

CHINESE FALLACIES REGARDING THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN SEA

A Position Paper by the Republic of Vietnam Pro-temp Leadership Committee

On September 25, 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with President Barack Obama in the White House to discuss a whole range of issues affecting both China and the United States. This is part of a running dialogue between two great powers meant to contribute to maintaining peace in the world, including Southeast Asia where Vietnam is located. It is for that reason that we would like to issue this position paper to make sure that the interests of a country like Vietnam would not be either swept under the rug or sacrificed in the name of Mammon, i.e. the big capitalists of the world, be they red or white.

East Sea, South Sea, West Philippine Sea

On this body of international water, often misleadingly called "South China Sea," this is the official position of the United States as defined by President Obama: "We did have candid discussions on the East and South China Seas, and I reiterated the right of all countries to freedom of navigation and overflight and to unimpeded commerce. As such, I indicated that the United States will continue to sail, fly and operate anywhere that international law allows. I conveyed to President Xi our significant concerns over land reclamation, construction and the militarization of disputed areas, which makes it harder for countries in the region to resolve disagreements peacefully. And I encouraged a resolution between claimants in these areas. We are not a claimant; we just want to make sure that the rules of the road are upheld."

And this is President Xi's response: "Islands in the South China Sea since ancient times are China's territory. We have the right to uphold our own territorial sovereignty and lawful and legitimate maritime rights and interests."

Nothing is further from the truth than that first sentence of President Xi on which China builds the entire edifice of its claims to 80 percent of the South China Sea. Once we can prove the fallacy of that first claim, it becomes obvious that the whole edifice of China's claims would fall to pieces.

First Fallacy as proven by the fact that No Chinese map until the 20th century shows Chinese sovereignty beyond Hainan

Yet it is a known truth to the entire world that *even Chinese maps, say of the great Qing Empire, up until 1909 identify Hainan Island as the southernmost frontier of China* whereas European maps of the 16th and 17th centuries used to identify what is now commonly referred to as the "South China Sea" as the Champa Sea. Vietnamese sovereignty replaced Cham hegemony starting in the end of the 15th century and by the 17th century, Vietnamese fleets regularly made annual and seasonal trips to the islands in what is called the East Sea, "Bien Dong" in Vietnamese, to gather products from these islands or jettisoned cargo from shipwrecks. In *Phu-bien tap-luc* ("Miscellaneous Records of Frontier Lands," 1771), Le Quy Don (1726-1784), the great encyclopedist, noted:

"In the prefecture of Quang Ngai, district of Binh Son, there is the village of An Vinh on the seacoast, to the northeast of which there are many islands and mountains in the sea amounting to 130 altogether, all separated by the sea, and one can hop from one to another either taking a whole day or a few watches. Up on these mountains there are springs of sweet water. In one of these islands there is a long stretch of yellow sand, estimated at 30 li, which is quite even and large with water that is limpid and can be seen through to the bottom. On these islands are innumerable swallows' nests and a huge variety of thousands, even tens of thousand of birds which are in no way afraid of man; seeing people, they would gather around and do not try to avoid one. And on the shores are found a great many curiosities. Among the

giant snails are 'elephant-ear snails' as large as a mat (sic) with thumb-size translucent excrescences, quite unlike pearls, at the bottom, their shell can be cut up and turned into small slabs or crushed and made into limestone for use in construction; there are also mother-of-pearl snails that can be used in decorations, 'perfume' snails, and all these snails can be salted and cooked. The giant tortoises are huge. There's also the sea-turtle, commonly called 'trang bong,' somewhat like the tortoise but smaller, with a thin carapace that can be used to decorate household items, its eggs are the size of a human thumb, it too can be salted and cooked as food. There are also the sea snails, called 'dot dot,' that commonly swim near the beaches, you can catch them and rub them clean with lime, throw away their innards, and when you want to eat them, you can take them out, dip them in ricefield-crab broth, then cook them with shrimp and pork."

