Dao Quang Hoa	Actually consists of 5. and 6.
5. (Duncan Island proper)	Shen hang dao	Dao Quang Hoa	1 km. long, 500 m. wide
6. No Western name	Guang jin dao	Dao Quang Hoa	Tiny islet a few hundred meters from Chin hang
7. Money Island	Jin-yin dao	Dao Vinh Lac	500 m. long, 200 m. wide
8. Drummond Island	Zhin Qing dao	Dao Duy Mong	500 m. long, 300 m. wide
9. Passu Keah	Pan shi yu	Dao Bach Tay	

Fig. 7. The Spratly Archipelago

English Name	Chinese Name	Vietnamese Name	Filipino Name	Comments	Occupied by
Spratly Islands	Nan Sha Qun Dao	Tuan Dao Truong Sa	Kalayaan	Between 4° and 11° 30' N Lat. and 109° 30' and 117° 50' E Long	Philippines SRV
1. North Danger	Shuang-zi jiao	Dao Song Tu Dong	Parola	1 km. long, 400 m. wide	Philippines
a. NorthEast Cay	Bei-zi jiao	Dao Song Tu Tay	Pugad	.5 km. long, 300 m. wide	SRV
b. SouthWest Cay	Nan-zi jiao				
2. Thi tu Island & Reefs	Zhong-ye dao	Dao Thi tu	Pagasa	1.5 km. long, 1 km. wide	Philippines
a. Thi tu Island				Tiny islet	Philippines
b. Sandy Cay					
3. West York Island	Xi-yue dao	Dao Ren Lac	Likas		Philippines
4. Loai ta Island & Reefs	Dao-ming qun dao	Loai Ta Tuan Dao			
a. Loai ta Island	Dao-ming dao	Dao Loai Ta	Kota	Insignificant size	Philippines
b. Lam kiam Cay	Yang-xin sha-zhon		Panata	Tiny sand cay	Philippines
c. Loai-ta Cay				Tiny sand cay	
5. Iwing Cay					
6. a. Nanshan Island	Ma huan dao		Lawak		Philippines
b. Flat Island	Fei xin dao		Patag		Philippines
7. Tizard Bank & Reefs	Zheng he qun jiao				
a. Itu Aba Island	Tai ping dao	Dao Thai Binh	Ligaw	1 km. long, 400 m. wide	Taiwanese naval base
b. Nam Yit Island	Hung ma dao	Dao Nam Ai	Binaço	Insignificant islet	SRV
c. Sami Cay		Dao Son Ca		Insignificant islet	SRV
8. Union Banks & Reefs		Dao Sinh Ton	Rurok		SRV
a. Sin Cove Island					
b. Sin Cowe Cay					
9. Spratly Island	Nan wei dao	Dao Truong Sa	Lagos	750 m. long, 400 m. wide	SRV
10. Commodore Reef	Si ling jiao		Rizal Reef	Sand cay	Philippines
11. Mativeles Reef	Nan hao jiao			Cay	
12. Amboyne Cay	An-bo-na sha zhon	Dao An Bang	Kalantiyaw	Beach of Sand & broken coral	SRV
13. Pearson Reef	Bi sheng dao				SRV (probable)





Guano, which on some islands has accumulated to a height of up to one meter, is used in the manufacture of high-quality fertilizers. The South China Sea is rich in a variety of edible fish, sea turtles (valuable for their shells), cuttlefish, trepang, shellfish, and oysters. On the islands, fisherman collect swallows' nests, the basic substance of a soup in great demand throughout East and Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup>

NOTES

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Part II: A Historical Review of the Conflicting Claims  
Chinese Claims to the Paracels

From of old, the Hsisha Islands have been  
our territorial waters  
These islands are covered with our forefathers'  
footprints  
Countless generations  
Of fishermen cast their nets here  
The fleets of countless dynasties  
Moored in their bays<sup>1</sup>

Since the mid-19th century, the Paracels have been claimed and temporarily occupied by the Ch'ing Empire, France, Indo-China, the Republic of China, Japan, the Peoples' Republic of China, and the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN). Since the end of World War II, the principal claimants have been the PRC and Viet Nam (first as the RVN and later as the SRV.) Until 1974, no party had claimed permanent occupation of any one of the islands. The historical claims, generally implicit ones, rely on the discovery of, temporary or repeated occupation of, or the maintenance of relations with the islands.

The Chinese claim to have discovered the Paracels in the 2nd century B.C. during the time of Emperor Wu Ti. Geographical features of the islands were first described in "Nan Zhou Yi Wu Zhi" (Strange Things of the Southern Provinces) by Wan Zhen and "Fu Nan Zhuan" (An Account of Fu Nan), by Kang Tai, both written during the Three Kingdoms period (220-265).<sup>2</sup> Over the next 1,000 years references to the islands and accounts of voyages to them appear in various works of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. In recent years, Chinese coins, the oldest dating back to the rule of the Emperor Wan Mang (3 B.C. to 23 A.D.), reportedly have been found in the Paracels.<sup>3</sup>

Further, there have been recent archeological finds in the Paracels of ruins of living quarters, pottery and porcelain utensils, iron knives and cooking pots, and other items of daily use dating from the Tang and Song dynasties.<sup>4</sup>

The "Wu Jing Zong Yao" (Outline Record of Military Affairs) of the Northern Song records that the Northern Song court ordered Chinese naval patrols to the Paracels. These patrols were to be based in Guangdong province and equipped with sea-faring warships capable of reaching the Paracels in seven days (with a fair east wind).<sup>5</sup> This would indicate that a) the islands were already considered Chinese, b) Guangdong province exercised some sort of military or administrative responsibility over them, and c) the Chinese planned to provide a military presence, whenever required.

Still another important indication of early Chinese control is reflected in a chronicle written during the Sung period which refers to the Song emperor's intention to escape the advancing Mongols by sea, by sailing to Indochina via the Paracels. This course would hardly have been contemplated had not the islands been under firm Chinese military control.

In 1279, the famous astronomer and Deputy Director of the Astronomical Bureau, Guo Shou Jing, was directed by the emperor to perform astronomical observations in the South China Sea. The official History of the Yuan Dynasty shows that the observation point Guo chose was in the Paracels.<sup>6</sup>

In 1293, Gen. Shi Bi touched on the Paracel Archipelago enroute to Java, as did the eunuch, Jeng Ho, during his seven voyages through the

South China Sea during the period 1403-1433. It is during this time that the two island groups of the Paracels are first referred to by the names Yung Le and Xuan De, referring to the titles of reign of the Ming Emperors Ching Zi (1403-1424) and Xuan Zong (1426-1435), respectively.<sup>7</sup>

In 1876, the Qing Ambassador to Britain, Guo Song Tao, kept a detailed record of the voyage to his post. When abeam the Paracels, he recorded, "Nearby to the left were the Paracel Islands (the Xisha Islands) . . . . These islands belong to China."<sup>8</sup>

The first clear case of a Chinese government taking possession of parts of this region was in 1902 when the Manchu government, believing it had discovered signs that France intended to occupy the Paracels by mounting an attack from bases in Indochina, sent Vice-General Wu Jingyung and Admiral Li Ju with three warships to carry out an inspection of the islands. The expedition hoisted flags and erected a stone tablet on North Island reading, "commemorating the inspection in the 28th year of the reign of Guang Xu (1902) of the Great Qing Empire."<sup>9</sup>

In 1911, the Guangdong provincial government announced that the Xisha Islands would be placed under the administration of Yaxian County, Hainan Island.<sup>10</sup>

In 1921, the first practical steps toward developing and exploiting the Paracels on a large scale were taken by the "Paracel Archipelago Company for Industry and Commerce." The head of the company, a Canton merchant named He Rui Nian, was issued a license for the exploitation of natural resources and marine products. In 1927 or 1928, the license was withdrawn when it was discovered that He Rui Nian was merely fronting

for the Formosa Monopolies Authority, a Japanese group, and that a sizeable proportion of the island's resources were being shipped secretly to Japan. The Guangdong government then established a new development plan.<sup>11</sup>

In May, 1982, the Guangdong provincial government sent a study group consisting of military and civil officers, scientists, and technicians to make an investigation of the Xisha Islands. The group submitted a detailed report on the results of their investigations to the provincial government.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1930 and 1946, the Chinese government appeared to be powerless to do anything but lodge ineffectual protests as first the French, then the Japanese occupied the Paracels. A strange feature of the Japanese occupation is that they, too, placed the islands under "Chinese" administration, but under the administrative jurisdiction of the port authorities of Kaohsiung, Taiwan.<sup>13</sup>

Following World War II, on December 9, 1946, the Nationalist government sent two warships to the Paracels to take possession of the islands. In January, 1947, the Chinese embassy in Paris issued a communique announcing the re-occupation of the Paracels and asserting Chinese claims to the archipelago. France, which had sent a small force to re-occupy the Paracels in the spring of 1946, withdrew its troops in January. The Chinese communique went on to say that the islands had always been governed by the Guangdong provincial authorities.

