

THE DISPUTED ISLANDS IN SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is surrounded by China to the north, the Philippines to the east and Vietnam and Malaysia to the west and south. In the area there are numerous reefs, shoals and banks associated with three so-called groups of islands: Pratas, Paracels and Spratlys. The Pratas consists of one island located 2°N., 117°E. and 160 miles southeast of Hongkong (Figure 1). The Paracels group has ten islands: Tree, Rocky, Lincoln, Woody, Triton, Money, Pattle, Robert, Drummond and Duncan, located between 111° - 113°E. and 16°- 17°N. Woody Island is about 150 miles from Hainan Island and 240 miles from Vietnam. The Spratlys group consists of the following islands: Northeastern Cay, Southwestern Cay, Thitu, Itu-aba, Namyt, Sin Cowo, Pearson, Cay Marine, Lizzie Weber, West York, Flat, Amy Douglas, Hanshan, Eldad, Løaita, Amboyne Cay and Spratlys located between 4°- 12°N. and 109°- 118°E. Itu-Aba Island is 550 miles from mainland China.

All the islands are small in size and low in elevation. Many are less than one square mile and 15 feet above sea level, such as Spratlys, Triton, Itu-aba, Flat, and Lincoln. Flat Island is only 40 by 100 yards. The highest island is Namyt (61 feet) and the largest, Pearson (5 square miles) including a large lagoon. It is an atoll reef with rocks 3-6 feet above high water.

The islands are mainly of coral origin and they sit on the continental shelf off coastal China, Vietnam and Malaysia. The Palawan, Manila, and West Luzon deep ocean trough separate the islands from the Philippines and the deep China Basin separates the Praty group from the Pratas and Paracel Islands (Figure 1). The China Basin covers an area of 720,000 square miles and is up to 13,000 feet deep. Its deep floor is hilly. "In contrast to the flat shelves, most side slopes of the China Basin are very irregular owing to the presence of fault blocks, volcanoes and calcareous reef structures." (Emery, 1972 p841).

Most of the islands are tropical in climate. There is no winter and monsoon winds are from the northeast in winter and the southwest in summer. The annual amount of rainfall varies but is usually over 40 inches.

Tropical rainforests including coconut palm and mangrove are found in Pattle, Southwest Cay, Loaita, West York, Itu-aba and Robert. In drier spots, grasses and bushes are found in Spratly, Namshan, Thitu, Namyit and Lincoln. Fresh water from wells is reported in Pattle, Lincoln and Robert. Sea birds are found on Woody, Lincoln, Triton and Pattle where phosphate is obtained from guano deposits. These deposits cover seventy per cent of the area of Woody and Lincoln Islands. The Pattle Island has facilities for shipping 1,000 tons of phosphate guano monthly to China.

Among the submerged banks, shoals and reefs, the Macclesfield Bank located east of the Paracel Islands is a submerged atoll, 75 miles long in a north-easterly and southeasterly direction. At the edge of the bank is a coral rim about 3 miles wide and from 42 to 60 feet deep. In the dangerous area of the Spratlys group the typical atolls are submerged with few rocks above high or low water. For example, the rocks in the Alicia Annie Reef stand one foot above high water as compared with 3 feet in the London and South Reefs and first Thomas Shoal, 4 feet in the Johnson and Royal Charlotte Reefs, 5 feet in the Cuarteron and Mariveles Reefs and 10 feet in the Swallow Reef. The Johnson Reef has brown volcanic rock and white coral around the inner rim. The Reef encloses a lagoon. The Piegion Reef is triangle in shape enclosing a lagoon which has a centrally located coral rock.

The shallow waters near the islands, shoals, atolls and banks in the South China Sea are less than 600 feet deep over the shelf areas. Here fishing resources include tortoise and tuna. Chinese fishermen from Hainan and Philipinos frequently visit the islands including the Nanshan Island.

The waters are part of the navigation routes between Singapore and Hongkong-Manila-Shanghai, between Manila and Saigon-Bangkok-Djakarta and between Hongkong and Saigon-Djakarta. Lighthouses are found in Pratas, Sin Cowo, Itu-aba and Searborough Shoal located east of Macclesfield Bank. Here there are also dumping grounds.

