

SOUTH EAST ASIA'S POST COLD WAR GEOPOLITICS

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Global Affairs: The American Journal of Geopolitics.
Winter, 1993, Vol. VIII, No. 1. p. 40 – 57

The Cold war is over. In Southeast Asia the United States is evacuating Subic Bay and scaling down its naval forces, and Russia (the former Soviet Union) is leaving Cam Ranh Bay, ending its military presence in Vietnam. This, however, does not herald peace and tranquility for Southeast Asia. As the two main protagonists of the Cold War move out, a new great power is pushing its way in to fill the vacuum. That great power is China. In the coming years, the nations of Southeast Asia will have to face new realities resulting from the resurgence of China into the South China Sea. Whether they will be faced with a distasteful open confrontation with their northern giant is not yet clear. That will depend on how far and how hard China will push its way southward. This "China factor" will be a major factor, if not *the* major factor, in the geopolitics of post Cold War Southeast Asia. In past years, and more so recently, Chinese leaders have taken great pains to stress that China has no hegemonist design in Southeast Asia because it wants to concentrate its effort on economic development and needs a peaceful environment. In a speech before the United Nations in January this year, Premier Li Peng said China "will never become a threat to any country or any region in the world... does not seek a sphere of influence for itself,...does not seek hegemony now and will not seek hegemony in the future when it grows stronger."¹ During a tour of Southeast Asia in the same month, President Yang Shangkun said in Singapore: "China now concentrates its efforts on the modernization drive, needs an environmental of stable peace."² At a press conference in Beijing during the Seventh National People's Congress in March, replying to the question whether China would fill the vacuum left by the reduced military presence of the superpowers in Asia, China Foreign Minister Qian Qichen said "China opposes hegemonism and it will never seek to be a superpower, so there is no such thing as 'filling up the vacuum'.³

Yet China has taken a number of actions that led to a contrary interpretation. On February 25, the National People's Congress passed the "Law on the People's Republic of China on Its Territorial waters and Contiguous Areas," claiming Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu (Sengokaku), The Penghu (Pescadores), the Xisha (Paracels), the Nansha (Spratleys), the Dongsha (Pratas bank) and the Zhongsha (Meccles Field) Islands. With the exception of Indonesia, all the nations of Southeast Asia reacted strongly. According to China's Foreign Ministry the law was "a normal domestic legislative process," simply reiterating China's long-time claims on vast territorial waters, and the timing of its enactment "was by no means intended to offend countries involved in the dispute."⁴ "But

¹ *Beijing Review*, February 17-23, 1992.

² *Beijing Review*, January 20-26, 1992.

³ *Beijing Review*, April 6-12, 1992.

⁴ Statement by Cheng Jiachuan, deputy director of the Treaty Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Beijing Review*, March 30-April 5, 1992.

the countries of the region were alarmed because the law claims Chinese jurisdiction not only over the islands named, but also over the surrounding air and waters as “inland waters”. It extends Chinese sovereignty to a large sector of the western Pacific - some 800,000 square kilometers – from north of Taiwan to Malaysia, practically turning the whole South China Sea into a “Chinese Lake.”⁵ Under the law non-military vessels are accorded right of free passage, but nuclear-powered ships must have China’s permission. Lastly, the law authorizes the navy to use force to back up China’s claims. Parallel to the assertion of its sovereignty, China has increased defense spending since the Tiananmen incident. In 1990 its military budget increased by 15 percent over the previous year; it rose again by 12 percent in 1991, to \$ 5.5 billion, i.e. 9 percent of GNP. It is expected to increase by 10 percent annually over the next four years.⁶ The build-up includes the purchase in 1991 from the Soviet Union of 24 Su-27s having the capability of taking off from an aircraft carrier, and six IL transport planes of an improved model, the purchase of air-to-air refueling aircraft from Iran, and of air-to-air missiles from Israel, construction of a one kilometer-long air strip on Woody Island in the Paracels (thereby extending the China Air Force’s patrol capability), negotiations for the purchase from the Ukraine of an aircraft carrier of the Kutznetsov-class, the Varyag (67,5000 tones and capable of carrying to 18 Su-27s or 35 Migs-25s), and the building of a water reservoir on the Paracels for the maintenance of troops.⁷

