

China's Xi in Vietnam to Bridge Troubled Waters

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By Vu Trong Khanh

HANOI — President Xi Jinping arrived in Vietnam Thursday for a two-day visit that will remind Hanoi's leaders that it is China, not the U.S., which is Vietnam's most important economic partner.

The two countries share the same communist ideology and a similar culture, but have drifted apart in recent years in part because of bitter territorial disputes in the waters of the South China Sea. The presence of an oil drilling platform which a Chinese company had towed into waters also claimed by Vietnam last year triggered a monthslong standoff at sea and a brief wave of anti-Chinese riots before the rig was withdrawn.

Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong subsequently became the first Vietnamese party chief to visit the U.S. this year, while Vietnam has signed defense cooperation agreements with Washington and is also part of talks to establish the U.S.-led Trans Pacific Partnership trade pact.

Vietnam's economy, however, depends heavily on imports of materials and machinery from China, binding the two nations together in such a way that Hanoi's leaders need to focus on keeping good relations with China even as they work on building stronger ties to the U.S. and other important export markets, analysts say.

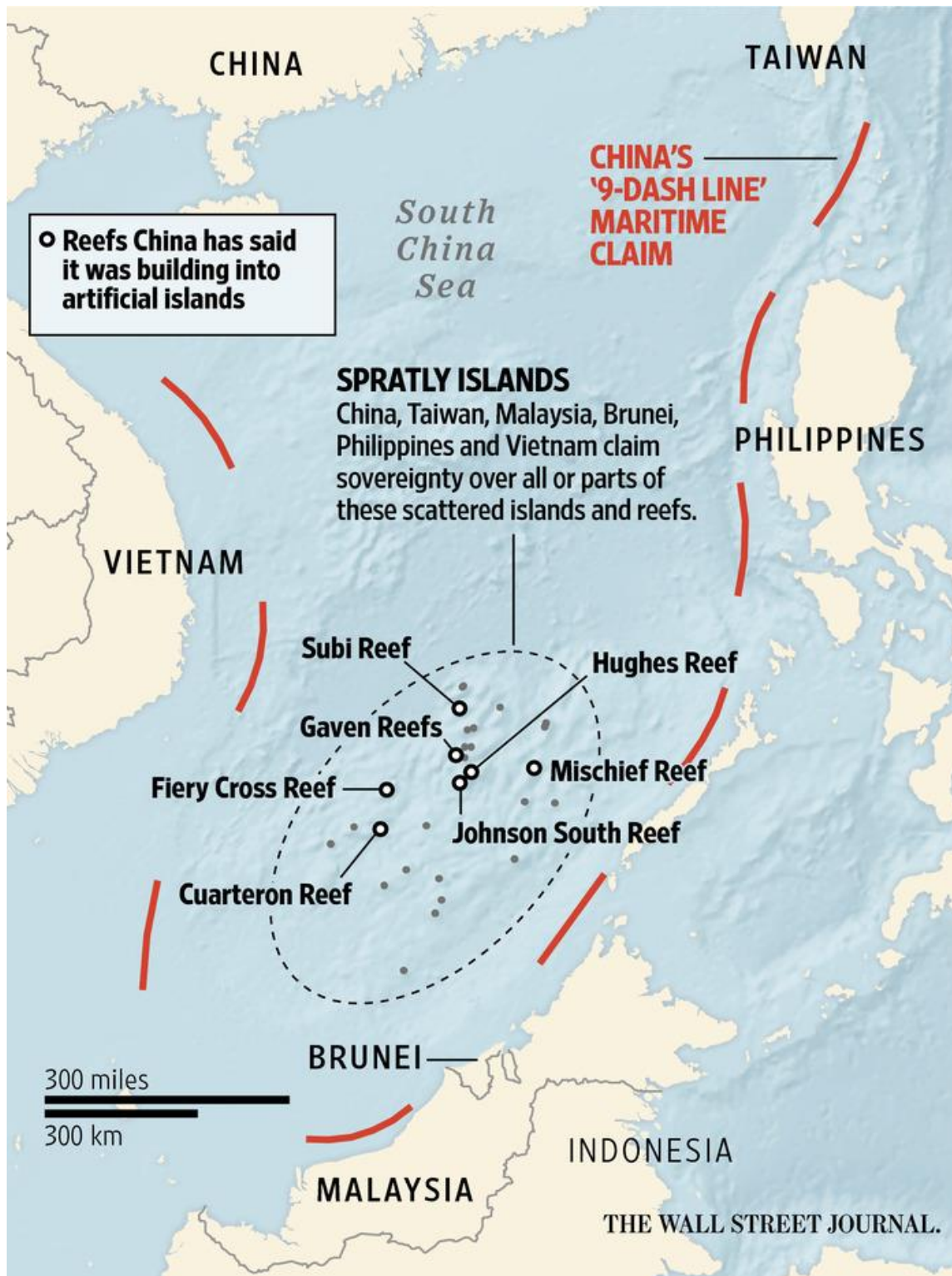
Mr. Xi's visit to Vietnam, the first by a Chinese president in almost a decade, is part of two-leg trip across Southeast Asia. On Saturday he plans to meet with Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore amid concerns in Beijing that Taiwan is exhibiting signs of breaking off further from mainland China.