"The area of the South China Sea is 1,460,000 square miles including 720,000 square miles in the China Basin." (Emery 1972, p 842) Thus, the shelf area is estimated at 740,000 square miles. The surface of the shelf is covered with mud and sand but below these recent deposits there are up to 11,000 feet of sediments including the Neogene formation which is the most important petroleum bearing stratum in all the Far East countries. L. G. Wells states that about 2 per cent of the world's shelf has excellent quality for bearing oil averaging 900,000 barrels per square mile (Wells, 1965, p 1680). About 15 per cent of the world's shelf has favorable quality for bearing oil averaging 320,000 barrels per square mile. It is estimated that the shelf in the South China Sea contains 49 billion barrels of petroleum deposits. These deposits are greater than the petroleum deposits in China, Vietnam or the Philippines.

At the present time, the Philippines has designated a shelf area of 47 square miles southwest of Palawan Island for oil concession. The South Vietnam government has designated a 30 block area of 96,500 square miles for oil leases. Most of the leases are in the Gulf of Thailand and additional blocks extend toward the shelf in South China. Several large oil companies, such as Shell, Mobil and Exxon have agreed to pay a royalty of 12.5 per cent and 55 per cent in tax to the Vietnam government.

The Chinese Communist and Nationalist governments claim the island in the South China Sea for several reasons: (1) the islands were first discovered by Chinese including Cheng Ho during his famous seven overseas voyages made between 1404 and 1433 of the Ming Dynasty. The Ming coins were uncovered in Paracels

during the thirties. Many Spratly Islands are named after Cheng Ho and his associates, such as Tizard Reefs called Cheng Ho Reefs, Flat Island called Fee-Sin Island, Nanshan Island called Ma-Ho Island and London Reefs called I-Chin Reefs; (2) the islands, such as Pratas and Woody, are closer to China than any other contry; (3) there are records of Chinese settlement and control of the islands. Before 1907 Chinese fishermen had established a village including temples in Pratas. During that year 100 Japanese inhabited the island. The Manchu government protested the illegal action to the Japanese government. The Japanese were paid 130,000 Chinese silver dollars to leave the island.

In 1910 three Chinese naval vessels under orders of the Manchu government landed at Pracels. The purpose was to survey the islands for development. The survey was not completed until 1921 when a Chinese merchant, S.L. Ho obtained a license from the Kwangtung province for developing Guano and other resources in the Woody and Lincoln Islands of the Pracels group. 50 to 70 acres of farms were developed. Ho ran short of capital and allowed the company to be run by the Japanese. Thus, his license was revoked in 1928 when the Japanese left the islands and Professor P.F. Shen and his associate from Chungshan University in Canton arrived on the islands to conduct a detailed survey.

In 1933 three French reconnaissance ships, De Lanessan, Alerte and Astrolabe, reported three Chinese living on Spratly and observed Chinese tree houses and statues of worship in Itu-aba. Chinese settlements were also found in other islands located nearby.

During World War II Japan occupied all the islands in the South China Sea and place them under the administration of Kaohsiung, Taiwan. After the defeat of Japan, the Nationalist navy in 1946 took over the control of Pratas, Paracells and Itu-aba Island of the Spratlys group. They withdrew from Pratas and Paracels in 1948 prior to the Communist take-over of these island in 1950.

According to the United States Navy, two large and several small buildings, temples, a meteorological station, water work and jetty of 9 by 60 feet were observed from the Pattle Island in the 1960's. A three story tower was found in Lincoln Island.

At the present time the Nationalist forces occupy Itu-aba. A Chinese newspaperman reported recently that walking slowly, he encircled the whole island in one afternoon. It took only one hour.

In early 1974, the South Vietnamese navy landed on four of the Pracels Islands, i.e., Robert, Pattle, Duncan and Money. They were forced to withdraw by the Chinese Communist Forces.