The Paracels were evacuated by the Nationalists in May, 1950, and were occupied by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) almost immediately. During the next decade, the Paracels appear to have been roundly ignored both economically and militarily by the Beijing government. By 1959,

the PRC was apparently no longer in complete military control. There are numerous reports of armed incursions, and outright raids, by South Vietnamese warships, overflights by South Vietnamese aircraft, and vandalism by Japanese fishermen. These events apparently moved the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee to begin a campaign in the spring of 1959 to induce Hainan Island farmers and fishermen to settle in the Paracels, especially on Woody Island (Yung Xing dao), and considerable construction was begun, especially on Woody Island.<sup>15</sup>

In March, 1959, the Hainan Administrative Area of the Guangdong government set up an "Office of the Xisha, Nansha, and Zhongsha Islands" on Woody Island, making it the administrative center for all the South China Sea archipelagos, with the exception of the Pratas. In March 1969, this office was renamed the "Revolutionary Committee of the Xisha, Zhongsha, Nansha Islands of Guangdong Province."<sup>16</sup>

In 1971, United States reconnaissance aircraft observed frequent convoys of PRC ships transporting construction materials to the Paracels, and by the end of that year, a naval complex consisting of a ship berthing area, a jetty, more than 50 buildings, and other facilities, had been constructed. Newly-built radar installations in the Paracels now formed the first line of early warning against air attack. A New China News Agency report of March 13, 1974, said that Yunghsing (Woody) Island had become a "strong bastion on China's South Sea frontier."<sup>17</sup>

In January, 1974, for reasons which will be discussed later in this paper, the RVN unwisely placed troops on several islands in the Crescent Group. The PRC responded quickly with military force, overwhelmed the South Vietnamese, and firmly established through occupation, its claim to the archipelago.

### Vietnamese Claims to the Paracels

It is ironic that the SRV has been forced to "borrow" documentary evidence, vis-a-vis its claim to the Paracel Islands from the archives of its former arch-rival, the RVN.

In early 1975, the RVN published a diplomatic white paper on its claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, in which was stated that, "the Republic of Vietnam fulfils (sic) all the conditions required by international law to assert its claim to possession of these islands."<sup>18</sup>

The RVN white paper cites evidence in an atlas compiled by Do Ba around 1630-53, which described Vietnamese salvage operations in the Paracels,<sup>19</sup> as well as foreign sources such as the Dutch Journal of Batavia which described Dutch negotiations with the Vietnamese over shipwrecks and salvage procedures in the Paracels.<sup>20</sup> The Vietnamese mandarin Le Qui Don recorded detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Paracels in his "Phu Bun Tap Luc" (Miscellaneous Records on the Pacification of the Frontiers),<sup>21</sup> Don also described visits to the islands by members of the "Hoang Sa Company," who spent eight months of each year in such activities as fishing and salvage work, on the islands.<sup>22</sup>

According to official RVN sources, a "Doi Hoang Sa" or Hoang Sa Society had been formed as early as 1700 for commercial exploitation of the Paracel archipelago. The first Nguyen emperor, Gia Long, reactivated the society in 1802; in 1816 had the Vietnamese flag raised over the Paracels.<sup>23</sup>

From the 18th century, the Vietnamese cite the 1701 diary of a French missionary aboard the ship "Amphitrite" in which he described



the hazards encountered around the Paracels, and stated that the islands belonged to Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> The Vietnamese also cite French Admiral d'Estaing's reports, noting Vietnamese military (naval) activity in the Paracels in 1768, and the fact that many cannon in the Vietnamese shore defenses were removed from British and Portuguese wrecks in the Paracels, as proof that by the mid-18th century, the Paracels already figured prominently in Vietnam's defensive plans.<sup>25</sup> Lord MacCartney in his book, A Voyage to Cochin China, published in 1806,<sup>26</sup> also mentioned Vietnamese economic ties to the Paracels.

In 1836, the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Works requested that Emperor Minh Mang send yearly missions to fully explore, survey, and map the islands, since they were "of great strategic importance to our maritime borders." Both the Paracel and Spratly groups were included in the "Detailed Map of the Dai Nam," in 1838, although neither was correctly located.<sup>27</sup>

After 1883, all Vietnam became a French protectorate, and today the Vietnamese claim that the French not only preserved but reinforced the Vietnamese title to sovereignty over the Paracels.<sup>28</sup> They further claim that it was a 1925 French scientific mission which proved the existence of a continental shelf reaching out in platforms from the Vietnamese coast, with the Paracels resting on one of these platforms.<sup>29</sup>

In 1932, the French made the Paracels an administrative unit of Thua Thien Province, an act which was confirmed by Emperor Bao Dai in 1938.<sup>30</sup>

In October, 1950, France formally turned over the defense of the Paracel Archipelago to the Vietnamese (although French troops garrisoned

the islands until 1956.)<sup>31</sup> The following year (1951) Vietnamese Premier Tran Van Huu attended the Japanese Peace Conference in San Francisco, where he affirmed the RVN's rights over both the Paracels and Spratlys. In 1961, RVN President Ngo Dinh Diem signed a decree transferring the Paracels from the jurisdiction of Thua Thien province back to Quang Nam province. The entire archipelago was given the status of a "xa" (village). Hence, in 1969, they became part of the mainland village of Hoa Long in Quang Nam province.<sup>32</sup> Over the next five years, the RVN carried out phosphate exploitation and operated a weather station on Pattle Island in the Crescent Group.

When, in 1974, the PRC wrested control of the Crescent Group from the RVN and consolidated its control of the entire Paracel Archipelago, neither the SRV nor its southern client, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) made any protest; however, shortly after the fall of the RVN in 1975, the SRV occupied several islands in the Spratly archipelago and publicly "assumed the mantle" vis-a-vis claims by the defunct RVN to both the Paracels and the Spratlys.

#### Chinese Claim to the Spratlys

The earliest reference to a Chinese presence in the Spratlys dates back to 1867, when the crew of a British surveying ship met Chinese fisherman from Hainan on the largest of the Spratly Islands. In accordance with what those fishermen had said, in their Hainan dialect, the British called the island "Itu Aba," a name still used on Western charts. In Chinese, the Spratlys were referred to as "tuan sha qun dao" until shortly after World War II, when the name "Nan Sha" was used.<sup>33</sup>

The PRC insists that many Hainan fishermen began to "settle on the Nan Sha (Spratly) islands long ago, and in addition to fishery, developed horticulture, reclaimed land, raised poultry, and engaged in mining phosphate areas.<sup>34</sup> The Chinese cite Japanese sources who recorded evidence at the beginning of this century, of Chinese wells, tombs, and temples on Bei Zi Reef, Xi Yue, Zhong Ye, and Tai Ping Islands. The Chinese also point to descriptions of life in the Nan Sha Islands made by both French and Chinese observers during the period of French occupation.<sup>35</sup>

Until the 1930s the Chinese claim to both the Paracels and Spratlys appeared to be unchallenged and was, in fact confirmed by several international and Chinese domestic acts. In 1883, the German government tried to survey the Spratlys but ceased when China protested. After Vietnam became a protectorate of France in 1884, on June 26, 1887, a convention respecting the Delimitation of the Frontier between China and Tongkin (Vietnam) was signed, Article III of which provided that, "the islands lying east of a line from 105° 43'E long running north-south through the eastern point of Tra-Co island;" are Chinese. Those west of the line were regarded as part of Vietnam.<sup>36</sup> Both the Paracels and Spratlys lie east of that line.

In July, 1933, when the French government announced it had occupied nine of the Spratlys, it also noted in its official gazette that the only persons found on the islands were Chinese.<sup>37</sup>

In April, 1939, Japan announced that it had placed both the Paracels and Spratlys under the jurisdiction of Kao-hsiung County of Taiwan, then a territory of the Japanese Empire.<sup>38</sup>

In November, 1946, the (Nationalist) Chinese government sent a naval contingent, with officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Guang dong Provincial Government, to take over the islands. This group surveyed each of the major islands, stationed garrison forces on several, and erected Chinese territorial stone tablets on Itu Aba, along with weather and radio stations. In March 1947, the islands were temporarily placed under the administration of the Chinese Navy. On December 1, 1947, the Ministry of Internal Affairs publicly announced new names for each island and since then, all Chinese maps have so inscribed them in the territorial scope of China. At that time, no country protested the Chinese takeover, the new names, or the inclusion within the territorial scope of China.<sup>39</sup>

In May 1950, after the fall of Hainan Island, the Nationalists withdrew their forces from the Spratlys and in September, 1951, at the Japanese Peace Conference in San Francisco, Japan renounced its claim to the Spratlys. While the PRC was not invited to that conference, PRC Foreign Minister Zhou En-lai said on August 15, 1957 that no decision made at the conference would alter the PRC's "inviolable sovereignty over Nanwei Island (Spratly Island)," although the Republic of China interpreted the Japanese renunciation as the transferal of the Pescadores, Paracels and Spratlys to Taiwan.<sup>40</sup>

In 1956, when a Filipino, Tomas Cloma, announced his "discovery" of the Spratlys and claimed the establishment of the "Free Territory of Freelandia," both Beijing and Taiwan reacted quickly; the former with a note of protest, the latter with a naval contingent. Although the Filipinos were found to have departed, Taipei established a garrison on Itu Aba which is was since maintained.<sup>41</sup>

The Taipei government has also actively protested claims or occupation by the Vietnamese, both under the RVN and the SRV. It has periodically sent military contingents to re-supply and re-garrison Itu Aba, and until around 1974, sent joint teams from the Navy and Ministry of Internal Affairs to inspect the islands and re-erect Chinese national boundary tablets. As late as 1972, a Chinese patrol boat temporarily apprehended a Japanese trawler entering its territorial sea around Itu Aba.<sup>42</sup>

The Taipei government has otherwise been content to restrict its claims of sovereignty to a continued presence at international cartographic conferences and diplomatic protests or representation to the RVN or the Philippines rejecting their challenge to Chinese sovereignty over the islands.