Carlyle Thayer, a Vietnam expert and emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defense Force Academy, said Mr. Xi's Vietnam visit was aimed explicitly at enhancing this economic relationship with Vietnam outside the framework of the Trans Pacific Partnership, which China hasn't joined. China is already Vietnam's largest trade partner, and its influence is set to grow. Vietnam's government recently forecast that trade with China will expand to \$100 billion a year by 2017, compared with \$59 billion in 2014.

In contrast, trade with the U.S. totaled \$35 billion last year.

China's state-run news agency Xinhua reported that China is expected to sign more than 10 cooperation agreements with Vietnam during Mr. Xi's visit, running from improving interaction between the ruling parties of both sides to strengthening infrastructure, expanding investment and introducing more of what it called people-to-people exchanges.

The underlying territorial tensions in the South China Sea, however, will inevitably seep into the discussions Mr. Xi is scheduled to hold with Mr. Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and other leaders.



Vietnam's Communist Party said in a statement Thursday that it aims to maintain high-level exchanges between the two countries while protecting what it described as Vietnam's legitimate interests in the South China Sea.

Mr. Thayer, meanwhile, said the Chinese president expected to use his visit to counter the U.S.'s growing influence in Vietnam.

“Mr. Xi will try to convince Vietnam's leaders to mute their public comments on the South China Sea and not openly support U.S. actions,” Mr. Thayer said.

So far, it appears that Vietnam is willing to go along with this line of diplomacy, at least in public. Police quickly broke up a brief anti-China protest at the Chinese embassy in Hanoi Thursday morning, while Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh told lawmakers last month that it is important for Vietnam to maintain good relations with both the U.S. and China.

“Keeping friendly relations with both countries will allow us to stay balanced, self-reliant and independent,” Mr. Thanh was quoted by state media as saying at the meeting. “The rule is not to side with one big country to oppose another.” Vietnam's Communist Party chief Mr. Trong also told Mr. Xi during their meeting Thursday afternoon that he believes the Chinese leader's visit will help “further boost the traditional friendly relations and comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries.”

Vietnam was also notably reserved in its comments after the U.S. Navy last week sent a warship within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef, one of the artificial islands which China is building in the South China Sea. Foreign ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh said Vietnam “calls on all related parties to actively contribute to maintaining peace, stability, security and maritime and aviation safety in the area.”

Still, Mr. Thayer and other analysts suggest that the full impact of Mr. Xi's visit perhaps won't be felt until next year, when Vietnam will select a new batch of leaders at its 12th national party congress. Mr. Trong, Mr. Dung and President Truong Tan Sang are all expected to step down from their current posts, and Mr. Thayer predicts Mr. Xi will attempt to present a more favorable image for China while he's in the country.

Among other things, a Vietnamese translation of Mr. Xi's book on governance recently went on sale in Vietnam.