The South Vietnam government claims the Paracels and Spratlys Islands. Some of the islands, such as Spratly, are closer to Vietnam. In 1834 the Minh Mang Empire included the islands in Vietnamese maps. In 1927 and 1930 the French government that controlled Vietnam sent several ships to reconnoiter the Paracels and placed a French flag on one of the islands. In 1933 three French ships were sent to the Spratlys Islands and the French government occupied Spratly, Amboyna Cay, Itu-aba, Northeastern Cay, Southwestern Cay, Loaita and Thi Tu which were administered by Baria Province in South Vietnam. At the San Francisco Peace Conference of 1951, when Japan renounced possession of the Pratllys and Pracel Islands, the Vietnamese dlegation declared its rights over the Islands. In 1956 the Pratllys and Paracels were placed under the administration of the Phuoc Tuy province, South Vietnam. In early 1974 South Vietnam took actual possession of Spratly, Amboyna Cay, Northeastern Cay, Southwestern Cay, Loaita, and Thi Tu, despite protests from the Chinese Communist and Nationalist governments and from the Philippines. The Spratly Islands which were not claimed by Vietnam are Nanshan, Amy Douglas, Eldad, Lizzie Weber, Pearson and Cay Marine.

The Philippines claims Itu-aba and at least six more nearby islands. The islands are considered strategically important and are closer to the Philippines. Islands such as Nanshan have been frequently inhabited by Filipino fishermen. The islands were first discovered by a Filipino, Tomas Cloma, during his voyages between 1947 and 1950.

Carlos P. Romula, foreign secretary of the Philippine Islands, declared in early 1974 that the Philippines had occupied the Patag, Lawak, Pagasa, Kota, Likas and Parola Islands, located 200 miles east of Pratlly Island. The islands were used by the Japanese for the invasion of the Philippines during World War II. Thus, the Philippines have every right to secure the area for its own protection.

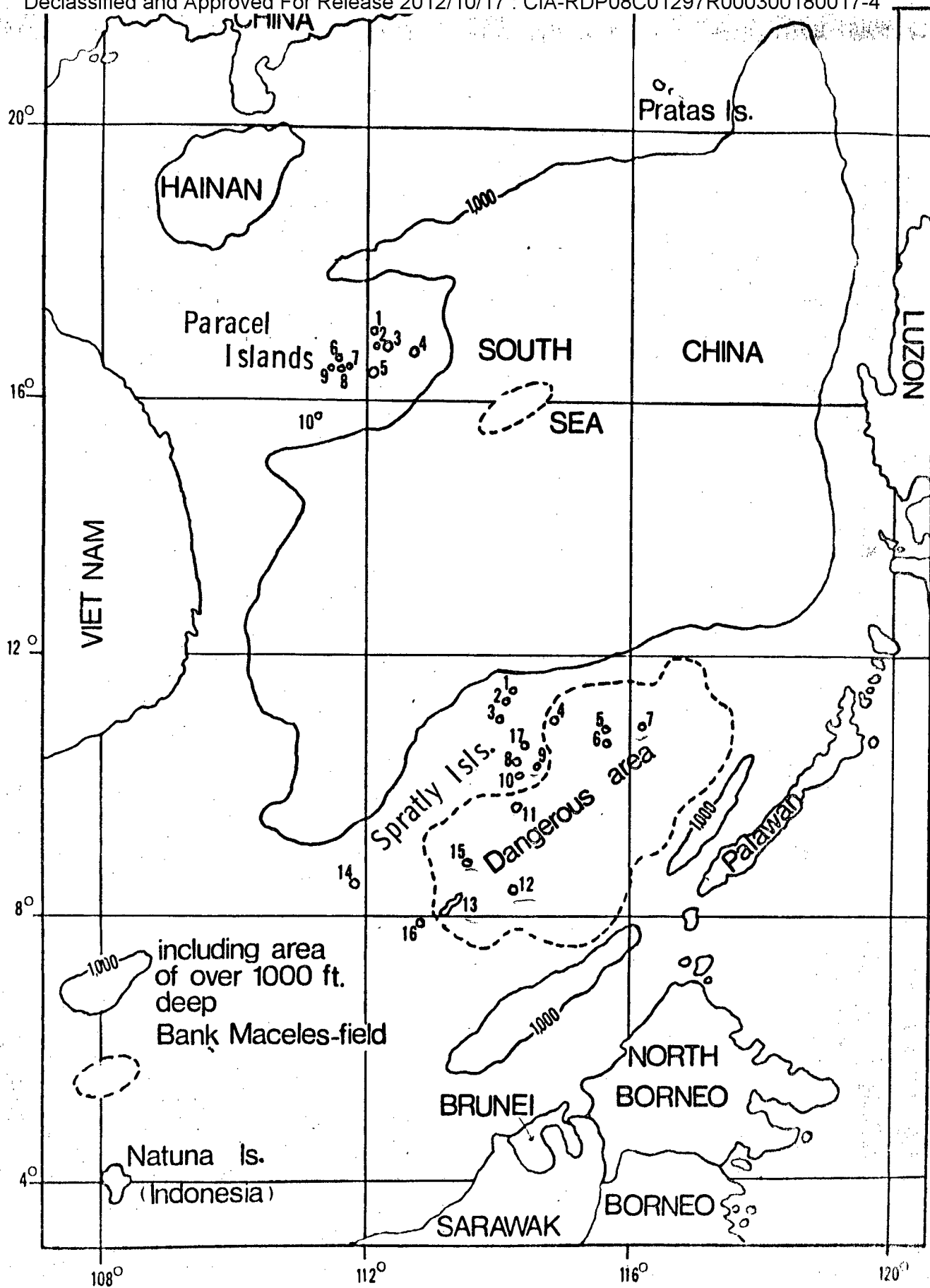
Under Article II of the Treaty of Peace with Japan, signed in San Francisco in 1951, Japan renounced all rights, title and claims to the Spratlys and Paracels Islands. It is obvious from the Treaty that the Paracels and Spratly were never ceded to any country. They are subject to the disposition of the Allies in the last world war. No country can use its forces to acquire sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys Islands.