The PRC, on the other hand, made bellicose rumblings in 1974 when, after the RVN defeat in the Paracels, the RVN occupied several of the Spratlys. After 1975, the PRC made similar moves toward its former Vietnamese allies when the SRV promptly took over the RVN bases. The PRC has also fumed periodically over drilling operations in the Reed Bank sponsored by Manila.

#### Vietnamese Claims to the Spratlys

As early as 1802, Emperor Gia Long of the Nguyen dynasty sent the Peking court a map defining the limits of his kingdom, which clearly showed the Spratly Islands under the jurisdiction of Hue.<sup>43</sup> However, the Vietnamese have been unable to present any hard evidence of a continued, or even intermittent, presence in the area over the following 130 years. The Saigon white paper merely states that, "unlike the case

of the Hoang Sa (Paracel) Islands, the former emperors of Vietnam did not have the time to strengthen these contacts through the organization of an administrative jurisdiction."<sup>44</sup>

A circa 1838 map by Phan Huy Chu expressly mentioned the Spratlys, under the name "Van Ly Truong Sa," as a part of Vietnamese territory; however, the archipelago was not correctly located.<sup>45</sup>

In April 1930, the French gunboat "Le Malicieuse" reconnoitered the waters surrounding the Spratlys and apparently occupied one island.<sup>46</sup> In the spring of 1933, a three-ship French expedition occupied the two principal islands, Itu Aba and Spratly, as well as seven other islands of the Spratly archipelago. Paris publicly announced their annexation on July 26, 1933.<sup>47</sup> Itu Aba became the "administrative capital" where all services were centered. The RVN white paper states that because of the isolation and hardship involved in living in the Spratlys, only volunteers were sent there; if none could be found, private citizens (Europeans only) were hired as "contract officials."<sup>48</sup>

Three months after the official incorporation of the Spratlys, the archipelago was made a part of Ba-Ria province. This organization was confirmed by the RVN in 1956, and in 1973, the Spratlys were attached to a village of the same province, now called Phuoc Thuy.<sup>49</sup>

In 1938, a meteorological station was set up on Itu Aba; however, according to the RVN white paper, "State activities on the Spratlys were necessarily restricted, because the islands were uninhabited and situated too far away from the mainland." The RVN claimed that by operating the weather station and undertaking geographic and geologic studies "on behalf of Vietnam," the French "substantiated" the right to sovereignty over a territory."<sup>50</sup>

From 1956 on, the RVN navy began to launch various operations to reassert control over the Spratlys. They erected "sovereignty steles" and conducted flag-raising ceremonies on numerous islands.<sup>51</sup>

In August or September of 1973, (for the first time) the RVN sent troops to the Spratlys. Initially, less than 100 men were garrisoned on Nam Yit island, but their strength was increased to several hundred during the following months and especially after the battle in the Paracels in January, 1975. The GVN garrisoned at least five islands, reefs, or cays, with headquarters on Nam Yit. In May, 1975, Radio Hanoi without going into detail reported the occupation of "various islands of the Spratly archipelago" by Communist troops.<sup>52</sup> The SRV armed forces are now believed to occupy six islands: Nam Yit, Sand Cay, Spratly Island, Amboyna Cay, Pearson Reef, and Sin Cowe Island.

#### Philippine Claim to the Spratlys

The Republic of the Philippines, as mentioned, claims ownership of only a few islands which were "discovered" by Tomas Cloma. On May 15, 1956, Cloma's group raised the Philippine flag on one of the unoccupied islands and formally staked a claim, calling the islands "Kalayaan," or "Freedom Islands." The PRC, Taiwan, and the RVN reacted angrily to the claim, and Taiwan sent troops to the Spratlys. On Itu Aba Island, the Chinese removed markers placed by Cloma's group, and in October 1956, there was an armed clash, following which, the Philippine claim to Spratly Island (Nan wei dao) was withdrawn.<sup>53</sup>

Since about 1957, the Philippines has based its claim to the Spratlys on four arguments: that the islands were unoccupied and therefore available for economic exploitation and settlement by anyone; that

the Spratlys had been turned over to the Allies by Japan under the terms of the 1951 Peace Treaty signed in San Francisco, but a final disposition had never been determined; that the Spratlys were used as a springboard for the invasion of the Philippines in 1941, and that Taiwan's occupation of Itu Aba constituted a threat to Philippine national security; and that the 1958 Geneva Convention on the Continental Shelf gave the Philippines certain rights to explore for oil in waters off Palawan Island.<sup>54</sup>

On July 10, 1971, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared the Spratlys derelict and disputed, and ordered occupation of three islands by Philippine marines. In early 1974, the Philippine government sent a diplomatic note to Saigon and Taipei protesting Vietnamese and Nationalist Chinese displays of force over the issue of the Spratlys and suggesting referral of the issue to either the U.N. or the World War II allies. In that note, Manila claimed that: the islands occupied by its troops had been acquired by right of occupation; the islands did not form a part of the Spratly Island Group, as they were located about "200 miles to the northeast" and were only 250 miles directly west of Puerto Princesa, the capital of Palawan province; the sovereignty over the islands which were abandoned and unoccupied, had been acquired by occupation; and the islands were strategically important to national security.<sup>55</sup> At present, Philippine armed forces reportedly occupy eight islands: Northeast Cay (Parola), Thitu Island (Pagasa), West York Island (Likas), Loaita Island (Kuta), Lam Kiam Cay (Panata), Nanshan Island (Lawak), Flat Island (Patag), and Commodore Reef (Rizal Reef).



### The Malaysian Claim to the Spratlys

The 1978, a senior Malaysian official visited a number of places in the southern Spratlys and claimed these for his government. In 1979, Malaysia published maps in which the "continental shelf" claimed by Kuala Lumpur included Amboyna Cay, Mariveles Reef, and Commodore Reef.<sup>56</sup> However, Malaysia has had no physical presence whatever in the area and has not actively pressed its claim. When Manila protested the 1979 claims, Kuala Lumpur declared its willingness to resolve all disputes by negotiation.<sup>57</sup>

### Discussion

In reviewing the claims of China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Malaysia, several points become apparent.

- None of the disputed islands lie on the "continental shelf" of any claimant. The Philippines has asserted that the Reed Bank area lies on its continental shelf; however, the bulk are more than 250 miles from Palawan, and a deep trench runs between Palawan Island and Reed Bank;<sup>58</sup> therefore, the claim is generally regarded as specious.
- Both China and Vietnam could conceivably claim parts of the Paracel Archipelago to be within their respective 200-mile economic zones. The Philippines and Malaysia could likewise claim major portions of the Spratly Archipelago. However, neither China nor Vietnam could so claim any portion of the Spratlys.
- In September 1958, China formally declared a 12 nautical mile territorial sea. At that time China also declared that "this

provision applies to all territories of the People's Republic of China, including . . . "the Nansha Islands (Spratlys) and all other Islands belonging to China which are separated from the mainland and its coastal islands by the high seas."<sup>59</sup> Not one nation protested the announcement.

- Both the PRC and Taiwan base their claims on historical possession by China from the time of the Yuan Dynasty.

In reviewing the specific claims of China and Vietnam to the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes, "China" would appear to have a stronger claim to both groups through discovery, settlement and government-sponsored commercial exploitation.

Vietnam's case is weakened by its late entry as a claimant; the earliest documented claims originate in the early 19th century. Vietnam also claims the islands on the basis of prior occupation by its former colonial master, France, which did occupy both the Paracels and the Spratlys, and conquest is still a valid method of transferring territory under international law. However, the Japanese conquered the Spratlys from France, and then, after World War II, yielded them without any specification as to whom the islands were to be yielded; therefore, the status of the islands is undetermined. Since the United Nations has never acted on the question (a Soviet attempt to award them to China was vetoed), the islands would in theory become "terra nullius," subject to occupation by any state.<sup>60</sup> This is the basis of the Philippine claim to the Spratlys,<sup>61</sup> although Taiwan views them as belonging to "China" and has reoccupied Itu Aba accordingly. Vietnam would have the right, under either the RVN or SRV flags, to those islands it has occupied since 1956.

In picking up the historical threads after World War II, no real territorial dispute occurred between China and Vietnam throughout the 1950s and 1960s, primarily because during that time, Vietnam was engaged in a war, first with France and then with the United States, and depended on China for aid and support.<sup>62</sup>

China is quick to point out that Vietnam recognized Chinese sovereignty over the two archipelagoes on numerous occasions during this period. On September 14, 1958, in response to a Chinese declaration stating that the territory of the People's Republic of China "includes the Chinese mainland and its coastal islands . . . the Xisha (Paracel) Islands . . . the Nansha (Spratly) Islands . . .," Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong sent a note to Zhou Enlai stating, "the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam recognizes and supports the declaration of the People's Republic of China on China's territorial sea made on September 4, 1958" and that "Vietnam respects this decision."<sup>63</sup>

And on May 9, 1965, referring to the United States declaration of the Gulf of Tonkin as part of the "combat zone," the DRV said, "U.S. President Lyndon Johnson designated the whole of Vietnam and the adjacent waters which extend roughly 100 miles from the coast of Vietnam and part of the territorial waters of the People's Republic of China in its Xisha (Paracel) Islands . . . ."<sup>64</sup>

It would now appear that, prior to 1975, Hanoi was willing to acquiesce in Chinese claims as long as Saigon remained more or less indifferent. However, once Saigon began attempts to assert sovereignty over the islands, Hanoi became reluctant to take the opposite stand so as not to appear to side with the historic enemy of the Vietnamese people.<sup>65</sup>

