

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S *INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES* SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 21 Jan 2013

Vietnamese Reactions over the South China Sea: Divergence between Society and Government

By David Koh

Recent Chinese moves in the South China Sea in November and again in December 2012 whipped up a wave of opposition from Vietnamese society. Such responses potentially demonstrate the existence of a large gap between what the government deems necessary to do, and what the more vocal part of the population want to have done. While the government's point of view is that divided opinion and responses are not helpful in portraying resoluteness towards China; society's vocal opinion, however, believes that appeasement would encourage the Chinese further. No doubt, the government will continue to be the one deciding how Vietnam is to deal with China, but societal opposition to this careful approach towards China is more likely to increase rather than decrease.

CHINESE MOVES IRK VIETNAM

On 25 November 2013 two China fisheries boats reportedly "cut" the survey cable of Binh Minh 02, a Vietnamese seismic survey ship. This incident was the second to have happened to this ship, the first being on 26 May 2011. The Vietnamese Centre for Research on South China Sea has provided a map that showed that Binh Minh 02 was operating within the EEZ of Vietnam, over 60 nautical miles northeast of the central city of Hue, and over 13 nautical miles inside the EEZ boundary of Vietnam (coordinates 17°26 degrees north and 108°02 East).

The second Chinese action was the 27 November declaration that its maritime police ships would board vessels of foreign origin found to be within its maritime territories (effective 1 January 2013), which China has often declared to be within its 9-dash line enveloping almost the entire South China Sea. The Hainan authorities, probably unwisely and unintentionally, clarified to the New York Times that this move was aimed at Vietnamese fishing boats.

The third move was the issuing of Chinese passports containing imprints of territories under dispute with neighbours, including those in the South China Sea and disputed land territories with India, as Chinese territories.

VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

The uproar in the Vietnamese mass media and social media towards these Chinese moves has understandably been intense. In early December 2012, activists began to discuss the idea of holding street protests in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi on Sunday, 9 December 2012. In 2011 when the Binh Minh 02's cable was first cut, a series of strong spontaneous protests had erupted in those two cities, resulting in much bad feeling and doubts regarding the willingness of the Vietnamese government to stand up to China. That led to the arrest and jailing of some protestors.

The official Vietnamese responses to the 2012 incidents appear to be formal and routine. The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a note of protest to China about Binh Minh 02, but the spokesperson of Vietnam Oil and Gas said a few days later that the cable cutting was just an accident. Even though this statement could be understood as a clarification aimed to calm the anger of those who thought the cable was deliberately cut again, it did not quite achieve the intended effect of calming anti-China elements. Why the Chinese fishing boats were near the Binh Minh 02 was never explained, given that the Binh Minh 02 reportedly had transmitted warning lights when the Chinese fishing boats were approaching, and the boats had at first heeded the warning, but then returned to pass behind Binh Minh 02.

Apparently, the Chinese side had explained to the Vietnamese that the two Chinese boats did not deliberately try to cut the cables. It appears that from the description of the boat types, the two vessels were fishing trawlers and their nets became entangled with the cables, and the sheer force of the moving trawl nets broke them. To what extent this to be believed, however, is still a matter of debate but the Vietnamese government has chosen not to blow up the matter beyond this explanation and protest.

On the passport issue, the Vietnamese government decided not to accord recognition to the new Chinese passports by not stamping on the passport pages, but on separate pieces of paper that are to be attached to the passport and retrieved when the passport holder leaves. This is compared to the reaction of India, USA, and the Philippines. India decided to affix entry visas that contained the Indian version of the map onto the page of

the new Chinese passport. The Philippines decided not to stamp on the Chinese passport at all, but on the visa form used by Chinese visitors to the Philippines. At the government level, India, Philippines and Vietnam also protested officially to the Chinese government against the new Chinese passport. The American State Department spokesperson said that the territorial claim contained in the passport would not be recognized, and urged the Chinese government to continue discussion with regional countries on the regional disputes. Indeed there is little basis in international law to claim that just because a country's passport is accepted by other nations, that they therefore accept the Chinese territorial claims, particularly since these disputes have existed for a long time.

On the right to board boats in Chinese maritime territory claimed in regulations issued by the Hainan authorities, the Chinese declaration has certainly stirred imagination of the worst kind among regional countries. Most important are the implications for the freedom of navigation, especially innocent passage as provided under international law; something that China has said would not be affected by its maritime claims in the South China Sea. The Americans has requested that their Ambassador in Beijing ask China to clarify the meaning of the regulations issued by the Hainan maritime police. The key question seems to be whether these regulations will be applied by the Chinese within the territorial sea of 12 nautical miles from the Chinese coast, the Chinese Exclusive Economic Zone, or in the entire area of Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea. Vietnam and the Philippines oppose the application of these regulations beyond 12 nautical miles.

VIETNAMESE SOCIETAL RESPONSES

Vietnamese mass media and social media have been important channels spreading information and sentiments against the Chinese actions. These channels have not only spread the news quickly, but provided very acidic commentary that has further aroused feelings against the Chinese government. This is understandable, but may not be in line with government preferences.