The Chinese Military Buildup

Reports also say that China has established a naval infantry brigade with the capability of maintaining it at sea for 30 days; that since 1984 flight crews have been practicing “deck-landing” and undergoing flight training from carrier-like platforms in southern China - a clear indication that China is seeking to establish a sea-based air capability.⁸ In addition to a fleet of 50 submarines, 57 destroyers and frigates, 700 patrol and coastal vessels,⁹ the acquisition of an aircraft carrier will enable it to project its power some 4000 kilometers to the south with “dramatic visual impact”.¹⁰ Meantime, work has been going on for many years to transform Hainan Island into an important forward base.

Politically, China has taken strong measures, including force, to assert its claims. So far, the main target has been Vietnam - which had already experienced two armed confrontations with China in the disputed areas and has been under strong pressure in the past year. In January 1974, the Chinese navy sank a South Vietnamese patrol boat, captured 48 Vietnamese sailors and one U.S adviser; and in March 1988, it sank three Vietnamese (Communist) transport troops, killed 72 sailors and took nine prisoners. On May 8 this year, China signed with an American firm, Crestone Energy Corporation of Denver, Colorado, for oil exploration on a shoal 650 km from the Vietnamese coast

⁵ *Business Times*, July 20, 1992.

⁶ Statement by Wang Yan, Vice-President of the China National Off Shore Oil Company. *Business Times*, July 20, 1992.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The Straits Times*, August 1, 1992.

⁹ *The Nation* (Bangkok), July 19, 1992.

¹⁰ Gary Klintworth, *The Straits Times*, August 1, 1992.

claimed by Vietnam, and on July 7 this year it sent troops to place border markers on a reef 320 Kilometres from the Vietnamese coast on Vietnam's continental shelf.¹¹ The Chinese Foreign Ministry acknowledged these facts and, according to Crestone, had promised to give the firm the protection of the Chinese Navy.¹² In August this year, China sent a seismic survey and an oil drilling ship to operate deep inside in the Gulf of Tonkin, 47 nautical miles west of the central line dividing the Gulf, only 70 nautical miles from Vietnam's major northern port of Haiphong. The ships ignored Vietnamese orders to stop. In addition, between June and September this year, the Chinese authorities seized 20 Vietnamese freighters sailing through the passage between Hainan and the mainland, impounded them and confiscated their cargoes without informing the Vietnamese. In this connection, Chinese ships have also attacked Japanese ships 220 kilometres from Diaoyu Island: 15 such attacks were recorded since March 1991.¹³

Perhaps the most ominous aspect is the Chinese reference to the need for *sheng cun kung jian*, "living space", a term reminiscent of *lebensraum*, the theme of a restricted internal document obtained and translated by the United States. Evoking the possibility of the exhaustion of the Xinjiang oil fields, the document says that the China Sea, which holds estimated oil reserves worth \$1 trillion, will be "a main fallback position for *lebensraum* for the Chinese people in the coming century." Consequently, "development southward is perhaps a strategic orientation we will have to choose," the document says. Although it is technically not official "it clearly reflects the views of government experts", says the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.¹⁴ The reaction in Southeast Asia to China's claims is a regional consensus which views China as "a threat to peace and stability," writes one regional analyst.¹⁵ What worries ASEAN, say another, is that because "China has been the most aggressive in staking claim over the entire Spratlys," it is regarded "more as a potential bully".¹⁶

Indeed, B.A. Hamzah, assistant director of Malaysia's Institute of Strategic Studies, notes that those who have put their faith in a Chinese non-hegemonistic foreign policy must have been "stunned" by Beijing's recent moves. He speaks about China reverting to "old back-stabbing habits," to the revival of "the Middle Kingdom mentality." China's intentions in the South China Sea and much more than settling old scores with Vietnam, he says.

"Peking's recent actions strongly suggest that its ultimate aim is to replace the U.S and Russia in the region

"China certainly has geostrategic interests beyond the South China Sea. Within the enclosed sea China's assertiveness is grounded in political, strategic, military as well as economic considerations. What we are now witnessing is a *Pax Sinica*

¹¹ *Business Times*, July 20, 1992.