In early 1959, Saigon landed troops on one of the Paracels, kidnapped dozens of Chinese and destroyed the Chinese flag. RVN gunboats also harrassed Chinese fishing in the Paracels. In 1961, Saigon announced the incorporation of the Paracels into Quang Nam province, and in 1973 the incorporation of the 11 main islands in the Spratlys into Phuoc Thuy province. All of these incidents drew strong Chinese protests, but neither Hanoi nor its client Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in South Vietnam expressed a word of support for China.<sup>66</sup>

In 1974, when China expelled RVN troops from the Paracels and Saigon occupied five of the Spratlys, no other nation's government supported the claims of the RVN. The DRV and PRG both avoided the choice between denying Vietnamese sovereignty on the one hand and supporting Saigon against Beijing, on the other.<sup>67</sup> Only after the fall of the RVN in 1975, and Hanoi's occupation of the islands in the Spratlys formerly held by the RVN, did Hanoi and the PRG begin to assert that "the frequently complex disputes over territories between neighboring countries demand careful and circumspect examination. Countries involved should settle such disputes by negotiation . . . ."<sup>68</sup> By the words "complex disputes," previous Vietnamese recognition of Chinese claims was implicitly withdrawn, and in late 1975, a new territorial map of the reunited Vietnam for the first time included the Paracels, as well as the Spratlys, as part of Vietnam.<sup>69</sup>

In June 1977, Chinese Premier Le Xian Nian reminded Pham Van Dong of Hanoi's past statements of support and admonished him on Vietnam's change of mind after 1974. Dong reportedly described Hanoi's previous

position as a "matter of necessity" as part of the "resistance to U.S. imperialism."<sup>70</sup>

Hanoi and Beijing would now appear to be in an unbreakable impasse over these territorial claims. The conflicting claims to the Paracels and Spratlys are actually only one aspect of a broader conflict which also involves conflicting claims over the Sino-Vietnamese land border as well as the demarcation of the Gulf of Tonkin.

On March 5, 1979, immediately after the Sino-Vietnamese border war, Vice-Premier of the PRC, Li Xian Nian, declared that China was prepared to make concessions on the contested land areas if Vietnam was "reasonable on other territorial issues," i.e., on the Gulf of Tonkin and the ownership of the South China Sea islands.<sup>71</sup> This statement can be interpreted to mean that the issues involving territorial waters and the islands in them are far more important to both parties than the demarcation of a common border.

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Part III: The Importance of the Islands: Strategic or Economic?

In assessing the importance of the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes to China and Vietnam, all observers immediately identify two important factors: their strategic geographical position in the South China Sea, and the potential presence of large deposits of oil. I would suggest that while China sees the islands in terms of both these considerations, Vietnam's primary interest is in the latter.

Strategic Consideration

A quick glance at a map of Southeast Asia confirms that the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes sit astride the main sea lanes through the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup> These lanes are used by international shipping moving from the oil fields of the Middle East, through the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait enroute to East Asia. This is Japan's oil lifeline, and it is estimated that every 10 minutes, a tanker bearing crude oil from the Persian Gulf transits the Malacca Strait enroute to Japanese refineries.<sup>2</sup> The Japanese recognized the strategic importance of these islands when during World War II they used the Paracels as an advanced submarine base.<sup>3</sup> Even today, anchorages, supply depots, defensive monitoring and intelligence-gathering stations could be established in either or both archipelagoes, to provide a critical strategic advantage.<sup>4</sup> China has already so fortified the Paracels.<sup>5</sup>

These same sea lanes are also the main line of movement for Soviet submarines and surface ships of the Soviet Far East fleet between the

Indian Ocean and Far East Fleet Headquarters at Vladivostok. Soviet naval units also use these waters enroute to and from the newly-acquired naval and air bases at Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

Under existing international law, the coastal state which occupies the islands in an archipelago could conceivably apply the archipelagic principle and claim, in addition to the immediately adjacent waters, a 200-mile economic resources zone around the entire archipelago, determined from the outermost point of each island. Any state in control of the Paracels and Spratlys could place a substantial part of the South China Sea under its jurisdiction. The coastal state would have sovereign rights within the zone for the purposes of exploiting, conserving, and managing the resources of the seabed, subsoil, and the seas above.<sup>6</sup> All the claimants in this case, i.e., China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia, realize that when technologically poor nations cannot exploit ocean resources, the only benefit is to stake a claim<sup>7</sup> and manage the exploitation.

It is expected that within this economic zone, a large proportion of the traditional high seas will remain; freedom of navigation and overflight will be preserved.<sup>8</sup> However, there are niceties which could be applied to impede or even prohibit certain naval traffic. For example, should the PRC control the Spratlys, it could cite environmental safeguards to prohibit Soviet nuclear-powered vessels from transiting the waters. It could also invoke that portion of the doctrine of innocent passage which gives a coastal or archipelagic state the right to "suspend temporarily the innocent passage of foreign ships if such suspension is essential for the protection of its security."

"Acts prejudicial to security" would include: 1) threat or use of force, 2) exercises with weapons, 3) launching or taking aboard aircraft, and 4) research or survey activities of any kind.<sup>9</sup>

In the summer of 1979, shortly after signing agreements with four U.S. oil companies for joint prospecting for offshore oil in the Gulf of Tonkin, China reiterated its claim to the Paracels and then announced four "danger areas" adjacent to Hainan Island and the Paracels, closing them to both naval and air activity, the latter to include all altitudes between 1,000 and 20,000 meters. While the Chinese gave no reason for this action, there was speculation that it was a bid to achieve international acceptance of territorial claims.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, possession of the two archipelagoes would give China the potential to control movement in the South China Sea, and enable China to break the Soviet Union's military encirclement of China. China might conceivably even be able to force the Soviet fleet to go around Indonesia and the Philippines in order to reach Vladivostok.<sup>11</sup> Possession of the Spratlys by the SRV, on the other hand, would indirectly provide those same economic and strategic benefits to the Soviet Union to be used against Japan, China, Korea, or the United States.

#### China and Offshore Oil

Although the average depth of the South China Sea is about 1,600 meters, the northern portion (the China Basin) averages about 4,300 meters and the Palawan Trough averages from nearly 3,000 meters to a maximum depth of over 5,000 meters off Palawan Island.<sup>12</sup>

Both the Paracel and Spratly Islands are situated in the deep basin area,<sup>13</sup> with average depths of almost 1,000 meters around the Paracels

and about 3,000 meters around the Spratlys.<sup>14</sup> Generally speaking, those portions of the South China Sea which lie beyond China's continental shelf are, for the present, beyond the PRC's capability to exploit.<sup>15</sup> In addition to great depths, environmental factors (i.e., wave frequency and height, bottom conditions, surface currents, and wind/typhoon exposure) greatly complicate drilling operations. The PRC's offshore oil drilling technology, even that inherited from the Russian presence in the 1950s, is especially rudimentary. This is attested by the continuing imports of oil-drilling, extraction, and transportation equipment from Japan, Romania, the USSR, and the United States.<sup>16</sup>

However, since the late 1950s, the PRC has shown increasing interest in the South China Sea and its potential bonanza of offshore oil. Beginning in 1968, scientists from the Institute of Oceanography on the South China Sea began investigations around the islands claimed by the PRC. According to the Chinese press, "these investigations included marine gravity, magnetism, hydrography, meteorology, biology, chemistry, and geology with the aim of helping exploit the resources in the South China Sea and develop marine science."<sup>17</sup>

However, although the work was ultimately postponed, it was the DRV which took the initiative in exploring the area when it informed the PRC in late 1973 of its intention to prospect for oil in the Gulf of Tonkin.

In 1977, the PRC announced that a "scientific investigation ship" had surveyed areas between the Paracels and Spratlys, during a 58-day, 4,926 nautical mile voyage for the Institute of Oceanography on the South China Sea under the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The same news

release announced that five other voyages had been made to the Paracels and Spratlys "within the last ten years."<sup>20</sup>

In November 1978, at least three oil rigs were in place west of Hainan Island and light crude oil was found there.<sup>21</sup>

During the early 1970s, China's oil exploration activity in the South China Sea was constrained not only by the technical difficulties and cost involved, but also by political uncertainties. China's oil planners are now aware that many of the promising areas in the South China Sea are now, including areas near the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes, within the reach of drilling technology, or will be by the late 1980s.<sup>22</sup> However, many of these areas appear likely to remain beyond Western production techniques until perhaps the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, an interim goal is to acquire Western technology, gain experience in all phases of managing joint-ventures in oil exploration and production, and most importantly, secure recognition of China's territorial claims by the time technological advances make possible the full exploitation of China's oil resources.

Beijing's stated plan is to double oil production by the year 2000. This will be done almost entirely by massive exploitation of China's offshore oil reserves, estimated in 1981 to be nearly 74 billion barrels, which could make China the world's fourth largest producer of oil.<sup>24</sup> By 1986, exploration costs in the South China Sea alone are expected to reach US \$250-300 million per year. Plans call for the drilling of 110 wildcat exploratory wells and 100 evaluation and confirmation wells in areas of the Pearl River Estuary, the Yinggehai Basin, and the Gulf of Tonkin.<sup>25</sup>

Given all these expectations it is unlikely that China will relinquish claims to territories which possibly contain oil deposits, and highly probable that the PRC will take any action necessary, including the military option, to protect those claims.