"Foreign ships," the record continues, "regularly throw anchor at this large island when they run into storm. The Nguyen Lords used to establish 70-man strong Hoang Sa fleets, formed by An Vinh villagers, who take turns starting out in the second lunar month after receiving their order. They take with them enough provisions for six months, they would man five small fishing boats, and rowing for three days and three nights they would reach that large island. There they can catch all the birds and fish and eat to their hearts' content. They sometimes come upon jettisoned cargo such as cavalry swords, silver flowers, silver coins, silver lumps, copper utensils, zinc and lead blocs, muzzle guns, ivory, beeswax, porcelain, woolen products; they also gather plentiful giant tortoise and sea-turtle carapaces, sea slugs and colorful snail beads. By the eighth month this small fleet would come back, going through Eo estuary to reach Phu Xuan [later on, called Hue] to turn over their catch, have it weighed and categorized, only then could they take away with them the colorful snails, sea-turtles and sea slugs, get their certificates and go home."

"The Nguyen Lords also established the Bac Hai fleet, with no determined number of hands, composed mostly of men from Tu Chinh hamlet in Binh Thuan or from Canh Duong village. These are volunteers who get their permit to go, are exempted from personal and ferry taxes, they would take small fishing boats to go out to Bac Hai [= Northern Sea] points, to Poulo Condor, and other islands in Ha Tien, pick up jetsam and giant tortoises, sea turtles, abalones, sea slugs under the supervision of the Hoang Sa captain. These catches are mostly of marine products, rarely of gold or silver or other precious cargo." (*Le Quy Don Toan Tap*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1977, Volume I, pages 119-120)

Thus, it is clear that since at least the 17th century, the Vietnamese have already organized fleets to regularly (annually) exploit the Paracel Islands (Hoang Sa or "Bai Cat Vang" to the Vietnamese, Xisha to the Chinese) and part of the Spratly Islands (Truong Sa to the Vietnamese, Nansha to the Chinese), a record that no Chinese document can match. Then there are hundreds of European maps in the 17th-20th centuries which clearly identified the Paracel and sometimes the Spratly Islands as belonging to the Vietnamese court, first identified as Cochinchina (Dang Trong in Vietnamese) and in the 19th century as the Empire of Annam (Empire d'Annam in French)--again, something that the Chinese cannot match.

As a matter of fact, in 1816 Emperor Gia Long of Vietnam is reported to make a personal visit to the Paracels to emphasize the claims of Vietnam and in 1836 Emperor Minh Mang, his successor, had the Paracels surveyed to be determined as part and parcel of the Dai Nam Empire, included in the *Dai Nam Nhat Thong Toan Do* ("Complete Map of Unified Dai Nam," i.e. Viet Nam) of 1838 established by the National Historical Institute (Quoc Su Quan). In J.L. Taberd's *Nam-Viet Duong Hop Tu Vi / Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum* ("Vietnamese Latin Dictionary") of 1838 (printed in Serampore, India), a map entitled *An Nam Dai Quoc Hoa Do* ("Map of the Great Country of An Nam") also includes the Paracels as belonging to Vietnam.

Second Fallacy as evidenced by the fact that Chinese authorities repudiated Chinese responsibility in the Paracels

Monique Chemillier-Gendreau, who has studied in depth the Chinese and Vietnamese claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, has this to say about the Chinese ones: "Actually, there is not a trace of China having ever been opposed to the sovereignty claims of Emperor

Gia Long and his successors, neither throughout the 18th century nor especially in the 19th when the Vietnamese sovereigns organized more administratively the exploitation of islands under their jurisdiction." (*La souveraineté sur les archipels Paracels et Spratleys*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996, page 73)

In fact, one can even find Chinese historical documents confirming Vietnamese sovereignty over these islands. For instance, in the *Haiguo tuzhi* ("Maps and Records of Maritime Countries," 1730) it is said that the "Van ly Truong sa is a sandbar that rises in the middle of the sea. Long of some thousand li, it serves as a palisade fronting the kingdom of An Nam."

The Most Venerable Shi Dashan (Thich Dai San in Vietnamese pronunciation) who was invited to preach at the court of the Nguyen Lord Nguyen Phuoc Chu (1691-1725) at the end of the 17th century also reported in his memoirs: "There are dunes lying all along the beaches going from the northeast to the southwest with caves that rise straight up like walls and low-lying beaches on the same level as the water, the dry sand is tough like iron and should any boat hit it by mischance it would shatter to pieces. The sandbar is vast covering hundreds of li with its length immeasurable, which is why it is called 'Van ly Truong sa' ('Sandbar of ten thousand li'), and one cannot see any vegetation or human habitation as far the eye can reach. [. . .] In the time of the last king [Nguyen Phuoc Tran, 1687-1691], every year fishing boats would be ordered out to lounge the coast of that sandbar to pick up gold and silver and various instruments from the shipwrecks that crashed into it." (Thich Dai San, *Hai ngoai ky su*, translated into Vietnamese from the Chinese by Cheng Ching-ho, 1963: Hue University Press, page 125)

But most conclusively, all the way until the end of the 19th century, Western companies with ships wrecked in the Paracel Islands would seek compensation from the Guangdong authorities but these would invariably refer them to the Nguyen court in Vietnam.