¹² Statement by Wang Yan, Vice-President of the China National Off Shore Oil Company. *Business Times*, July 20, 1992.

¹³ *Business Times*, September 5-6 and 13, 1992, and *The Straits Times*, September 1, 1992.

¹⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992.

¹⁵ Rodney Tasker, reporting on the 25th ASEAN Ministerial Conference in Manila, July 21-23, 1992. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 6, 1992.

¹⁶ B.H. Hamzah, "China's Strategy," in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992.

in the making, in place of a reluctant *Pax Americana* and an impotent Russia. It could well be that China is pushing hard for a power projection capability in the South China Sea, hence the assertiveness..... If China persists with its policy, it will reinforce the mistrust and misgivings that some leaders in the region have towards Peking".¹⁷

In the same vein, Surin Maisikrod, a research fellow at the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, says that the dispute over the Spratlys goes beyond interest in the natural resources reputedly deposited there.

“The island have great political symbolism, particularly in China: by controlling the islands, China could spread its wings to cover, in a geographical sense, almost half of Southeast Asia. This geographical reach is intended to match Beijing’s political power..... The unequivocal political message is that China should be recognized as the most powerful force in the region.....now, with the absence of an immediate problem with Vietnam [regarding Cambodia] the ‘Chinese threat’ has come alive again in Southeast Asia.¹⁸

TABLE I

Asian areas and population (1991) compared

Countries	Areas	Populations
	(Sq. Kilometres)	(Millions)
China	9,600,00	1,150
Japan	377,000	124
ASEAN		
Indonesia	1,904,345	182.5
Malaysia	329,589	18.3
Philippines	299,700	62.8
Singapore	587	3.0
Thailand	514,000	54.6
Indochina		
Cambodia	181,000	8.2
Laos	231,400	4.2
Vietnam	327,000	68.0
Burma	670,000	42.5
Total	4,457,621	444.1

Source: Compiled from *Asia Week* (June 28, 1992)

¹⁷ B.H. Hamzah, "China's Strategy," in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992.

¹⁸ *The Straits Times*, August 1, 1992

The Asean Options

What could the countries of Southeast Asia do in the face of such a challenge? Rather little. China is a giant compared to each of these countries in terms of size and population (See table I above) as well as armed forces. (See table II on Page 5)

None of these countries can match China's naval capabilities, as was demonstrated in the case of Vietnam in 1974 and 1988. On land, with the exception of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam the countries of Southeast Asia are not exposed to direct threat.

TABLE II

Armed Forces of China and Southeast Asian countries (As of 1992)

Spending

Countries	Personal (000s)	Amount in (US \$ Billions)	% of GNP
ASEAN			
Indonesia	278	1.5	1.5
Malaysia	128	1.56	3.8
Philippines	106	0.96	2.1
Singapore	55	1.70	5.1
Thailand	283	2.06	2.6
Vietnam	1.000	2.32	na
China	3.200	5.6	9*
Japan	246	28.73	1

SOURCE: *Beijing Times*, March 18, 1992 *Asia Week*, August 7, 1992
Business Times give 1.7 as the GNP percentage. The highest figure is more logical.

What China can do to these countries has been demonstrated in China's conflict with Vietnam in February – March 1979. Apart from material destruction, a constant pressure from China would considerably hamper economic development because of the need to spend larger sums on defense, not to say coping with opposition and insurgent

movements encouraged and supported by China. Southeast Asia already got a taste of this in 1949 – 1960 and during the Cultural Revolution in 1966 – 68.¹⁹

So, direct confrontation is out of the question, summed up neatly by Raul Manglapus, the Philippines' Foreign Secretary, when he said: "We can't pretend that we can take care of ourselves."²⁰

The natural solution would be turning to the great powers, in particular the United States and Russia, for support and protection. But here, the prospects are not bright either. Both of these countries abstained from intervening when China attacked Vietnam in 1974. The American Seventh Fleet was simply a distant spectator. Yet, at the time, South Vietnam was officially a protégé of the United States. In March 1988, the Soviet Pacific Fleet made no move although Vietnam then had a defense treaty with the Soviet Union (signed in 1978 and valid for 25 years).