#### Vietnam and Offshore Oil

During the French colonial period in Vietnam, an active interest was sustained in searching for oil throughout Indochina, especially after the Dutch discoveries in Indonesia. However, nothing came of these attempts, which ceased in 1945 with the collapse of French authority.<sup>26</sup>

In 1967, using U.S. Navy oceanographic ships, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) mapped the region extending from the Sea of Japan south along the coast of China and around the Indochinese peninsula into the Gulf of Siam. While the initial findings were discouraging, the geologists did find a desirable drilling area on the continental shelf, southeast of South Vietnam containing a projected 140,000 cubic statute miles of oil sediments. A larger area is said to extend from southwest of the Spratly Islands, looping around toward the Sarawak coast, south of the Spratlys.<sup>27</sup>

Magnetic field survey data from Project MAGNET of the U.S. Naval Oceanographic Office, was analyzed by the German Geological Survey for a geophysical interpretation, and two large sediment-filled basins were identified; namely, the Can Tho and Ca Mau basins of the Mekong Delta.<sup>28</sup>

According to Dr. K. O. Emery, a marine biologist of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and an advisor to ECAFE, the Asian coastal area is equal in potential to the Middle East or to the oil fields of Venezuela and the Gulf of Mexico combined,<sup>29</sup> more significantly, the basin off South Vietnam is particularly desirable because local oil sediments there are low in sulphur.<sup>30</sup>

During 1969 and 1970, with the permission of the RVN government, a detailed survey of the Vietnamese southeastern continental shelf was carried out by a consortium of private oil companies. The results were sufficiently encouraging by mid-1973 for the RVN to solicit bids. Thirty-eight companies from six nations responded and four U.S. oil companies and a Canadian group were granted exploration rights on Vietnam's continental shelf.<sup>31</sup> The security situation in the Mekong Delta precluded any exploration/exploitation activity.

The first well was begun in August 1974, and by March 1975, the exploration program had made significant progress and was continuing to gain momentum. However, in April, because of the deterioration of the military situation, all the oil rigs were towed away and the personnel were withdrawn.<sup>32</sup> The extent of the deposits remains unknown.

The former RVN had placed great hopes on the discovery of offshore oil as being one of the solutions to the country's economic woes. The oil could have provided a source of badly needed hard currency-if only to offset a portion of the nation's costly oil imports. Vietnam had few other mineral resources and agricultural development was either retarded or destroyed by the war. Additionally, after the American withdrawal in 1973<sup>33</sup> the RVN faced an ever-dwindling flow of U.S. economic and military support.



The early stages of the oil exploration program did indeed contribute significantly to the RVN economy in the form of taxes and fees levied against concessionaire companies.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the dream of oil riches might also have touched off a spark of nationalism which re-ignited regional territorial disputes between Vietnam and Cambodia, and Vietnam and Indonesia, and might also have been the reason behind the RVN move on the Paracels in January 1974. Finally, oil may have been an added element in convincing the North Vietnamese to seek a final victory on the battlefield, fearing that oil discoveries might become a critical factor in determining the course of the Vietnam War, i.e., a fresh source of economic support for the Thieu regime.<sup>35</sup>

In 1973, the DRV was also taking steps toward exploration for oil. According to Japanese sources, prospects for oil in North Vietnam are also bright. Two Japanese oil companies competed with French and Italian companies for bids on offshore exploration in the Gulf of Tonkin;<sup>36</sup> however, so as not to annoy China, Hanoi reportedly later abandoned the idea.

Immediately after the conquest of South Vietnam, Hanoi invalidated oil contracts signed with the RVN government, an action which cost U.S. oil companies, whom Hanoi had accused of "plundering" Vietnam's resources, some \$50 million invested in exploration and a comparable figure in distribution facilities.<sup>38</sup> However, in August 1975, Hanoi created a cabinet-level national oil and gas agency and officially announced its willingness to renegotiate the terms for offshore oil exploration with any foreign oil company ready to participate in the country's search for oil. Negotiations were initiated with Norwegian,

Japanese, and Algerian companies for various forms of help in exploration. The French began negotiations for a contract to construct a logistics base at the seaport of Vung Tau, and Norway agreed to provide an off-shore drilling rig and technical training in its use. The PRG even approached American companies and invited them to return; however, the United States trade embargo against Vietnam brought that effort to a standstill.<sup>39</sup>

In 1976, Hanoi hired a French company to conduct seismic surveys in the offshore areas near south Vietnam which had previously been explored by the RVN.<sup>40</sup> Since that time, seismic and exploration contracts have been awarded to Canadian, Italian, and West German concerns. Vietnam's entrance into COMECON, coupled with the U.S. trade embargo, have paved the way for an agreement with five COMECON partners, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, to aid Vietnam in surveys for oil in projects running from 1981 to 1990.<sup>41</sup>

Judging from the speed with which the SRV has entered into the "oil game," it would appear that, like the RVN, the SRV is also anticipating the discovery of offshore oil in order to rescue its economy, which eight years after the war, remains in disarray due in part to Vietnam's Cambodian war, the costs of rebuilding both North and South, and general mismanagement of the entire economy. According to United States State Department estimates, by the end of the fiscal year ending in June 1980, the Soviet Union had poured \$1 billion of economic and military aid into Vietnam, and that aid continues at a rate of over \$3 million per day.<sup>42</sup>

In July 1981, Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed an agreement to establish a joint enterprise to survey and explore for oil and gas on the continental shelf of South Vietnam. According to Do Muoi, Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers, "thousands of Soviet cadres and experts are now cooperating with us in oil exploration and exploitation along the continental shelves in an effort to help our country quickly obtain oil and natural gas."<sup>43</sup> Although there was considerable skepticism among observers as to how much Moscow would be able to achieve in off-shore exploration, given its own technical weaknesses in this field, Hanoi appeared optimistic that with Soviet aid, it could begin to exploit offshore oil reserves by 1983.<sup>44</sup>

Given the PRC's renewed drive for oil exploration in the Gulf of Tonkin, (the delineation of which is still contested by the SRV), China's on-shore discoveries in the Paracels (which Vietnam also claims), and Vietnam's intention to explore for oil in offshore areas close to the Spratlys (claimed by China but several islands of which are SRV-occupied), it would appear that the quest for oil could eventually lead to renewed armed conflict between China and Vietnam.

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Part IV: The Military Capabilities of the Claimants

During the 1974 clash in the Paracels, for several reasons, the PRC had a decided advantage over the RVN forces. First, the Chinese "reaction" was a carefully-planned and coordinated, well-executed combined arms operation, involving aircraft, ships, and infantry. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) had employed such tactics against Hainan and Quemoy in 1949-50, Yikiangshan and the Tachens in 1954-55, and Quemoy again in 1958. The RVN forces had no such experience. Reportedly, the PLA used its Canton Military Region Headquarters as the command post for the operation, and therefore had a trained battle-operations staff and well-established command and control communications throughout the course of the battle.

The PLA also had the advantages of nearby airbases on Hainan island and radar on nearby Yung-Xing (Woody) Island,<sup>3</sup> while almost all the RVN's F-5 fighters were based at Tan Son Nhut airfield, near Saigon. Further, no Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) fighter pilot had ever seen aerial combat and had little or no experience working with the controllers at the Tactical Air Control Center North Sector (TACC/NS) outside of Danang, who would have had directed the fighters. None of the controllers had ever performed an actual ground-controlled-intercept (GCI).

On the sea, the Chinese had a similar advantage. The RVN coast-guard cutters, destroyer escorts, and patrol boats were clearly no match for the Chinese task force which included at least four destroyers and a number of short-range missile-firing, fast attack craft (FAC's).<sup>4</sup> Militarily and psychologically, RVN military commanders were more

concerned with holding off the Vietnamese Communist threat than they were a Chinese attack from which the Vietnamese had emerged with only light losses and only the loss of island territory, the defense of which was not militarily feasible.

And finally, the northern half of Vietnam was then the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, China's ally, and was hardly in a position to speak out against an attack on its enemy, the Thiệu regime, let alone come to their defense. One year later, the situation had changed drastically. The RVN had been toppled by the DRV in a lightning-swift final offensive, and the Vietnamese people were now, theoretically, unified and by 1979 would revive their traditional anti-Chinese brand of nationalism to challenge Chinese claims to the Paracels and Spratly groups.

#### Naval Strengths

After 1974, the PRC increased its military presence in the South China Sea. In July 1976 and August 1977, it held joint air-sea-amphibious maneuvers along the southeast coast,<sup>5</sup> and embarked on a program to strengthen the navy overall. The South Sea Fleet, with some 600 vessels deployed from Dong Shan to the Vietnam frontier, received its due share. In May and June, 1980, an 18-ship task force made a 35-day, 8,000 nautical mile foray into the South Pacific, accompanied by new ocean-going supply ships, and one year later, a destroyer-led flotilla from the South Sea Fleet made an operational cruise into the South China Sea.<sup>6</sup> On the surface, it would appear that China at last has a "blue water" navy, i.e., one capable of a greater role than that of coastal defense.

If China intends, as it obviously does, to continue to press claims to the islands in the South China Sea, especially the Spratlys, and to



assert complete control over a 200-mile economic zone for its continental as well as island territories, then a long-term development program oriented toward a "blue water" navy is exactly what China requires.<sup>7</sup> But how effectively can China utilize this naval force to enforce its territorial claims? Fig. 9<sup>8</sup> shows a comparison of the PRC and SRV navies in the types of naval craft required for such operations. As with most aspects of the Chinese military machine, numbers alone are not entirely indicative:

- Although one single unlocated nuclear attack submarine would be of great concern to any surface fleet, China would probably be loath to risk detection of either of the two HAN-class nuclear submarines by the Soviet TU-95F anti-submarine patrol aircraft operating out of Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay,<sup>9</sup> and Chinese diesel patrol submarines have only a 7,500 mile maximum cruising range and can remain at sea only 35-45 days.<sup>10</sup>
- The missile-equipped destroyers are armed with an obsolete missile, and have no effective surface-to-air-missile (SAM) system, a primitive anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability, and no over-the-horizon (OTH) radar.<sup>11</sup>
- While the fast attack craft (FAC) were very effective in the 1974 Paracels action, these are strictly short-range boats. This is probably one reason, along with inadequate air cover, why the Chinese in 1974 did not mount a similar operation against RVN garrisons in the Spratlys.<sup>12</sup>
- The Chinese mine warfare capability has not yet been tested but could prove to be of great value in either an offensive or defensive role, simply because the Vietnamese have virtually no capability for laying or sweeping naval mines.