An economic reason not officially mentioned by the parties concerned, is the oil potential near the islands. Whoever controls the island has the exclusive right to explore the oil resources un the shelf of the island.

Among all the factors for possession of a new territory, the one accepted internationally is actual occupance. Location, history and natural resources are secondary. Thus, the present pattern of occupance of the islands in the South China Sea will play an important role in the final settlement of the areas.

REFERENCES CITES

1. Emery, K.O. and others, Structure and Stratigraphy of China Basin, American Association of Petroleum Geologists Bulletin, Vol. 56, No. 5 (May 1972) p 841
2. Emery, K.O. and others, op. cit. p 842
3. Wells, L.G. World Offshore Petroeum Resources, The American Association of Petroleum Geologists Bulletin, Vol. 49, No.10 (October 1965) p 1680



Footnote for Figure I

The islets in Figure I are 1, Tree, 2, Woody, 3, Rocky, 4, Lincoln 5, Duncan, 6, Pattle, 7, Drummond, 8, Robert, 9, Money and 10, Triton in the Paracel group. In the Spratly group the islets are 1, Northeast Cay, 2, Southwest Cay, 3, Thi-tu, 4, West York, 5, Flat, 6, Nanshan, 7, Amy Douglas, 8, Itu-aba, 9, Eldid, 10, Namyit, 11, Sin Cowo, 12, Cay Marine, 13, Lizzie Weber, 14, Spratly, 15, Pearson, 16, Amboyna Cay, and 17, Loaita.

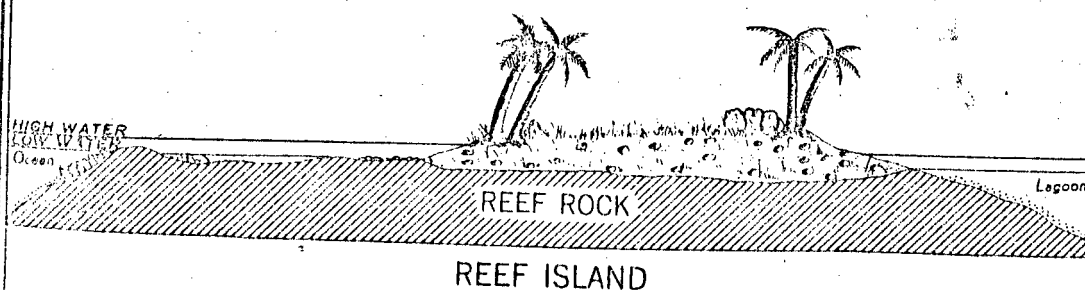
DIAGRAMS OF TYPICAL ATOLL—REEF RIMS IN DANGEROUS GROUND



REEF RIM AWASH AT LOW WATER



REEF RIM AWASH IN PLACES AT HIGH WATER



REEF ISLAND