The natural ally of ASEAN is in the United States. Indeed, at the Manila conference, all the members of ASEAN, including Indonesia and Malaysia, wanted U.S. presence. They considered the United States "the cornerstone of regional stability". As one diplomat as reported saying: "There is only one power to be aligned with", and "it is the first time that ASEAN as a whole wants the U.S. to stay."²¹ At present, the Philippines has a Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, while Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and even Indonesia have informal military arrangements. These are limited to the stationing of a small number of U.S. personnel for aircraft servicing, ship repair, and communications, and to joint exercises.²² But this military association with the United States was based on the need for meeting a potential Soviet threat. The real protection against China with the United States would have been through SEATO, never popular in the region, and in any case, now dead and buried. Since "America isn't Asia's cop" any more, as the *New York Times* has put it editorially,²³ there is little to expect from that quarter.

What Are The Great Powers?

That ASEAN should not count on the United States became clear during the 25th ASEAN ministerial conference in Manila on July 21 – 23 this year. The United States was emphatic that it will not get involved in the Spratlys territorial dispute. Secretary of State James Baker told a press conference that the withdrawal of the United States from Clark Field and Subic Bay "has not altered our interest in, nor commitment to, Asian security."²⁴ But on the Spratlys dispute, Robert Zoëllick, Under-Secretary, said that the United States made "no judgements on the merits of the claims," and what the United States primarily wanted was the preservation of freedom of navigation, and "support for

¹⁹ On this, see: Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia: Peking's Relations with Revolutionary Movements* (New York: Praeger, 1976).

²⁰ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 6, 1992.

²¹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 6, 1992.

²² See Nayan Chanda, "U.S. maintains broad Asian military pacts," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1992.

²³ *The New York Times*, August 10, 1992.

²⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 6, 1992.

peaceful resolution of disputes.²⁵ The United States is “prepared to play a role” if all of the claimants ask it to do so, said another official.²⁶ One may ask what role and especially, whether the United States will override Chinese resistance to U.S. interference in an area which it considers to be under its jurisdiction and in a dispute to which the U.S. is not a party.

On two points, the United States was quite specific: With regards to the Philippines’ claim on Kalayaan Island, Morton Smith, the US embassy spokesman, said that “the Philippines cannot expect the United States to come to its aid in case of armed conflict over the disputed Spratlys” because that island, occupied by the Philippines after 1978, was not part of metropolitan territory defined in the 1951 Filipino-American Mutual Defense Treaty. And Secretary Baker said that “ASEAN is well suited to deal with the dispute over the Spratlys.”²⁷ As regards Russia, because of its turbulent domestic situations, “it no longer makes sense militarily, economically and financially for it to keep so many ships and aircraft far from home.”²⁸ Rashid Khamidulin, said that “Russia won’t interfere in this question.”²⁹ With regard to other powers, Japan’s policy is to achieve national goals through economic means.³⁰ As regards the European Community, Germany is constitutionally in the same position as Japan and cannot intervene. France has not shown much enthusiasm, and does not have the means for intervention. And no word has been heard so far from the United Kingdom, which is a party to Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. So ASEAN has to fall back on itself.

Since its foundation in 1967, ASEAN has constantly tried to preserve the image of an organization concerned with economics, and not with military matters. On the other hand, it had to struggle to maintain unity among its members. Vietnam’s drive into Cambodia and through to the borders of Thailand in its bid for preeminence in Indochina in 1978 changed that.³¹ Yet, it was only after China dramatically asserted its territorial claims in the South China Sea that security ceased to be a “taboo” for discussion among its members. Security was mentioned publicly for the first time at the ASEAN ministerial meeting in Singapore in January this year, and it was put formally on the organization agenda of the 25th ministerial meeting in Manila on July 21-23, also a first.