Fig. 9: Comparison of PRC and SRV Navies

<u>Type Ship</u>	<u>PRC</u>	<u>SRV</u>
Nuclear attack submarine	2 HAN-class	0
Ballistic missile submarine	1 GOLF-class	0
Diesel attack submarine	92 ROMEO/WHISKEY/MING	0
Missile-equipped destroyers	12 (w/CSS-N-2 SSM)	0
Frigates	16 (8 w/CSS-N-2)	6
Corvette/patrol escort	9	2
Fast attack craft (missile)	188 (w/CSS-N-2)	8 (w/SS-N-2)
Fast attack craft (torpedo)	255	8
Fast attack craft (gun)	376	22
Fast attack craft (patrol)	24	10
Large patrol craft	21	4
Mine warfare craft	80	0
Ocean minesweepers	23	1
Landing ship, tank (LST)	15	4
Landing ship, mechanized (LSM)	16	3
Landing craft (various types)	475	18

- Although the Chinese have a large number of landing craft, the vast majority could not operate on the open sea. China is building a new Alligator-class amphibious landing ship, but at present the Chinese Navy would be hard-pressed to move more than one infantry division with light tanks (12,700 men, 3T-62/63 light tanks, 32 T-59 medium tanks), and this could only be done over an unopposed beach or pier.<sup>13</sup> The absence of a large-scale amphibious capability indicates that there is little chance in the near future for PRC military planners to attempt to mount a major invasion.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, although some destroyers are equipped with SAMs for air defense, Chinese ships are generally vulnerable to air attack, relying primarily on anti-aircraft cannon and machine guns.<sup>15</sup>

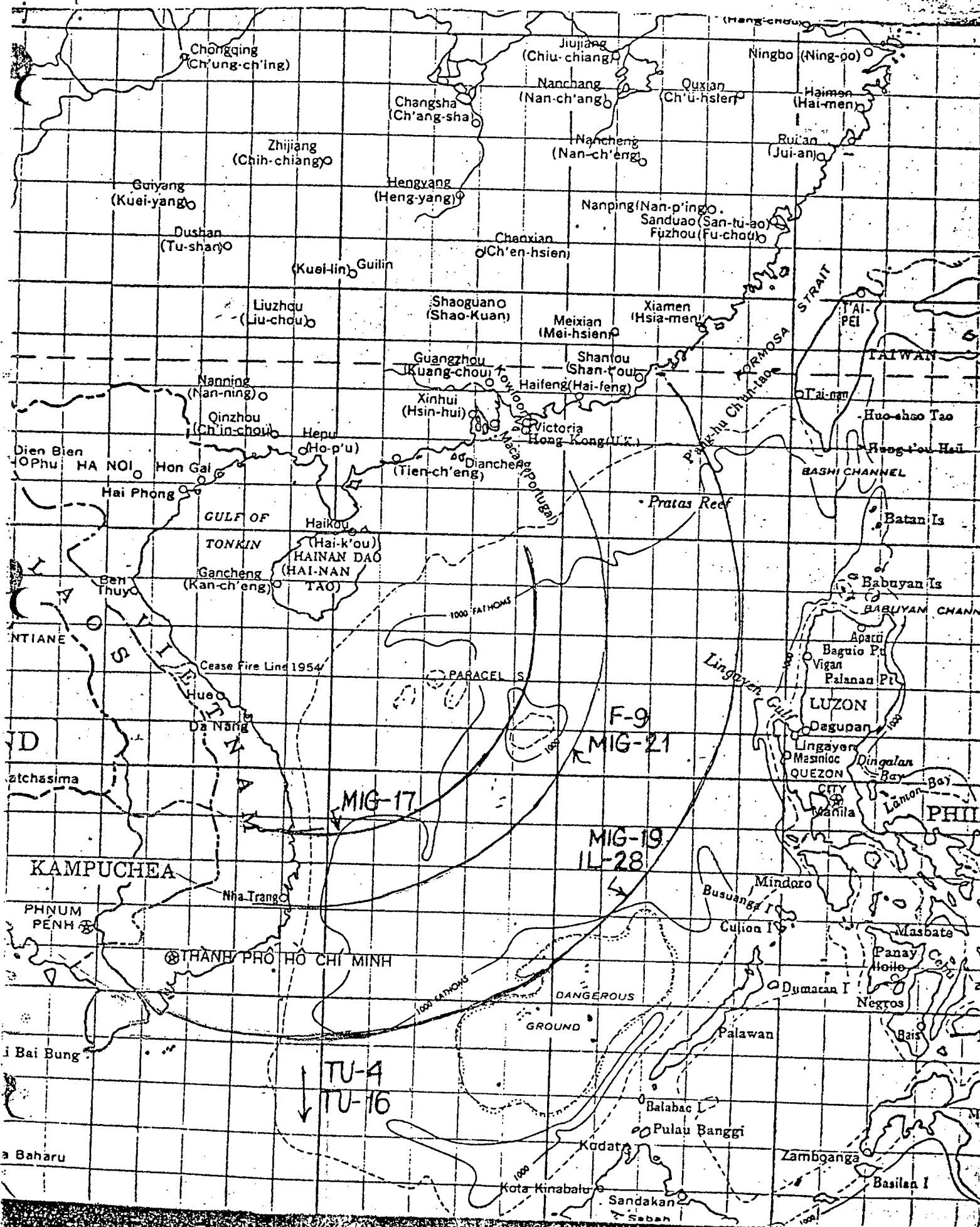
#### Air Forces

Fig. 10<sup>16</sup> shows the principal types of bombers, fighters, transports, and helicopters in the PLAAF inventory, while Fig. 11 shows operational envelopes from Hainan island, using the combat radii for the major aircraft types. As can be easily seen, the PLAAF would have no problem putting bombers, fighter-bombers, or interceptors over the Paracels; however, only one fighter, the MIG-19 is capable of operating over the Spratlys. PLAAF aircraft have never operated at such a great distance from the mainland, and even if these could be kept under positive control (i.e., given optimum weather and communications), the MIG-19 would be at the extreme end of its combat radius with little or no fuel to engage enemy aircraft.

Similarly, the TU-4, TU-16, and IL-28 could all be used over the Paracels, but only the TU-4 and TU-16 could actually deliver bombs on targets in the Spratlys. The TU-4 is a copy of the World War II U.S.

Fig. 10: PRC Air Force (PLAAF)

<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Radius (NM)</u>	<u>Payloads (lbs)</u>
TU-16/BADGER	Intermed-range bomber	1,650	6,600
TU-4/BULL	Intermed-range bomber	1,550	10,000
IL-28/BEAGLE	Medium-range bomber	550	2,200
TU-2/BAT	Medium-range bomber	570	3,300
MIG-15/FAGOT	Fighter-bomber	150	Cannon, 2-550# bombs
MIG-17/FRESCO	Interceptor	280	Cannon, 2-550# bombs
MIG-19/FARMER	Interceptor	530	Cannon, 2-550# bombs, msl
MIG-21/FISHBED	Interceptor	360	Cannon, 2-550# bombs, msl
F-9/FANTAN	Fighter-bomber	430	Unknown
LI-2/CAB	Short-range transport	550	27 troops
IL-12/COACH	Short-range transport	650	32 troops
IL-14/CRATE	Short-range transport	550	26 troops
AN-12/CUB	Medium-range transport	910	100 troops
AN-24/COKE	Short-range transport	650	38 troops
AN-26/CURL	Short-range transport	650	80 troops
MI-4/HOUND	Medium helicopter	130	14 troops
MI-6/HOOK	Heavy helicopter	165	90 troops
MI-8/HIP	Medium helicopter	115	24 troops
SA-32/SUPER FRELON	Heavy assault helicopter	220	30 troops



Boeing B-29 Super-fortress. The Chinese have less than 12, and most are believed to be delivery platforms for nuclear test devices. Both the TU-4 and the TU-16 lack the armament and electronics systems required for defense against modern, high-speed interceptors armed with cannon and radar-guided or heat-seeking missiles.

