

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

Singapore | 27 May 2014

The Anti-Chinese Riots in Vietnam: Responses from the Ground

*By Huong Le Thu**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 2 May 2014, the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) placed its deep sea drilling rig HD-981 in the disputed waters south of the Paracel Islands. According to Hanoi, the location was within the territory of the Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- This sparked a wave of peaceful demonstrations on 11 May. These protests came with slogans expressing opposition to the oil rig, to China's presence in the EEZ, and evoked sentiments of patriotism for the protection of Vietnamese sovereignty.
- A second wave of protests was decidedly more violent. On 13 May violence, accompanied by strident anti-Chinese expressions broke out in the southern provinces of Binh Duong and Dong Nai which host Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean factories, as well as the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Park. Around 351 factories were destroyed or damaged.
- The mainstream and international media were quick to blame 'anti-Chinese' sentiments for the violence, while explaining the destruction of non-Chinese owned factories as a case of mistaken identity. These explanations need to be re-considered.

* **Huong Le Thu** is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS; e-mail: lethu@iseas.edu.sg

- Vietnamese workers are keenly aware of their dependence on FDI. Some workers had even formed a human shield around the factories in an attempt to protect their jobs and livelihood.
 - Local activists have also visited the provinces beset by riots to speak to witnesses who may potentially shed more light on the situation. There are suggestions that those leading the riots were, in fact, not workers.
-

INTRODCUTION

The outbreak of violent riots on 13 and 14 May 2014 resulting in damages to Chinese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, Korean and Japanese factories in the provinces of Binh Duong, Dong Nai and Ha Tinh shocked the world, and Vietnam itself. The international media – especially media from the affected countries – condemned the riots and expressed concern over the political stability in Vietnam while China sought to portray Vietnam as the trouble-maker.¹ International public opinion has, consequently, become preoccupied with the escalating violence,² ironically pushing developments in the South China Sea, which sparked the riots in the first place, to the periphery. Indeed, the image of Vietnam took a swift turn for the worse just when the international media was condemning China's unilateral action and disregard for international norms over its deployment of oil rig HD-981. The media reports told of widespread nationalist demonstrations that had gone out of control and become xenophobic.

The mainstream media identified discontented Vietnamese workers fueled with anger towards Chinese movements in the South China Sea as the main reason for the riots and violence. Here, workers employed under poor conditions took the chance to go on strike and express long suppressed grievances. While it is most likely that a number of workers, 'just followed the others', as opined by an interviewee in a BBC report,³ it is still not clear who – which individual or organization – initiated the riots. In the absence of concrete answers, the media has opted for a straightforward narrative of injured nationalism and suppressed industrial anger.

Such explanations, however, are neither complete nor fair. Violent anti-Chinese sentiment expressed publicly in such form and scale is not usual. It is even more perplexing that the aggression was aimed at those who had nothing to do with China's manoeuvres in the South China Sea. Moreover, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Singapore have consistently been the top foreign direct investors in the country. Given Vietnamese reliance and admiration for these Asian economies, it is hard to believe, as was reported in the media, that the rioters had attacked the factories 'mistaking them as Chinese'⁴. Indeed, while the national sentiments were fueled by the oil rig deployment and provocative language that Chinese used, including 'teaching Vietnam a lesson it deserves'⁵, nationalism alone remains an insufficient explanation

¹ <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/05/16/VIDE1400194440774313.shtml>

² <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/south-east-asia/story/five-vietnamese-16-others-described-chinese-dead-vietnam-rioting-doc>
<http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/south-east-asia/story/hundreds-chinese-enter-cambodia-fleeing-vietnam-violence-police-2014>

³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/multimedia/2014/05/140514_worker_binhtan_protest.shtml

⁴ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/05/14/uk-vietnam-china-riots-idUKKBN0DU0FE20140514>
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/taiwanese-companies/1109518.html>

⁵ <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1505666/chinese-media-threatens-vietnam-lesson-it-deserves-over-oil-rig-row>

for what happened. This paper goes beyond the official media reports to offer a survey of the unfolding responses on the ground.