Asian’s Options Are Limited

The margin of maneuver for the ASEAN countries is small. Only two options are open to them: Finding some way of restraining China diplomatically, and strengthening their military position as much as possible. The first option led to the adoption of a Declaration

²⁵ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 6, 1992.

²⁶ *The Nation*, July 26, 1992

²⁷ *The Nation*, July 26, 1992

²⁸ *The Jakarta Post*, August 4, 1992.

²⁹ *The Nation*, August 28, 1992.

³⁰ On Japan's current policy, see: Chaiwat Kamchoo, "Japan's role in Southeast Asian security: Plus ça change . . ." *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 1, Spring 1991.

³¹ On ASEAN, see: Alison Broinowski (ed.), *Understanding ASEAN* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982); and M. Rajendran, *ASEAN's Foreign Relations* (Kuala Lumpur Arenabuku sdn. bhd, 1985).

of South China Sea on July 22, 1992 enjoining the signatories 1) to exercise restraint and explore joint cooperation while setting aside the issue of sovereignty; 2) to apply the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (adopted at Bali in 1976) in their relations, i.e., renounce the threat or use of force.

It was difficult for the nations represented at the meeting - including the ASEAN members, their “dialogue partners,” the European Community, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, Canada and the observer countries, China, Russia, Vietnam, Laos – to reject such a proposal, although China’s backing was qualified, while Vietnam’s approval was total. It was believed, wrote *Asia Week*, that the declaration was

“a master stroke which left the Chinese little room for maneuver. If they opposed it, they would have raised fears that China had no qualms about using its military in the Spratlys and Paracels..... giving up the military option would have deprived China of its trump card in any territorial dispute”.³²

ASEAN’s second option was to use “the Vietnam Card.” With the revival of “the Chinese threat”, writes *The Straits Times*, “Vietnam has emerged as a new card for ASEAN to play against Beijing.” It is “no exaggeration to suggest that diplomats and political analysts within ASEAN have included what might be called ‘the Vietnam factor’ in the region’s political equation.” The inclusion of Vietnam in the ASEAN fold “would give some confidence to the non-Communist Southeast Asian grouping in dealing with China.”³³ Vietnam is seen as “a global ally” in debates in various fields, and “a buffer against Chinese influence.” As a result, Vietnam’s standing “has improved rapidly and dramatically since 1990”.³⁴

The geopolitics of Southeast Asia has been thus reversed. Twelve years earlier, at the time of Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and its attempt at establishing predominance in Indochina, there was an intense debate among the members of ASEAN whether China or Vietnam should be considered a great danger. Because of Hanoi’s very aggressive, arrogant and rigid attitude, and of the need for an effective and immediate rescue of Cambodia, it was decided that Vietnam was greater danger. Singapore and especially Thailand, on whose borders Vietnamese troops were massing, favored this view while Indonesia and Malaysia, which had both faced virulent Communist rebellions supported by China, had strong misgivings. Only China had the political will, the military might, as well as the geographical possibility, to block Vietnam. As a result, a sort of informal alliance between ASEAN and China came into being. Strong, and converging action by ASEAN and China, pursued vigorously at the UN and outside it in the next years, resulted in Vietnam’s withdrawals from Cambodia.³⁵

³² *Asia Week*, August 7, 1992.

³³ *The Straits Times*, August 1, 1992.

³⁴ *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 1992.

³⁵ See: Broinowski and Rajendran, Op.cit. and Donald Weatherbee *Southeast Asia Divided: The Asean-Indochina Crisis* (Boulder, Co." Westview Press, 1985); and Ton That Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam: A Study of Communist Tactics* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1989).

Vietnam's Strategic Debacle

With the Cambodian conflict now basically out of the way, and Vietnam no longer insisting on the “irreversibility” of the establishment of a Vietnam-dominated Indochina (Communist) Bloc, together with the recent big changes resulting from the end of the Cold War, and China asserting its territorial claims aggressively, a new geopolitical situation has arisen in Southeast Asia. Although the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is reluctant to acknowledge the new situation, these realities are asserting themselves with increasing force.