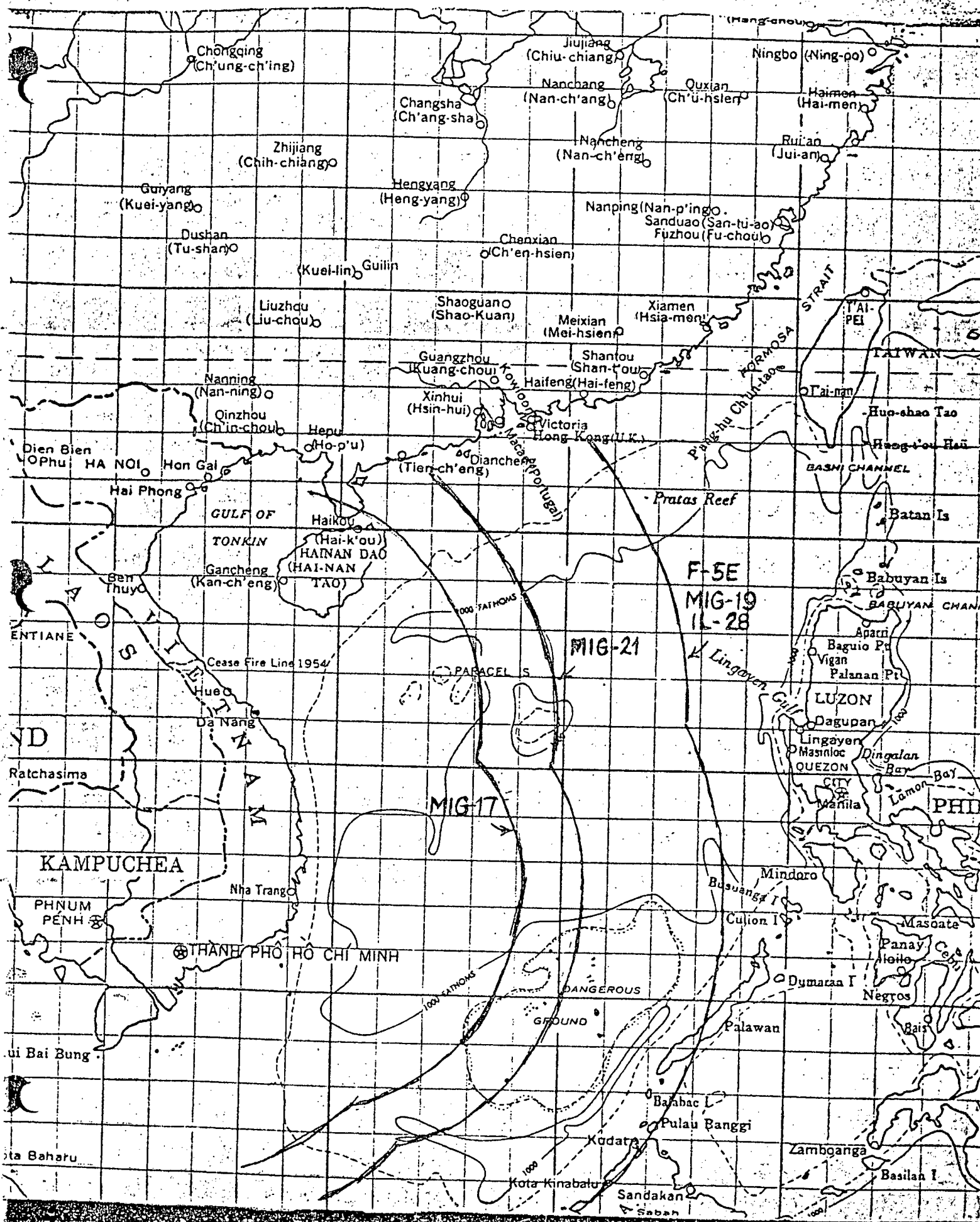
While none of the PLAAF's helicopters can reach the Spratlys, all are capable of operations over the Paracels and could conceivably be used to insert troops either to strengthen an existing garrison or to repel an attack by sea or airborne enemy troops.

All Chinese transports except the AN-2 are capable of reaching the Spratlys; however, the lack of suitable landing strips would dictate troop and equipment delivery by parachute drop. The PLA has three airborne divisions which are kept in the Wuhan area as a strategic reserve; however, these troops have never made a combat jump, the majority of Chinese transport pilots are untrained in troop dropping, and if sufficient numbers of troops could be dropped successfully, it would require an air or sea armada to keep them supplied. The airdrop and resupply operations would be require protective combat air patrols (CAP) to protect the transport, and the limitations of such protection have already been discussed.

Fig. 12<sup>17</sup> shows the SRV's aircraft inventory, and Fig. 13 depicts their maximum operational ranges from principal Vietnamese airbases. A number of points are immediately evident. Although none of its helicopters can reach either the Paracels or the Spratlys, the SRVAF has the capability of placing fighter and bomber sorties over both island groups. Additionally, the SRVAF can protect its bombers and ground attack aircraft with late-model American (F-5E) and Soviet

Fig. 12: SRV Air Force

Aircraft	Role	Radius (NM)	Payload (#)
IL-28/BEAGLE	Medium-range bomber	550	2,200 lb. bombs
MIG-17/FRESCO	Interceptor	280	Cannon, 2-550# bombs
MIG-19/FARMER	Interceptor	530	2 msls, cannon, 2-550# bomb
MIG-21/FISHBED	Interceptor	360	2 msls, cannon, rockets
SU-7/20/FITTER	Fighter-bomber	260	2 cannon, 2-1,650# bombs 2-1,100# bombs, rockets
A-37 (U.S.)	Fighter-bomber	200	Guns, bombs, rockets
F-5B/E (U.S.)	Fighter-bomber/interceptor	495(B), 570(E)	Bombs, cannon (B, E) missiles (E)
AN-2/COLT	Short-range transport	240	14 paratroops
LI-2/CAB	Short-range transport	550	27 paratroops
AN-12/CUB	Medium-range transport	910	100 paratroops
IL-14/CRATE	Short-range transport	550	26 paratroops
AN-24/COKE	Short-range transport	650	38 paratroops
C-130 (U.S.)	Medium-range transport	1,080	92 paratroops
MI-4/HOUND	Medium helicopter	130	14 troops
MI-6/HOOK	Heavy helicopter	165	90 troops
MI-8/HIP	Medium transport & assault helicopter	115	24 troops
UH-1 (U.S.)	Medium transport & assault helicopter	138	14 troops
CH-47 (U.S.)	Medium transport & assault helicopter	100	44 troops





(MIG-21) interceptors. SRVAF interceptors have greater range plus airborne-aid-to-intercept (AAI) radars, and many of the Vietnamese pilots and GCI controllers are combat veterans of the air war over North Vietnam. As can be seen in Fig. 15, SRVAF aircraft could attack surface shipping as well as air transports, moving south from China toward the Spratlys. By launching sorties from coastal bases in a "ripple effect" from North to South, the SRVAF would achieve maximum engagement time all along the projected enemy path.

#### The Soviet Military Presence

To the SRV military strength must be added the Soviet military presence in Vietnam. On November 3, 1978, Russia and Vietnam signed a "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation," the most important part of which deals with defense. It is still not clear how deeply the Russians are committed; however, the operative clause, with respect to security guarantees, is Article Six, which states:

"In case either party is attacked or threatened with attack, the two parties signatory to the treaty shall immediately consult each other...and shall take appropriate and effective measures to safeguard peace and the security of the two countries."<sup>18</sup> Initially, the SRV denied that it would provide the Soviets with bases in Vietnam; however, by mid-1979, a 14-ship Soviet flotilla, with a support force that included submarines, called at Da Nang and Camranh Bay, and Soviet TU-95D reconnaissance and TU-95F anti-submarine aircraft now fly sorties from Da Nang and Camranh.<sup>19</sup> By 1980, with the stationing of submarine tenders and repair vessels at Camranh Bay, Soviet nuclear submarines for the first time were permanently stationed east of the

Malacca Strait.<sup>20</sup> Soviet intelligence collection ships have also begun operations in the South China Sea.<sup>21</sup> During 1980, Soviet submarines, guided missile destroyers, and the aircraft carriers Minsk and Kiev have called at Camranh Bay, and Soviet technicians have been busy maintaining and extending installations.<sup>22</sup> In 1981, the Soviets established a naval task force which now operates out of Vietnam and patrols the South China Sea, in a position to cut off the oil routes from the Persian Gulf.<sup>23</sup> Soviet ships from Camranh Bay have also been seen "shadowing" Chinese naval vessels cruising off the Spratlys.<sup>24</sup> According to United States intelligence estimates, at least 30 Soviet warships are in the South China Sea at all times in the vicinity of Camranh Bay,<sup>25</sup> and the facility is seen not only as a staging point for naval units proceeding to and from the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, but also as a potential means of applying military pressure on Vietnam's neighbors.<sup>26</sup>

The intensity of the territorial claims is further exacerbated by the possibility of oil riches. The PRC is flexing its naval muscle in the South China Sea. The Soviet Union, by its military presence in Vietnam, could conceivably play a major role, should another Sino-Vietnamese conflict erupt.

What are the possibilities for a peaceful resolution to the controversy, and what are the possibilities for armed conflict?

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Part V: The Potential for Renewed Sino-Vietnamese Armed Conflict

Recent Incidents in the South China Sea

If the "war of words" between and among the various claimants leads one to believe that the controversy over the South China Sea islands is all sound and no fury, a review of the incidents in the area quickly dispels such a notion. The most significant, of course, was the January 1974 battle between China and South Vietnam in the Paracels.

In early November, 1974, three probably Chinese trawlers were sighted slowly circling a Shell Pecten oil rig located approximately 160 miles southeast of Saigon. The RVN placed its F-5E interceptors on alert and sent a small task force to the area to protect the rig.<sup>1</sup> Later reports indicated the trawlers might have been North Vietnamese.

