

# Rallying For Democracy

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## Building tension

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If China wants to rattle cages in neighbouring Vietnam, there are few better ways than asserting its sovereignty over the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. Recent announcements from the State Council that it is formalising plans to develop tourism across the Paracels archipelago appear to reflect rising tensions in the South China Sea, rather than any earnest desire to build resort hotels, marinas and airstrips on the typhoon-lashed network of reefs and sandbars.

The timing is certainly intriguing, for starters. This month marks the 36th anniversary of China's defeat of the naval forces of then-South Vietnam that held the eastern part of the Paracels, which lie south of Hainan Island and east of Da Nang on Vietnam's central coast.

That swift rout - South Vietnam's relatively humble forces supported a weather station - gave Beijing sole possession, which remains to this day. The situation is a far cry from the disputed Spratlys grouping to the south, where most of the rival claimants - mainland China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei - occupy fortified island holdings. Both archipelagos are, of course, highly strategic, straddling East Asia's most important shipping lanes and sitting above oil and gas deposits.

In the decades since, Hanoi has rarely missed an opportunity to assert sovereignty over both the Paracels and the Spratlys. It has obtained international legal opinions and signed oil exploration deals with foreign oil giants, while government officials trumpet Hanoi's legal and historic claims at every turn, ensuring the push for sovereignty is at the core of the national propaganda script.

In the event - currently unlikely - that the dispute ever comes to an international court, every assertion of sovereignty could be cited as evidence.

Yet, in 1974, Hanoi was conspicuous by its silence at the Chinese takeover, which saw South Vietnam protest in vain to the United Nations. It came just as Hanoi was plotting its last big military push to finally defeat the US-backed regime in Saigon, the final act of the Vietnam war. China, like the Soviet Union, was a crucial backer of Hanoi's "liberation" of the South. And while cracks were already appearing in the historically suspicious Sino-Vietnamese relationship, Hanoi remained quiet.

Over the years that silence sits in ever-starker contrast to Vietnam's modern assertiveness.

"It is quite clear that China's occupation of the Paracels is still painfully felt in Hanoi," said veteran Hanoi-watcher Professor Carl Thayer, a scholar at the Australian Defence Force Academy at the University of New South Wales. "The silence all those years ago remains a very sensitive issue."

Certainly Hanoi is making a lot more noise now and its leadership is facing unprecedented public pressure to stand up to China in the South China Sea.

The State Council's move came just weeks after confirmation that Hanoi had struck a deal with Moscow, its great cold

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war ally, to buy six stealthy Kilo-class submarines - a clear weapon of deterrence against China's expanding naval reach.

Beijing's naval modernisation involves a large submarine base on Hainan that is getting increasing attention from Washington, which is developing a new relationship with Hanoi, its old enemy.

As the tit-for-tat diplomacy continues over the South China Sea, it is apparent that the 2002 declaration signed between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to avoid worsening tensions is effectively a dead letter. It is Vietnam's turn to chair Asean this year, but it is unlikely to be able to secure a more meaningful document.

Vietnam's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Nguyen Phuong Nga, lost no time in warning that China's tourism plan "seriously violates Vietnam's sovereignty, causes tension and further complicates the situation".

But on Hainan, where China administers its South China Sea holdings, an official was even blunter: "It is our territory and we can do what we want."

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