First, it is quite clear now that Ho Chi Minh and the leadership of the CPV made a colossal strategic mistake in 1945 – 1950 in deciding: that the main threat to Vietnam was France and the United States and not China; and since 1975, in considering the Soviet Union as its best ally, and the United States as its worst enemy. Furthermore, in sticking to Marxism- Leninism and world revolution at all costs it has denied itself all the benefits of a closer association with ASEAN. This happens at a time when, as a result of 50 years of continuous warfare made inevitable by the CPV leaders' colossal blunders, Vietnam finds itself exhausted and prostrate, highly vulnerable to foreign pressure. Vietnam finds itself without the financial means, sophisticated weapons, and especially without spare parts, to maintain a large and strong force capable for holding its own in a major confrontation with a power like China.

Vietnam's armed forces are being reduced to 600,000 from 1.2 million men, and this “big demobilization” will go on, Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam said on September 7.³⁶ Vietnam's navy and air force will be no match for China's. The navy is reported to consist of seven old rusty U.S. and Soviet frigates of Petya II class, 40 fast patrol boats of dubious operational capability; the air force has 30 Mig – 23s and 40 SU-20/22 ground attack aircraft.³⁷ Gone are the days when Vietnam felt confident that it could defeat any foreign power. “Socialist brotherhood” has ceased to have much meaning.³⁸ In fact, Vietnam, which has stuck steadfastly to socialism, is the only country of Southeast Asia to have been subjected to the pressure of socialist China.

Obviously, Vietnam has to make important changes in its fundamental orientation if it wants to stand up to China. These include a full adhesion to ASEAN, a reversal of its hostile attitude towards the United States, and above all, the abandonment of its present course – Marxism-Leninism and world revolution.

As regards ASEAN, for the past two years, and especially since its Seventh National Congress in June last year, the CPV has been very active in seeking rapprochement. Hanoi sought admission to ASEAN, and was admitted as an observer at its Manila

³⁶ *The Straits Times*, September 9, 1992.

³⁷ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992.

³⁸ See Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War After the War* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1986).

meeting. However, the ASEAN have made it clear that Vietnam's full membership could not be contemplated for at least another five years because of the incompatibility of its economic system.³⁹

For their part, the Vietnam CPV leadership has clung fast to Marxism-Leninism. Improvement of relations with its neighbors is just a means for ensuring the success of "building socialism." The Politburo's political report to Seventh Party National Congress made that quite clear. It says "*Doi Moi* (renovation) does not mean changing our aim - socialism - but using appropriate concepts and forms . . . to ensure the successful achievement of that aim".⁴⁰ With regard to foreign policy, it says: "The task of foreign policy is . . . to create the favorable conditions for the building of socialism . . ." ⁴¹

Reversing The U.S – Vietnam Relationship

In relations with the United States, the CPV leadership has also rejected change. Fundamentally, the United States is the main enemy. They looked disapprovingly at the efforts of Nguyen Co Thach (foreign minister until June last year) to improve relations with the United States. Pointedly, Thach is nicknamed "Mr. America" by his politburo comrades.⁴² Internal Party documents leave no doubt that the CPV leaders consider the United States the main enemy to fight in the struggle to prove "who will defeat whom", i.e., between capitalism and socialism. They believe that Communism is only going through a "temporary setback" and that inevitably it will be victorious.⁴³

At the Seventh Party National Congress in June last year, the conservatives captured Party leadership and decided to cling firmly to Marxism-Leninism and to reject the fundamental changes that would give Vietnam a truly free market economy. These changes naturally imply recognition of private ownership, free enterprise, as well as political liberalization, including acceptance of multiparty system. But the conservative-dominated Politburo is dead set against this course. The CPV leadership has set its hopes on China instead. At the Seventh National Party Congress the conservatives led by General Le Duc Anh won out against the reformists, and decided in favor of initiating and placating China. As a result, Nguyen Co Thach had to be eliminated from the Politburo because Beijing considered him anti-Chinese. On the other hand, the Party has adopted a very meek attitude in the face of Chinese deep penetration into Vietnamese territorial waters in the Gulf of Tonking. This is because "we do not want to appear to prepare for confrontation," explained Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai.⁴⁴

³⁹ Statements of Thailand's Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and of his economic advisor Naronchai Akrasene at the Singapore meeting in January 1992. *The Nation*, January 30, 1992, and *The Straits Times*, February 17, 1992.

