CHAPTER V

DISPUTE OVER THE SPARTLYS
DISPUTES OVER THE SPRATLYS

The ownership of the Spratly group of islands in the South China Sea is another bone of contention between China and Vietnam. Known also as Nansha, the island group comprises several small islands, shoals and sandbanks scattered over a wide area and is situated about 480 kilometres west of the Philippines, about 350 kilometres from the eastern coast of Vietnam and nearly 1,000 kilometres from the Chinese mainland. Before 1974, the Spratlys had little economic value, but in the 1970s, they suddenly became the focus of international attention when oil reserves were discovered in the South China Sea. Today, several nations lay claim to some or all of the Spratlys. Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic have occupation forces on several of the islands. Japanese oil interests are also covetous of the oil potential in the Spratlys.

The U.S. protege for staking claims on the territory was the Marcos regime in the Philippines. The Philippines, which is almost totally dependent on imports for its oil needs and spends about one-third ($1,000 Million) of the country's export earnings on oil imports could do with a little oil of its own. At the heart of the Philippine thrust is Puerto Princesa, capital of the large island province of Palawan, the westernmost region of the Philippines. The major object of the conflict between Manila and other contenders, particularly Vietnam, is a cluster of small islands in the eastern part of the Spratlys known as Kalayaan. This cluster is separated from the Philippines and Vietnam by deep ocean trenches. Three of the islands in the Kalayaan group have been under Vietnamese occupation since 1975, while the Philippines occupied six of them in 1971. Taiwanese forces have held one island since World War II, when the United States put them there to keep a check on Japanese ships. The arms build-up in the Spratlys received a big push when oil was discovered west of Palawan in 1976.  

It is a busy area for oil prospecting. American, European and Japanese consortia have acquired prospecting rights around the Tiaoyus. But discovery of crude in these fields could only make the area more troubled. An indication of this was given in September 1970, when amid much excitement in Taipei a band of journalists and marines from Taiwan visited the island and hoisted the Kuomintang flag there. The Japanese reacted by instructing the authorities in the Ryukyus to send armed coast guard to tear down the flag and chase away the Taiwanese fishing boats from the area at gunpoint. Peking reacted to the Japanese move by declaring officially:

"There are indeed rich oil, mineral gas and other mineral resources on the sea floor in the water areas around China's Taiwan province and its attendant islands and the shallow water areas around China's Taiwan province and its attendant islands and the shallow water areas closer to China all belong to China, their rightful owner, and we will not permit others to put their fingers on them." 3

The Japanese government and business interests

3. Ibid.
have their sights set on two large sources of offshore oil on the Asian Pacific Rim, one of them in the Yellow Sea-East China Sea area off the Chinese continental shelf and the other off the Vietnam coast. Japanese oil interests had been hopeful of teaming up with one of the seven international oil giants, Gulf Oil, to obtain concessions from the former Saigon regime. According to Keith Buchanan:

"The pattern which is emerging is that of a multi-national drive, spearheaded by the United States to control the potential oil wealth of offshore Asia. This is designed to assure U.S. oil needs to provide economic living space and resources for a rapidly expanding Japan (within the framework of the Pacific Rim strategy), and to open up new and profitable fields for the capital and technology of the developed nations. By 1970 pro-Western regimes had been established in all the countries margining the major offshore oil deposits of Southeast Asia and around the great oil and gas reservoir of the Chinese continental shelf. 4

The Chinese assert that the Spratlys were accepted by Vietnam as Chinese territory in 1956. According to a report in the People's Daily, the then deputy Foreign Minister of Hanoi, Ung Van Khiem

4. Ibid.
supported China's claim. In 1960 Spratlys were identified on a map prepared by the people's Army of Vietnam by their Chinese name Nansha with notes in brackets indicating they were Chinese territory.\(^5\)

China claims to have had jurisdiction over the territory since the second century B.C. (Han dynasty) and has published a memorandum saying that in the Song and Yuan dynasties, China named these islands Qianlichangsha and Wanlishitang respectively. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese government put the Xisha and Nansha islands under the jurisdiction of Qiongzhou prefecture, then in Guangdong province.\(^6\)

In recent years, facing competing territorial claims over the Spratlys, China began a legitimation process. In October 1987 Beijing announced the creation of a new province of Hainan in which the Paracels and Spratlys were merged. The new province was granted special economic status with provincial power. Naval manoeuvres were commenced in the region thereafter. It is believed that China

\(^5\) The Rising Nepal (Kathmandu), 31 March 1988

has located 25 submarines, five destroyers and over 200 coastal attack craft, to protect the security of the islands of the South China Sea.  