THE BACKGROUND

On 2 May 2014, the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) placed its deep sea drilling rig HD-981 in the disputed waters south of the Paracel Islands with the accompaniment of 80 other vessels. According to Hanoi, the location was within the territory of Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Ever since then, more surrounding vessels have been sighted with a number of clashes between both sides reported. This perceived violation of Vietnamese sovereignty has met with strong opposition both from the Vietnamese government and its citizens. On 7 May, 20 civil society groups disseminated an appeal calling for 'patriotic' citizens to join them at planned demonstrations. They spelt out their three objectives for demonstrations as follows: 1. Oppose China's invasion of Vietnamese territory; 2. Call on the Vietnamese government to take appropriate, effective and transparent measures in dealing with the crisis; and 3. Release Ba Sam, Dieu Cay and a number of other Vietnamese bloggers who had been arrested before the oil rig crisis.⁶

Since 11 May there have been a number of peaceful demonstrations with slogans expressing opposition to the oil rig, to China's presence in the EEZ, and terms such as 'patriotism' and the 'protection of sovereignty'. Interviewed by BBC, a veteran soldier at a peaceful demonstration said: 'The Vietnamese people just want to live peaceful life after so many years of wars. But [the Chinese] just wouldn't let us [do so]...' ⁷ Until that point, all demonstrations had been peaceful.

On 13 May, violence, accompanied by strident anti-Chinese expressions, broke out in the southern provinces of Binh Duong and Dong Nai. These provinces host Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean factories, as well as the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Park. The violence and damage also affected Ha Tinh Province which hosts the Taiwan-owned Formosa group which employs large numbers of Mainland Chinese. Protestors were reported by the media as 'workers' from these factories. Unlike the earlier peaceful demonstrators that had been called by civil society groups, students, bloggers and pro-democratic activists, the violent riots had no prior public announcement. Factories suffered damage and a number of people were hurt, which resulted in Chinese and Taiwanese people leaving the country.

⁶ <http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/loi-keu-goi-bieu-tinh-yeu-nuoc>

⁷ http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/multimedia/2014/05/140512_phan_tich_bieu_tinh_vn_chong_tq.shtml

AN UNLIKELY MISTAKE AND THE NEED TO AVOID EASY EXPLANATIONS

Many within the country, as well as the active Vietnamese diaspora, agree that anti-Chinese fervor was not sufficient in explaining what had happened. For example, when Taiwanese, Singaporean, South Korean and Japanese factories were attacked, ostensibly mistaken for Chinese ones, blame was put on 'anti-Chinese' sentiments. In addition, the Singapore daily, *The Straits Times*, reported that Vietnamese protesters had burned the Singaporean flag, mistaking it for the Chinese one⁸ – an explanation that would arouse disbelief in any observer of Vietnam politics. Indeed, even though the majority of violent protesters were from the less-educated strata of Vietnamese society they would not have made such an elementary mistake in light of China's long historical presence over Vietnam. Given Vietnam's long relationship with the Middle Kingdom it is not likely that a Vietnamese national would fail to recognize the Chinese flag—no matter his or her level of education—any more than a Mexican citizen could fail to recognize the American flag or a Ukrainian the Russian flag.

The 'anti-Chinese' explanation must also be reconsidered because the workers were keenly aware of their dependence on FDI. After all, the escalation of violent attacks on Chinese factories would have lasting repercussions for the Vietnamese economy and its international image. Such awareness led to many Vietnamese condemning the violent acts, with some workers even forming a human shield around the factories, holding banners directed at the rioters to 'save our bowl of rice,' in the attempt to protect their jobs and livelihood. The government has since arrested those who agitated the riots, and although it has been a week since the investigation started, no official explanation for the disturbances has been announced. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung issued a formal message asking the Vietnamese people to express their patriotism responsibly and according to the law and not listen to 'bad elements'.⁹ Authorities have issued a number of public appeals for the public not to be 'used' and 'manipulated' by malicious groups.¹⁰ The authorities have also sent all users of Viettel (the biggest telecom provider in the country) a text message urging citizens to express their patriotism and protect Vietnam's sacred sovereign maritime territory in a law-abiding manner.