⁴⁰ Communist Party of Vietnam, *Documents of the VII Party National Congress* (Hanoi: Su That Publishing House, 1991), p. 53. (in Vietnamese).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 88

⁴² *The Wall Street Journal*, July 5-6, 1992.

⁴³ See, for example, General Doan Chuong, deputy director of the Institute of Strategic Studies, "The Lesson of the time," *Tap Chi Cong San* (Communist Review) 2/1992.

⁴⁴ *Business Times*, September 8, 1992.

What then should we expect in the coming months, or years? This will depend on China. One thing is obvious: From a power politics point of view, the end of the Cold War offers China the best opportunity of “reclaiming” its rights in waters which were controlled by other powers for decades. It is appropriate to recall here that the first official maps showing China’s borders appeared as far back as 1951. However, it was not until 1956 – after Dien Bien Phu, when it was clear that the French, who had occupied the islands in 1933, were on their way out – that the Chinese Government publicly laid claims to the Paracels and the Spratlys; not until January 1974 - a year after the Paris Peace Accord confirming the U.S. evacuation of Vietnam - that China moved in and sank a South Vietnamese patrol boat in the Paracels; not until March 1988 – after it was clear that Gorbachev was serious about “glasnost” - that China fired on Vietnamese Communist vessels in the Spratlys.

So now, with both Russia and the United States having made clear that they do not want to get involved in a regional territorial dispute, and with no regional country able to match its air-naval power, China can assert its claims aggressively, effectively, and especially safely. But beyond that, it is natural also to expect that with every other great power out of the way, China can reassert its preeminence in the region. When China dramatically asserts its claims over practically the whole of the South China Sea, it does not cause much surprise to those familiar with Chinese history.

In the immediate future, no Chinese admiral is likely to repeat the legendary Admiral Cheng Ho’s conquest of the South China Seas, for China will need another 30 years, until 2020, to complete the modernization strategy in several stages worked out by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. It is at present in its third stage. And “to make China a powerful socialist country standing firm in the East, we must concentrate on our domestic affairs,” Premier Li Peng told the Seventh National Congress in March.⁴⁵ And so, one would expect that concerning the Spratlys, China will adopt a peaceful approach, “leaving aside the controversy and jointly [seek to develop] the islands involved in the dispute”.⁴⁶ As regards negotiations concerning the territorial dispute, Foreign Minister Qian Qichen said in Manila: “We’re ready for negotiations when conditions are ripe.”⁴⁷ China thus retains the initiative in the matter, free to decide with whom, when, and how to quarrel.

Beijing’s Vietnam Policy

Still, China’s visibly rough attitude toward Vietnam would be understandable for the period when China was embroiled in a feud with the Soviet Union – the main enemy – and Vietnam acted as “a surrogate of Moscow” and “Asia’s Cuba”.⁴⁸ But Soviet-Chinese relations were normalized two years ago, and Russia today is no threat to China. Moreover, in the past two years Vietnam, frightened and isolated by the collapse of the

⁴⁵ *Beijing Review*, March 30-April 5, 1992.

⁴⁶ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992.

⁴⁷ Cheng Jiachuan, speaking for the Foreign Ministry, *Beijing Review*, March 30-April 5, 1992.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Soviet Union, but intent on pursuing socialism, has made a very major effort to seek normalization with China. How then to explain China's present attitude?

One reason is that Beijing wants to show displeasure for Vietnam's attempt to outmaneuver China. In spite of Chinese warnings, Vietnam continued to occupy territory and to bring troops to the Spratly Islands, on the principle that occupation is nine points of the law. Thus in April 1975, immediately after its conquest of the South, Hanoi hastily dispatched troops to occupy a number of islands in the Spratlys. So far, it has occupied nine islands and 21 points of the area, and has sent their construction workers, hydrological staff, scientists and "several thousand troops" according to a Vietnamese high official.⁴⁹ Vietnam thus greatly offended China. After the Sino-Vietnamese naval clash in March 1988, Qian Qichen declared that, "there will be no war in that area if Vietnam refrains from provocations against China and withdraws all its troops from these islands and reefs."⁵⁰ That obviously was a strong warning.