On 12 December 2012, the BBC reported that the Vietnamese mass media was reprimanded by the Propaganda Commission of the Vietnamese Communist Party for injecting anti-China opinion into reports on the cable-cutting incident. The Commission had earlier instructed the mass media to tone down attacks on China and try to stick to factual reporting when it came to China. Together with the consistent action that the government has taken in the past years against bloggers and demonstrators who take a strong stance against China, it would seem that Vietnam does try to keep societal and governmental responses measured, even though this comes at the expense of a loss of some respect for the government on the part of the public. In parallel with this clampdown on the media, the Vietnamese government continued with the policy of strongly discouraging any street protests against China. In December 2012, like on previous occasions, it took steps to prevent key leaders or agitators from attending the scheduled street protests through

persuasion or physically preventing them from joining the protests.¹ Part of the problem for the Vietnamese government was that it perceived that the protestors could have included groups of people who had the added intention of toppling Vietnamese communist party rule. The government did concede though that most people who attended the protests were patriots. Outwardly, leaders of the street protest movement portray themselves as the conscience of the country, and urge the government to be tougher on China. In truth, the government is divided between the need to maintain peace with its giant neighbour but at the same time finding ways to ward off Chinese pressures. Significantly, despite state attempts at preventing them, two protests took place in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City on 9-12 December in response to the Chinese actions.

WILL THE PERCEPTION GAP CHANGE VIETNAMESE POLICY?

The gap between the government and vocal portions of the Vietnamese population regarding how Vietnam should react towards Chinese moves is not something unusual. Such a gap can occur during tense periods in bilateral relations in many countries, as between Japan and China, or between Indonesia and Malaysia. Most of the time, however, the governments have tended to be more measured in their responses.

But the gap in the case of Vietnam in its policies toward China holds more significance. The societal response shows that suspicions of China are more than skin deep, and have worsened over the past 20 years. They are on a different trajectory from what the governments would like the people to believe is a strong Sino-Vietnam relationship. While the police have tried their best to prevent the anti-China temperature in society from rising too high, it has largely only managed to prevent protests in the streets, and have not been able to set the agenda in cyberspace. This is quite evident from the fact that when political leaders such as National Assembly members visit their constituencies to take questions and queries from the public, they are very often asked why the Vietnamese government was not reacting more strongly to China. What is more, most of these voters who attend the sessions with the National Assembly would be rather senior in age, indicating that the rage against China extends also to the elderly. These sentiments are in part, of course, shaped by the use of an anti-colonial and anti-China historical slant in the history books of Vietnam to help shape Vietnamese identity, as well as the bitterness that arose out of contemporary Sino-Vietnamese interactions, including the loss of the Paracel Islands to China in 1974 and the loss of more islands and navy men in a naval fight in 1988. Both history and recent experience has always emphasized the threat from the north. This history also inspires con-

1 The case of Le Cong Giau, a revolutionary youth leader of southern Vietnam during the Vietnam War was a clear example of this. According to his own account he was waylaid on a bus directed by security people, that kept him away from the protests. See Le Cong Giau, "Một cuộc "bắt cóc" ly kỳ ngày 9/12/2012" ("A strange "kidnap" on 9/12/2012) carried at <http://dttl-nguoiilotgach.blogspot.sg/2012/12/mot-cuoc-bat-coc-ly-ky-ngay-9122012.html>. The Vietnamese government has also dealt with other protestors, either by jailing them through prosecution for crimes against the state and giving them stern warnings of serious repercussions.

fidence and heroism by emphasizing that every threat up to now has always been repelled. There is now hardly a kind word about China to be found in Vietnamese social media.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has asked the National Assembly to consider drafting a law on street protests that would allow the protests, but with restrictions that would at the same time permit the state to deal with those who break the law, including those who exploit the protests to subvert the regime. Moves towards this law are however quite slow, given its many other implications.

Whether eventually the modern Vietnamese nation, in the current period of a strong China, would be able to firmly resist China is not clear, but the gap between government policy and society's desires are already causing a big headache for the government. Society has confirmed China as a "threat", but the Vietnamese government would like to delay taking such a stance as long as possible to forestall the resulting inevitable deterioration of relations. From society's point of view, all hope seems lost because they see China as deliberately targeting Vietnam and wanting to humiliate it.

On the other hand, a late December 2012 revelation by a Vietnamese defence establishment researcher that the Vietnamese government has also taken a strong stand against China in private makes the position of the Vietnamese government less defensive. For instance, it has now become known that at his meeting in October 2011 with President Hu Jintao of China, Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong responded strongly to the assertion by President Hu of Chinese sovereignty over disputed islands in the South China Sea. Yet, domestically, the General Secretary has often been seen to be "pro-China" and not as someone able to stand up to China.

Why this gap in how Nguyen is perceived exists is not clear but it does suggest that the government has not been able to shape the public agenda and perception as ably as it did in the pre-Facebook, pre-internet age. This explains why the Vietnamese government is clamping down on blogs, and we are likely to see a period of strong self-censorship in Vietnamese social media in the near future. This repressive measure, however, is not long-term solution.

* * * * *

David Koh is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.

ISEAS accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.

Comments are welcomed and may be sent to the author(s).

Editors: Ooi Kee Beng, Daljit Singh

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30, Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang,
Singapore 119614
Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955
Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Homepage: www.iseas.edu.sg