In addition to the international bad press, the Vietnamese authorities are also facing growing distrust within the country. Taking into consideration the limited official information for public consumption, blogs have become the alternative source of information and opinion. Political bloggers have built conspiracy theories over the

⁸ <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/south-east-asia/story/singapore-condemns-burning-national-flag-vietnam-20140515>

⁹ <http://baodientu.chinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Cong-dien-cua-Thu-tuong-Chinh-phu-ve-dam-bao-an-ninh-trat-tu/199262.vgp>

¹⁰ <http://tuoitre.vn/Chinh-tri-Xa-hoi/607241/ubnd-tinh-binh-duong-keu-goi-nguoi-dan-tranh-bi-loi-dung.html>

mishandling of the crisis, suggesting that the violent riots were part of a deliberate game and were the result of an internal political struggle for control of the regime. There was a prevailing fear among active discussants that this would provide the government with a pretext to squash the emerging pro-democratic movements in which many of the peaceful demonstrators have been involved. There are missing elements to this theory when considering the cost-benefit balance involved in this intrigue. For example, the movement for peaceful demonstrations had spread beyond Vietnamese borders and Vietnamese overseas were beyond the government's power to stop. Furthermore, looking at Vietnam's foreign policy in the past decades, targeting domestic opposition by using 'anti-Chinese' riots comes with too big a cost.

Until the riots broke, Vietnam had been praised for its successful foreign policy of 'the more friends the better'.¹¹ In 2013 alone, Vietnam signed six out of 15 comprehensive and strategic partnerships with key partners within and across Asia-Pacific region.¹² Vietnam had shown a proactive attitude in multilateral diplomacy, whether in a regional or trans-regional context. All those efforts have shown Vietnam's commitment to building strategic trust and gaining international support. Facing the threat of an Chinese invasion, Vietnam would need as many friends as possible.

ACTIVITIES ON THE GROUND

In the aftermath of the riots, some of the protesters involved in organizing the earlier peaceful demonstrations have taken the initiative to go down to the provinces beset by riots. A number of them distributed their own printed leaflets calling for non-violence, responsible action and restraint. Others have talked to factory workers, security guards and anyone who may potentially shed light on the situation. An alternative understanding of what happened is suggested by one well-known blogger and artist, Tuan Khanh, who has been actively participating in the pro-democratic movement. He was among those who talked to security guards at the factories and found out that those leading the riots were, in fact, not workers. 'They are not workers. They are professional', he was told by a few security guards. Apparently, the demonstrators came prepared, equipped with metal sticks, knives and other vandalism tools. Tuan Khanh, who witnessed mobs flooding into factories, testified that those seeking violence were not factory workers.¹³

¹¹ Binh Minh Pham, "Thoughts on shaping new foreign policy [Một số suy nghĩ về định hình chính sách đối ngoại mới]," in *Setting direction for strategic diplomacy of Vietnam toward 2020 [Định Hướng Chiến Lược Đối Ngoại Việt Nam đến 2020]*, ed. Binh Minh Pham (Hanoi: National Political Publisher Nhà Xuất Bản Quốc Gia, 2010).