In 1976, the Vietnamese garrison on Southwest Cay in the Spratlys fired at a Philippine aircraft. Since that time, the Philippine government has placed marines aboard the drillships, and Philippine navy ships patrol the drilling areas.<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1976, the PRC complained of Soviet naval activity in the South China Sea and reported a Soviet submarine in the vicinity of the Xisha Islands.<sup>3</sup>

In April, 1979, the PRC navy captured 24 Vietnamese naval personnel in 3 boats on a reconnaissance mission some 500-700 meters off the coast of the Xishas. All were released in February, 1980, as a goodwill gesture for Tet (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year).<sup>4</sup>

In July, 1979, a Vietnamese gunboat attacked two foreign-owned oil rig supply vessels off the coast of Vietnam. It is not known whether the attack resulted from policy or overzealousness.<sup>5</sup>

On March 3, 1980, a bloody incident occurred approximately 50 nautical miles due east of Dong Hoi, SRV, in which two Vietnamese gunboats shelled a group of 11 Chinese fishing boats, sinking one and capturing another. Eighteen people were reported missing. Hanoi claimed that the Chinese vessels were gunboats from Hainan Island which had opened fire first.<sup>5</sup>

On the following day, March 4, 1982, the PRC announced that it had seized a Vietnamese intelligence collection ship operating just off the Paracels.<sup>7</sup>

The most recent incident was in June, 1982, when off the southeast coast of Vietnam an unknown number of Vietnamese boats fired machine-guns at three U.S. Navy destroyers. Ironically, one of the destroyers was the USS Turner Joy, which was involved in the 1964 "Gulf of Tonkin Incident."

#### Possible Ways to Resolve Some Conflicting Claims

It is interesting that the Vietnamese were the instigators in virtually all these incidents, for apart from the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, there appears to be a good possibility that China might be able to resolve its claims with the other claimant states.

As stated earlier, Malaysia has never forcefully asserted its claim to the few islands it claims in the Spratlys. This could be in part because China has recognized the Malacca Strait as being in the territorial waters of Malaysia and Indonesia. The latter state was the only Asian nation to back China's claim after the 1974 Paracels incident.

In the case of Taiwan, China will probably tolerate the Chinese Nationalist presence in the Spratlys until the issue of China's

reunification is settled, as it has tolerated their presence since 1959 on Quemoy and Matsu.<sup>8</sup>

The Philippine governments' drilling activity in the Reed Bank was initially viewed as a potential threat. However, both China and Vietnam are aware that the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 obligates the U.S. to come to the defense of the Philippines in the event of an "armed attack...on the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific or on its armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the Pacific."<sup>9</sup> Manila could invoke the 1951 treaty if Philippine forces defending oil operations in the Spratlys were attacked by China or Vietnam, neither of whom are prepared to meet the overwhelming U.S. air and naval forces based at Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay, respectively.

Fortunately, this problem appears to be one which will soon solve itself. The Philippine government had initially claimed virtually all the Spratlys; however, by late 1976, there were reports of diplomatic feelers to China from Manila suggesting a division of the South China Sea under which the Philippines would give up its broader claim in exchange for Reed Bank and other unspecified parts of the Spratlys<sup>10</sup> (possibly the London Reefs and Tizard Bank areas, for it was in these areas that "significant" oil discoveries were made in early 1976).<sup>11</sup>

By 1981, the Philippine government had revised its estimate of oil reserves in the area from the original 45.2 million barrels downward to 11.5 million barrels, after major problems were encountered with difficult geology and water seepage.<sup>12</sup>

By 1982, of 34 service contracts granted by the government in offshore and onshore drilling areas, all but 10 had been abandoned. It is now believed that there is little probability of striking commercial deposits except possibly off northwest Palawan. Even so, oil deposits there are scattered, with each pocket too limited for economically feasible search operations.<sup>13</sup>

West German researchers say that the oil off Palawan comes from a marginal source. A joint study by the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank has voiced the belief that there is "very little chance" of a big oil find in the Philippines. The deposits were found to be small and quickly exhaustible.<sup>14</sup>

Since these oil deposits now appear to be of marginal importance, it would be rational for Beijing to seek agreements with Manila for some equitable boundary settlement rather than to risk confrontation with the United States.<sup>15</sup> Also, by reaching peaceful, equitable settlements with the Philippines and Malaysia, China gains the goodwill of two important members of ASEAN and avoids charges of "hegemonism" in the South China Sea. The latter is especially desirable in view of China's long years of effort to rally other Asian nations against Soviet hegemonism and more recently against Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

#### Some Future Courses of Action for China

Some observers feel that China's restraint with regard to territorial claims probably reflects Beijing's need to secure foreign capital and advanced technology for the development of its offshore oil resources. Multinationals will probably not allocate risk capital in offshore ventures prior to the resolution of conflicting claims, but conversely,



they also would not pursue exploration in a contested area against explicit Chinese opposition.<sup>17</sup>

China could use its foreign "oil partners," especially U.S. companies, as a political buffer with a two-fold function:

1) The involvement of U.S. firms in and near contested areas in the South China Sea merges American and Chinese interests in the event of a flare-up of long-standing territorial disputes, and 2) by drawing U.S. companies into joint ventures, China effectively pre-empts Hanoi's earlier hopes of wooing back U.S. oil companies to aid in Vietnam's offshore oil activity.

Also, through such commercial ventures, China could draw U.S. interests into the conflict and fill the strategic void that has existed in the South China Sea since the departure of the U.S. Navy after the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup>

Other observers contend that China's currently accommodating position reflects not only a desire to minimize conflict with the U.S., Japan, and certain other neighboring states, in the context of the Soviet challenge, but also China's limited military abilities to enforce claims.<sup>19</sup>

Still others contend that Beijing has apparently decided to postpone definitive action until its own offshore capabilities are more advanced. As China acquires, either through foreign purchase or domestic fabrication, oil rigs capable of operating in deeper waters, it could deploy them selectively in disputed areas, drilling symbolic wildcat wells in preference to sending gunboats.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, China would accelerate the development of its naval, fishing,

and commercial shipping force to better protect and exploit its territorial "acquisitions."

While the PRC appears willing to make concessions to third world countries in many international matters, there is so far no indication that it would be willing to give up its claims to the South China Sea islands.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the issue for the 1980s is not whether China will rapidly acquire the military assets to conduct complex offshore air and naval campaigns in support of these territorial disputes, but whether actions of other parties will force Beijing's hand on issues the Chinese would prefer to reserve for more opportune circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

Hanoi is clearly aware of China's inability to take over in the foreseeable future the Spratly Islands by force. Hanoi is also aware of the beneficial effects that would accrue to Vietnam if the effective occupation of the six islands in the Spratlys could be prolonged.<sup>23</sup>

Thus far, the PRC has persistently held to negotiations despite their proven futility, apparently to avoid if possible, and to delay if unavoidable, paying the high cost of securing by force nominal title to the Spratlys. However, the Chinese cannot acquiesce in a prolonged Vietnamese occupation of the Spratlys without seriously weakening their own claim of sovereignty over that archipelago.<sup>24</sup>

A further possibility has been suggested; as long as Vietnam refuses to give up these islands and China lacks sufficient naval forces to recapture them, the only way for China to press its demands upon Vietnam is to exert pressure on the land border.<sup>25</sup> However, I feel that China's experience from its last "incursion" into the SRV,

together with the desire to avoid the role of imperialist aggressor, especially in Sinophobic Southeast Asian eyes, mitigates against this course of action.

#### A Possible Sino-Vietnam Conflict

Based on all the factors previously discussed, I suggest that the following sequence of actions could occur:

- 1) The Philippines may reach an accord with China by which the Reed Bank is recognized as being within Philippine territorial waters, in exchange for which Manila withdraws all its garrisons from the Spratlys.
- 2) The SRV, taking advantage of the vacuum, may move to occupy the former Philippine "possessions," especially Pagasa Island, with its 6,000 foot runway.<sup>26</sup>
- 3) The SRV then could fly A-37 & F-5 aircraft (without ordnance and using external fuel tanks) to Pagasa and arm them with ordnance shipped to the island.
- 4) The SRV then could publicly reiterate its claim, by virtue of occupation, to all the Spratlys.
- 5) The PRC might react by sending a naval task force to the islands which would include LST's and cargo ships carrying troops.
- 6) PLAAF TU-16 bombers may then be launched from mainland bases to fly bombing missions over the Paracels, using low altitude approach and egress routes which would place them out of the range of Vietnam-based fighters.
- 7) Citing their mutual defense agreement with Vietnam, the Soviets might make available to the SRV intelligence on the movements of the

Chinese forces, collected by TU-95 aircraft from Da Nang and Camranh Bay as well as satellite-derived.

8) The Soviets also may make available an assault ship such as the IVAN ROGUNOV, along with escort ships, to transport Vietnamese troops to reinforce the Spratlys.

9) The PRC could declare a zone of hostilities around the Spratly archipelago.

10) Japan, with only a 60-90 day crude oil stockpile,<sup>27</sup> might then press the U.S. to act to keep the sea lanes open from the Malacca Strait through the South China Sea.

11) The U.S. could send naval units from Subic Bay to take up blocking positions between the Spratlys and the Vietnam coast and between the Spratlys and the Paracels (to intercept the Chinese task force).

12) The U.S. could then publicly pressure the Soviets to assist in bringing the matter before the United Nations for a final determination on the status of the islands.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel that if hostilities break out over the issue of the off-shore islands, the SRV will be the instigator, and while oil might be Vietnam's principal reason, the SRV would be encouraged by its Soviet sponsor because such action serves the strategic interests of the Soviet Union. The Soviet military presence in Vietnam is in itself a significant threat to the security of the sea lanes, and Soviet forces are capable of limited interventions on behalf of regional allies such as Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> Vietnam well knows the limits of Chinese military power

as well as the limits on U.S. action in the Pacific, and may act with the expectation that if the issue is placed before the U.N., the outcome will be the award of the Paracels to China and the Spratlys to Vietnam.

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