When the warning was ignored by Vietnam, China reacted angrily and strongly. In December last year China told Vietnam to withdraw from the islands which it had occupied "illegally". Vietnam's action, it said, was "blatant encroachment" on China's sovereignty, and Vietnam's position was "totally unacceptable to us".⁵¹ It should be mentioned in this connection that the Vietnamese Government has kept quiet on another fact: China has occupied 36 areas totaling 8000 hectares of border land which Vietnamese considers to be its territory, and in May there was shooting on the border when Chinese soldiers were caught trying to displace the frontier marker 400 metres inside Vietnamese territory.⁵²

When Vietnam protested against the intrusion of Chinese ships into Vietnamese waters in the Tonking Gulf in August, China replied that "China stands for a peaceful solution to the differing views about the delimitation of the sea waters of the Gulf of Tonkin through negotiations with Vietnam."⁵³ China considers the present borders imposed on it by France in 1887 (following the Treaty of Tientsin, 1885) and wants to conclude a new treaty. But so far Vietnam has evaded the issue for a good reason: In 1958, Pham Van Dong, Vietnam's Prime Minister, wrote a letter to Chou Enlai, China's Prime Minister, recognizing the frontiers claimed by China then. Thus China has been putting strong pressure on Vietnam while avoiding confrontation with the other countries of Southeast Asia with which it also has territorial disputes in the Spratlys. And this moment is particularly propitious for China to do so.

The second reason follows logically from the view, held by many analysts, that China wants to be recognized as the preeminent power in the South China Sea. It has therefore

⁴⁹ Asia Week, August 7, 1992.

⁵⁰ On this, see: Harish Kapur, *The Awakening Giant, China's Ascension in World Politics* (Rockville, Maryland: Sitjhoff and Noordhoff, 1981); Michael Yahuda, *China's Foreign Policy after Mao, Towards the End of Isolationism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983); and Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-79* (New York, University of Columbia Press, 1988).

⁵¹ *The Straits Times*, December 28, 1991.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992.

chosen a confrontation with Vietnam, military the strongest of the Southeast Asian countries, to demonstrate its determination and capability to achieve its aim. Here, it may overplay its hand, and Vietnam's stubbornness may lead to a confrontation which could get out of control.

A Vietnam-Asean Alliance

If the worst comes to the worst, and China's conditions are absolutely unacceptable to Vietnam, then the fallback position for the latter would be joining ASEAN and pushing for the establishment of some kind of collective defense organization, an ASEAN, or, Southeast Asian Defense Organization (ASEANDO or SEADO), to serve as its rear base. But as a price for full membership of ASEAN, Vietnam will have to renounce socialism. ASEANDO/SEADO will be reminiscent of SEATO, but with a difference: It will be a purely regional pact, without the umbrella of a group of great powers like SEATO. To have a powerful rear base, it will have to seek some kind of link with the United States, and also with Japan. For this, Vietnam will have to abandon its fundamental hostility towards the United States.

It is reasonable to think that Japan will react strongly only if China dramatically pushes southwards. The acquisition of an aircraft carrier by China would be such a signal. Then Japan will rearm one analyst says.⁵⁴ For any move to exercise effective control over navigation in the South China Sea would also force Japan, as well as the United States, to react more concretely.

Japan will surely have reasons to be concerned. For decades Japanese defense planners have viewed the Soviet Union as the main threat to Japan and deployed their forces in the north. But now, the latest White Paper of the Japanese Defense Agency, acknowledges that they are thinking about a significant redeployment of these forces in the west to guard against possible attack by North Korea and China. With regard to China, a Defense Agency counselor said: ". . . now, China is modernizing its armed forces, especially its naval power, is advancing into the Spratly Islands and recently revised its law concerning territorial waters. We hope China will not become a factor of uneasiness in the security of the region."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Shipping Times*, September 7, 1992

⁵⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, reprinted in the (Montreal) *Gazette*, September 28, 1992