¹² http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/ISEAS%20Perspective%202014_04%20-%20Bumper%20Harvest%20in%202013%20for%20Vietnamese%20Diplomacy2.pdf

¹³ <http://nhacsituankhanh.wordpress.com/2014/05/15/di-giua-dong-bao-dong-p-1/>

Latest reports to emerge after the arrest of the instigators allegedly hired to lead the mass protests suggest that there had been preparations for riots. A large number of Vietnamese flags and T-shirts had been purchased before the demonstrations suggesting that the attacks were not spontaneous. Even maps locating Chinese and Taiwanese factories had been photocopied in large numbers. The leaders of the riots have been reported to have been using walkie-talkies to communicate with each other. The fact that the violence affected as many as 200 factories in a single day already suggests that a high level of professionalism and organization was involved. This suggests that the riots were premeditated, although unlike the earlier peaceful demonstration of the patriots, they were not announced openly. Workers were believed to receive from VND50,000 to VND300,000 VND (equivalent to US\$2.3 to US\$14) to follow the agitators.¹⁴ This begs the question: where did the money come from?

China has used the attacks on foreign factories to discourage foreign investors from investing in Vietnam, presenting it as an unsafe and unruly place.¹⁵ The international media were fast to react. Reuters reported 21 dead¹⁶, while in fact only two persons were confirmed dead.¹⁷ *The Straits Times* uploaded a photo of large numbers of injured people lying on the hospital floor, which it later had to apologize for as the photo was taken in another province of Vietnam of people who had suffered from food poisoning.¹⁸ Even the *New York Times* published a cartoon which depicted Vietnam bringing a big dog called 'nationalism' to the Chinese door. As a result, trust deficiency on different levels – among different groups, between the people and the regime, and internationally – makes Vietnam extremely vulnerable at this moment.

CONCLUSION

Meanwhile large numbers of Chinese troops marching towards the borders seemed to have evaded the international headlines.¹⁹ Images of Chinese vessels on the South China Sea have been taken over by images of ships coming to evacuate Chinese citizens from Vietnam. This rapid intervention leaves raises some questions: Have the Chinese workers provided testimonies for what happened in factories before they were taken back to China? Why are they evacuating after a week when the protes-

¹⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2014/05/140516_cong_doan_viet_len_tiang.shtml

¹⁵ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/861191.shtml>

¹⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/15/us-vietnam-china-riots-casualties-idUSBREA4E03Y20140515>

¹⁷ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-05-14/anti-china-protests-in-vietnam-spur-warnings-factory-closures.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2014/05/wrong-picture-in-st-could-fan-anti-vietnamese-sentiments-heighten-tensions-readers/>

¹⁹ <http://chinadaily.com/2014/05/18/large-number-of-chinese-troops-seen-heading-for-china-vietnam-border/>

tors have already been arrested and factory life has returned to normal? Given the number of factory protests within China every year²⁰, the decision to evacuate the workers, including those from provinces not affected by riots, seems to be unusually cautious. Reports note that out of 351 affected factories, only 14 were Chinese investments, while the most severely hit were the Taiwanese with 190 factories damaged, 19 damaged Korean factories, and finally 27 Vietnamese-owned factories.²¹ Interestingly, no other country-investor has evacuated its citizens.

The truth behind the violent protests has yet to be uncovered. However, for now, the notion that the riots and violence were simply the result of a wave of blind nationalism and anti-Chinese sentiments must be re-examined. The current crisis presents major challenges for not only Vietnam-China relations, regional stability and ASEAN's unity, but most of all, for Vietnam's political system.

²⁰ <http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat9/sub60/item1888.html>
<http://www.thenanfang.com/blog/thousands-strike-at-nike-adidas-reebok-factory-in-dongguan-over-invalid-contracts/>
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-16161764>
<http://mashable.com/2012/01/16/sanyo-protest-in-shenzhen-sign-of-things-to-come-for-factory-workers-in-china/>

²¹ <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1515912/few-factories-hit-vietnams-anti-china-riots-were-mainland-chinese-owned>

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

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

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).

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

Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong

Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng

Production Editors: Benjamin Loh, Su-Ann Oh and Lee Poh Onn

Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Francis E. Hutchinson and Daljit Singh