These Chinese activities were frowned upon by the Southeast Asian contenders for the Spratlys, but they did not make their displeasure visibly known. Vietnam however was alarmed and began to take defensive measures. Vietnam had occupied the Spratlys in 1975 after the fall of the Saigon regime. It had published new maps then to claim its jurisdiction over the islands. Hanoi's claim to the islands is mostly based on the decrees and actions in the 1950s and 1960s of the then South Vietnamese government. China's claims were not disputed by Hanoi until 1975 because it was then receiving crucial aid from Peking in its war against France and the United States. Vietnam insists that China never had a physical presence on the islands until January 1988. In late February 1988, Hanoi published what it claimed was evidence that Vietnam had controlled the Spratlys continuously since 1815 when one of its kings, Gia Long sent a team to the island to chart sea routes. During the French colonial

period, Vietnam says, the French governor-general planted flags and markers on the islands.\textsuperscript{8}

On March 1, 1988 Chinese and Vietnamese warships clashed with each other near the Spratlys. Cina had landed troops on two reefs of the Spratlys under Vietnamese occupation. The Chinese warships partially sank three Vietnamese freighters and blocked the rescue of 76 sailors from the burning ships. The Vietnamese despatched two unarmed life-boats for rescue flying Red Cross flags but they were prevented from entering the area. The Government in Hanoi on 16 March summoned Beijing's ambassador to request China to "order its warships to stand off and not prevent Vietnamese vessels from coming to the rescue of sailors on board the burning freighters."\textsuperscript{9} Hanoi Radio asserted that China's six-ship convoy was armed with missiles and 100 mm guns, while its freighters were carrying grain and other food and were only lightly armed for self-defence. Hanoi said that China provoked the clash "to pave the way for its use of force on the seas in the days

\textsuperscript{8} Murray Hiebert (No, Not Another War) \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review}, Vol.140, no.18, 5 May 1988, p.24.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Indian Express}, New Delhi, 18 March 1988.
ahead in order to occupy Vietnam's Truong Sa (Spratly) archipelago". According to Vietnamese sources about 74 Vietnamese servicemen were missing after the clash and it was believed that half of them were dead. The number of Chinese casualties was not known.

The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry in Hanoi said in a statement on 16 March 1988 that the Chinese authorities must immediately put an end to their armed provocation and withdraw their vessels from Vietnamese territorial waters off the Truong Sa archipelago. It accused China of distorting facts. It condemned China for what it called an armed attack on two Vietnamese cargo ships conducting routine operations.  

The Chinese Foreign Ministry delivered a strong protest to the Vietnamese ambassador in Beijing and demanded that Hanoi withdraw from the archipelago or face the consequences. It accused Vietnamese warships of firing on Chinese vessels on patrol near the archipelago.

12. Ibid
In any strategic offensive in the Spratlys, air support is a crucial factor. Chinese H6 Badger bombers - Beijing's only combat aircraft - is capable of reaching the Spratlys from mainland bases without inflight refuelling. But the Chinese navy lacks sophisticated anti-aircraft defences. The area of likely combat is near the maximum range of Vietnamese fighter aircraft, but without air cover, the Vietnamese position is vulnerable to the Badgers which are armed with C61 air to ship missiles. Vietnam is inadequately equipped to match the Chinese military might. It is reported that in view of the crisis over the Spratlys, Hanoi ordered refits of warships - including two Soviet Petya II class frigates - to be speeded up to meet any escalation of the dispute. The Vietnamese navy has a total of seven frigates and about 50 coastal attack craft compared with the Chinese naval strength in the region of 25 submarines, five destroyers and 200 coastal attack craft concentrated on the region. Vietnam's MiG 23, Su 22 fighters lack sophistication. There is also not much


hope of help from Vietnam's Soviet ally which is on the road to normalization with China, and which did not even condemn the Chinese action of 14 March.