Third Fallacy as found in the false claims even in the 20th century

Some Chinese accounts claim that a Chinese governor of Guangdong, Zhang Yen-jun, dispatched a flotilla in May 1909 to go out to the Paracels for three weeks to claim them for China. But in actuality, the true story was that the expedition spent two weeks at anchor off Hainan waiting for good weather, then finally sped to the islands on 6 June before returning to Canton the next day. This is hardly a serious claim.

Another Chinese expedition was said to have occurred in 1902 yielding "indisputable" markers later found in the 1970's on the islands. A French researcher at IRASEC (Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine, based in Bangkok), Francois-Xavier Bonnet, has demonstrated at a conference held in March 2014 in Manila that a super secret mission led by Huang Qiang in June 1937 was dispatched to the Paracels to lay fake sovereignty markers marked 1902, 1912 and 1921 on some four islands in the archipelago. That was how "proofs" of Chinese sovereignty were fabricated, as late as in the 20th century.

Fourth Fallacy as demonstrated in the very Chinese names of the islands

But the most telling evidence of the Chinese false claims is exposed by Bill Hayton in his 2014 book, *The South China Sea - The Struggle for Power in Asia*, published by Yale University Press, in which he reveals that when the French colonial masters of Vietnam formally annexed six islands in the Spratly archipelago in July 1933, despite vociferous outcries from China as recounted in *Shenbao* ("Morning Post") at the time, the Chinese consul in Manila, Mr. K.L. Kwong, had no idea where these islands were--even as they were claimed by China. He had to go and ask the American colonial authorities to find out that they were in the Spratlys. After learning that the islands were not in the Paracels, the Nanking government decided to drop a formal protest.

In a paper contributed to the March 2014 Manila Conference on the South China Sea Disputes, Bill Hayton also pointed out to an interesting feature of the Chinese names of most of the islands in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes. In 1935, he reported, the nationalist government of Chiang Kaishek in Nanking instructed a committee to come up with Chinese

names for the 132 features in the South China Sea that could be claimed for China. (Incidentally, this number, 132 features, is remarkably close to the figure of 130 cited as far back as 1777 by Le Quy Don--which shows that 250 years ago, the Vietnamese already had a very precise knowledge of the islands in what was seen by them as their "East Sea.") The ironic thing, notes Hayton, was that the committee had never visited these islands and features so that mistranslation was inevitable. In most cases, the Chinese names, far from being traditional ones (because they did not exist), were simply translations of the English names or their transliteration. For instance, North Danger became "Bei xian" ("Bac Hiem" in Vietnamese), Antelope Reef became "Ling yang" ("Linh duong" in Vietnamese), and Money Island became "Jin yin Dao" ("Kim ngan dao" in Vietnamese).

It is telltale pointers like that that show the shallowness of Chinese claims to historical sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, let alone the Mischief Reefs that belong to the Philippines or the Spratly Islands 800 miles away from Hainan Island, the southernmost frontier of the Chinese empire as known traditionally.

Fifth Fallacy as exposed by the UN-condemned Chinese occupation by force of the Paracels and parts of the Spratlys

The Chinese were clever in their timing of the occupation by force of the Paracel Islands in January 1974. Even though the naval force sent out by Republic of Vietnam naval command was inadequate in countering the Chinese attacking force, its vigorous response to the Chinese threat (destroying two Chinese ships in the process, including the command vessel) has turned Nguy Van Tha, who went down with his ship, and 73 sailors lost in that battle into national heroes, not just to people in the South but also to the young and the general population in the Communist north.

Because of their resistance, the 74 who went down in the Paracel/Hoang Sa battle have forever secured the Vietnamese claim to the Paracel Islands, now considered only occupied territory by China and not something given as belonging to China. Even though China holds veto power in the UN Security Council,