

Vietnam Told China to Get Out of Its Waters. Beijing's Response: No, You Get Out.

South China Sea was site of monthslong standoff with a Chinese oil-and-gas survey ship; Beijing accused of trying to impose its rules over region

By Niharika Mandhana

HANOI—For months earlier this year, Vietnamese officials tracking the operations of a Chinese oil-and-gas survey ship off their country's coast in the South China Sea sent urgent communications to Beijing, demanding that the vessel leave Vietnam's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone.

China's response: Vietnam should stop drilling activities off its own southern coast, according to a Vietnamese official. There, a rig named Hakuryu-5 had begun work in May under a contract with Russian state-owned company Rosneft, which operates an offshore block licensed by Vietnam.

A maritime standoff ensued, lasting more than three months. Law-enforcement vessels from both sides shadowed each other and Chinese coast-guard ships fired their water cannons at Vietnamese vessels. Last week, the drilling rig completed its mission and left the area, followed by the departure of the Chinese vessel.

Vietnamese officials say the long-running episode shows how China is ramping up efforts to enforce its own set of norms in the South China Sea, most of which it claims. An international tribunal ruled in 2016 that China's expansive claims, which also overlap with those of the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, have no legal basis, but Beijing rejected the ruling. The U.S. regularly conducts naval patrols, or what it calls freedom-of-navigation operations, in the area to challenge China's position.

Since the standoff began, Vietnam has asserted its right over its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf. These are offshore areas governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea where coastal states are entitled to exploit natural resources. China and Vietnam have both ratified the convention.

According to Beijing, no country or company may carry out oil-and-gas operations without its permission in waters it claims. That includes areas where other countries have long explored for natural resources, such as the block involved in the standoff.

In June, not long after the rig began its activities, two Chinese coast-guard ships arrived at the scene. Vietnam deployed its coast guard to protect the project, including vessels that were assisting the rig. The Chinese crews used megaphones and warned the Vietnamese in three languages—Vietnamese, Chinese and English—to halt operations, a Vietnamese official said.

The U.S. has repeatedly criticized China's actions. In a speech last week, Vice President Mike Pence said the Chinese coast guard had tried to "strong-arm Vietnam from drilling for oil and natural gas off of Vietnam's own shores." The State Department said in August that China was

trying to coerce Vietnam out of partnerships with non-Chinese oil-and-gas companies and to work only with Chinese state-owned enterprises.

In a separate statement, the U.S. Defense Department accused China of trying to enforce an unlawful maritime claim and of using bullying tactics.

China has denied these assertions and accused the U.S. of “wanton and fact-distorting criticism on China.”

China’s foreign ministry said that the area where its survey vessel, Haiyang Dizhi 8, had operated since July falls under China’s jurisdiction and that the ship left when its scientific exploration was done. Beijing didn’t respond to specific questions from The Wall Street Journal about the activities of its survey or coast-guard ships.

Officials and analysts in Hanoi say they see China’s actions as more than a strategy to capture oil-and-gas reserves.

“China wants to become the whole decision maker in the South China Sea,” said Nguyen Hung Son, director general of the Institute for South China Sea Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, which is managed by the country’s foreign ministry. “It has rules it wants to impose and it is acting to enforce the rules.”

In the past decade, China has taken significant steps to shift the balance of power in the South China Sea. It has modernized its navy and built the world’s largest fleets of coast-guard and maritime-militia vessels to keep a robust presence in contested areas. Beijing has also created artificial islands and equipped them with airfields and radar systems, leading Mr. Pence to describe them as an “archipelago of military bases.”

China has long prevented another Southeast Asian country, the Philippines, from conducting oil-and-gas operations in an area of seabed known as Reed Bank, which Beijing also claims. Chinese officials are pressing Manila to develop the resources jointly, and the two sides have said they are negotiating a deal.

The situation off Vietnam is different. For years, the fast-developing country and companies licensed by it have undertaken oil-and-gas activities off its southern coast. Russia’s Rosneft currently operates one such project. China responded sharply after the Hakuryu-5 rig began a new round of work related to the project in May.

In response to questions, Rosneft said its participation was “in strict accordance with the current rules of international law.” Issues related to territorial disputes were outside the company’s competence, the company said.

From early July, the Chinese survey vessel conducted what China called scientific explorations across a large area off Vietnam’s coast, accompanied by coast-guard and maritime-militia vessels. A tracking map made by Vietnamese officials and seen by the Journal shows it first took a zigzag path to the northeast of the Rosneft-operated site. In September, it expanded its operations farther north, sailing in U-shaped patterns off the coast of central Vietnam.

To sustain its monthslong mission, the ship relied on one of China’s nearby artificial islands called Fiery Cross. The ship left its area of exploration on three occasions and sailed to the island for short breaks before returning to its task. That way, it didn’t have to make the long journey to a port back home for rest, refueling or repair.

The islands have become increasingly pivotal in China's efforts to persistently patrol all parts of the South China Sea. Chinese vessels have used the islands as staging areas to deploy flexibly and to maintain a near-constant presence around contested features.

Vietnamese officials said the operational boost the islands gave China during the recent standoff made it much tougher for Vietnam, with far fewer resources and smaller fleets, to keep up.

At one point, the number of Chinese coast-guard and fishing-militia vessels accompanying the survey ship grew to 35, Vietnamese officials said. A 12,000-ton Chinese coast-guard cutter involved in the operations is larger than many warships. The officials described China's escalating steps as a test for Hanoi and the international community.

"If we do not stand up, it will have serious consequences," said Dr. Nguyen of the Institute for South China Sea Studies. "The global order will crumble piece by piece."