Within Vietnam there is strong suspicion of possible Chinese subversion and aggression. The army is using the current hostilities to appeal to the patriotism of young men in the south to be prepared. In the north the factories put up signs about the conflict and called on workers to produce more for their country. Sources in Hanoi said that after March 1988, China increased its reconnaissance around 21 Vietnamese military outposts. The Chinese plan to send an oceanographic team to the islands in mid April was seen as "a new scheme ... to occupy more Vietnamese territories in the Truong Sa archipelago". In turn, China says that Vietnam has increased its naval presence to about 30 ships since the clash on 14 March.

In late March 1988, Vietnam proposed joint Foreign Ministerial talks to be held in the Chinese capital at the earliest to discuss not only the

sovereignty of the Spratlys but also the contested Paracels. Vietnam also drew the support of the UN Secretary General to help initiate a meaningful negotiation. Hanoi has been requesting China not to resort to force to resolve the conflict. It has been careful to deal with the Chinese diplomatically in view of any possible negotiation by throwing responsibility for the tension on certain people in power in Beijing. The Chinese however are not ready for talks. They have repeatedly rebuffed numerous Vietnamese entreaties to solve the Spratlys tangle and improve relations. The News from China declares the official view:

It must be pointed out emphatically that in view of the foreign infringement upon China's sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha islands, the Government of the People's Republic of China has issued statements on many occasions reiterating its indisputable territorial sovereignty over these two archipelagos. All maps published by the People's Republic of China clearly mark the Xisha and Nansha island as part of Chinese territory. As early as March 1959, China's Hainan Administrative Region established on Yongking island of the Xisha islands an "office of the Xisha, Nansha and Zhongsha islands", which was renamed the Revolutionary Committee of the Xisha, Zhongsha and Nansha islands of Guangdong province" in 1969. In January 1974, the People's Liberation Army and the militiamen of China drove the invading South Vietnamese troops out of the Xisha islands in defence of China's territorial sovereignty.
Over a long period of time, Chinese troops, fishermen and scientific workers have never ceased patrolling, surveying and fishing and other productive activities on the Xisha and Nansha islands and their adjacent waters. 16

Internationally, the renewed Sino-Vietnamese conflict over the Spratlys has important ramifications, particularly for the Asian region. At the root of it all is the speculation about China's reasons for escalating the conflict. The Chinese seizure of the Paracels in 1974 reflected the deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations in the aftermath of what the Vietnamese saw as China's betrayal of their independence struggle against the U.S. in 1972. The Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979 was meant to be a salutary lesson to the Vietnamese for their earlier invasion of Kampuchea, though the lesson backfired on China. The clash at the Spratlys in March 1988 is in continuation of the Chinese desire to weaken Vietnam and lower its regional profile.

As the Spratlys along with the Paracels form a strategic archipelago which straddles key sea routes linking the Indian Ocean with the Pacific any ambitious powers in the region will try to have

a foothold there. But the Chinese have the capacity
to push the others out and occupy the areas in
question. The regional powers are unwilling to
confront China, the superpowers seek a policy of
rapprochement with it, and the ASEAN states are also
apparently supporting the Chinese regional perception
and outlook. Vietnam is the only country in the
region to defy Chinese ambitions, but it lacks suffi-
cient economic and military clout and regional
backing to confront the Chinese.

The Chinese policy had been to bleed Vietnam
in Kampuchea ever since December 1978. Now there are
prospects of solving the Kampuchean imbroglio. The
Vietnamese forces are withdrawing in phases and are
likely to withdraw fully by 1990 with or without an
agreement. They are serious about their national
reconstruction. The Spratlys dispute is a tactical
Chinese manoeuvre to substitute Kampuchea now and
continue the Chinese way of bleeding Vietnam. The
Chinese are astutely searching for new ways to create
tensions for Vietnam and block its path of economic
development. Aware of this trap the Vietnamese continue
to advocate a peaceful negotiated settlement of the
dispute.