

# Vietnam Confronts China, Alone

**Hanoi has not found as much support as it hoped for despite its bold confrontation of Beijing in the South China Sea.**

By Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

Vietnam and China are engaged in a slow boiling stand-off in the South China Sea that has not received sufficient attention. China has reportedly sent one survey vessel and at least four Chinese maritime vessels; Vietnam has responded by deploying its Coast Guard vessels.

According to Vietnamese news reports citing its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the stand-off is taking place in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the south of the East Sea (as Vietnam calls it) since July this year. The exclusive economic zones have been drawn in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which both Vietnam and China are party to. Vietnam is finding itself in a tough spot, without very much support beyond words, as it faces a determined China.

The most recent troubles began in mid-July, when the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lê Thị Thu Hằng claimed that the "Chinese geological survey vessel group Haiyang Dizhi 8 recently violated Việt Nam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the south of the East Sea." Vietnam asserts that it has repeatedly reached out to China "to protest the violations."

In addition, Vietnam has asked all the major powers to make efforts at bringing peace and order back in the region by saying "maintaining order, peace and security in the East Sea is a common interest of countries both inside and outside the region. Việt Nam wants concerned countries and the international community to protect and maintain this joint interest." Toward the end of July, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson reaffirmed its stand asking that "China immediately withdraw all of its vessels from Việt Nam's waters and... respect Việt Nam's sovereign right and jurisdiction, for the sake of the relations between the two countries and for regional stability and peace." Vietnam asserts that it has repeatedly reached out to China through several different channels.

Taking the issue to the ASEAN in late-July, the Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Bình Minh "expressed his grave concern over the recent developments in the East Sea, with Chinese geological survey vessel group Haiyang Dizhi 8's activities violating Việt Nam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the waters." He added that such activities "seriously threaten legitimate rights of coastal countries, erode trust, and worsen tensions, thus hurting peace and stability in the region."

Noteworthy too is that this time around, China has followed a different deployment pattern. The author has learnt from Vietnamese analysts that unlike in the past, when Chinese vessels stayed for a couple of months in the same area, this time China deployed its survey ships for a few weeks before withdrawing, only to come back again into the same Vietnamese exclusive economic zone areas later. In the beginning of August, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson announced that "the Haiyang Di Zhi 08 (Marine Geology 8) survey vessel has halted its geological mission and left Việt Nam's Exclusive Economic Zone and southeastern

continental shelf.” A few days later, however, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated that “the Chinese vessel group and a number of escort ships came back to Việt Nam’s territorial waters.” Vietnam once again appealed to the international community to respond to the situation in order to maintain regional peace and stability. Meanwhile, China has also reportedly begun fresh military exercises near Hoàng Sa (Paracel) Islands.

Despite the continuing protests by Vietnam, the stand-off has continued, and is now in its third month. A few days ago, Nguyễn Mạnh Đông, head of the maritime affairs department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ National Border Committee, in a detailed interview to the Vietnam News Agency, maintained that “Disputes are inevitable in interpretation and application of the [UNCLOS] Convention, but all countries have the obligation to settle these disputes in a peaceful manner via measures stipulated in Article 33 of the UN Charter and Article 279 of UNCLOS.”

China has become much more aggressive in the region in the last couple of years. A month before the current stand-off with Vietnam began, a Chinese ship sank a Philippines fishing boat in Bai Co Rong (Recto Bank). Earlier in May 2019, a China Coast Guard vessel, Haijing 35111, reportedly prevented Malaysia’s oil rig operation near Luconia Shoals off the coast of the Sarawak State. In another move to assert its claims, China organized the seventh Sinan Cup Regatta in Duy Mộng island, part of the Hoàng Sa archipelago.

Meanwhile, Vietnam has reached out to India, the United States, Russia, Australia and other Indo-Pacific countries. But the regional and global reactions to these developments have been muted. Malaysia in its new foreign policy document has said, “the South China Sea should be a sea of cooperation, connectivity and community-building and not confrontation or conflict. This is in line with the spirit of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). Malaysia will actively promote this vision in Asean.” Further, a joint statement issued on August 27 between Vietnam and Malaysia “emphasized the importance of self-restraint, non-militarization and observance of international legal obligations in good faith, respect for sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction of the coastal states, and rule of law in accordance with the 1982 UNCLOS and avoidance of activities that may escalate tensions.”

Extraregional powers have also made similar statements but not much beyond. Testifying in front of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, David Stilwell, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs said, “through repeated illegal actions and militarization of disputed features, Beijing has and continues to take action to prevent ASEAN members from accessing over \$2.5 trillion in recoverable energy reserves.”

Other powers have stopped with reiterations of the importance of freedom of navigation, such as the India-France joint statement during Prime Minister Modi’s recent visit to France. The recently-held conference on Indian Ocean in the Maldives on September 3-4, where the prime minister of Sri Lanka and foreign ministers of Singapore, Maldives were present, also stressed the freedom of navigation but again there was no mention of South China Sea.

Japan has been slightly firmer, with the foreign minister saying that “South China Sea is an important sea lines of communications for Japan and many other countries. It is directly related to the stability and the peace of the region, and the international community, including Japan, pay serious attention to the situation in South China Sea. Japan opposes to any actions by anybody to increase the tension in South China Sea.” Similarly, India has emphasized that it “has an abiding interest in the peace and stability in the region. India firmly stands for the

freedom of navigation and over-flight, and unimpeded lawful commerce, in the international waters, in accordance with international laws, notably UNCLOS.”

It appears unlikely that Vietnam will be able to get any stronger support from its partners in the region and outside. It is also unlikely that Vietnam will be able to resist China on its own. Beijing appears to have correctly calculated that it does not have to fear any serious, united opposition.