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A Chinese Coast Guard Vessel in the South China Sea. Source: Wikimedia Commons

USS Theodore Roosevelt off Da Nang on March 05, 2020. Source: PACFLT, US Navy

Leaders at the 14th East Asia Summit. Source: Singapore Ministry of Communications and Information

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Continuing Geopolitical Games in the South Sea

by

Lalit Kapur & Anushka Nair

The cutthroat nature of geopolitical competition in the South China Sea became evident once again in an incident off Woody Island earlier this month. As has almost become a norm in the region, the pawns in the front line were fishing boats, normally presumed to be manned by civilians. Notwithstanding the overwhelming global impact of COVID-19, it is clear that global, or even regional solidarity remains a distant dream, never mind bilateral and multilateral treaty commitments. Geopolitical games between nations continue unabated.

The specific incident involved a collision between Vietnamese fishing boat QNg 90617 TS and an unidentified Chinese Coast Guard vessel off Woody Island, in the Paracel group, on the morning of April 02, 2020. Due to the collision, the fishing boat sank and its eight crew were picked up by the Chinese vessel. The incident should be seen in the context of the timeline of significant operational activity in the South China Sea.

Table 1: Timeline of Significant Events in South China Sea

Dates (All 2020)	Event	Remarks
March 04	USS Theodore Roosevelt and Bunker Hill arrive Da Nang, Vietnam ¹	To commemorate 25 years of US-Vietnam Relations and signal growing convergence between the US and Vietnam
March 13	US Ships America and Gabrielle Giffords conduct operations in South China Sea ²	The USS America group serves as a ready response force for operations in the Indo-Pacific

¹ <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130563>

² <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130564>

Dates (All 2020)	Event	Remarks
March 15-18	US Ships Theodore Roosevelt and America conduct Expeditionary Strike Force training in South China Sea ³	Signalling USN readiness for combat and readiness to counter Chinese ASBMs
March 24	US Ships Barry and Shiloh carry out live firing exercise with Standard SM2 SAMs in Philippine Sea ⁴	
March 31	San Francisco Chronicle publishes letter from Captain Crozier requesting for assistance in response to COVID-19 pandemic on board USS Theodore Roosevelt ⁵	Captain Crozier relieved of command of his ship. Reports indicate entire crew has been quarantined. Significant reduction in US combat capability, more so as the other operational carrier in the region, Ronald Reagan, is undergoing scheduled maintenance at Yokosuka.
April 02	Vietnamese fishing boat sinks following collision	

According to the official Vietnamese narrative⁶, the fishing boat was carrying out normal fishing activity in the waters of the Hoàng Sa (Paracel) Islands of Vietnam, in the vicinity of Phú Lâm (Woody) Island, when it was hindered, rammed and sunk by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel. Vietnam lodged a diplomatic protest with the Chinese Embassy in Ha Noi, requesting the Chinese side to investigate the incident, strictly discipline the officers on board their vessel, prevent recurrence of similar actions and compensate the losses of the Vietnamese fishermen.

³ <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130567>

⁴ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/water-wars-coronavirus-spreads-risk-conflict-around-south-china-sea>

⁵ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Exclusive-Captain-of-aircraft-carrier-with-15167883.php#photo-19240172>

⁶ http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns200404161321



A Chinese Coast Guard Vessel in the South China Sea. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Chinese narrative⁷, in contrast, said that the boat was spotted illegally fishing in the internal waters off China's Xisha (Paracel) Islands and on being told to leave, suddenly veered sharply towards the Chinese vessel, which despite its best efforts, could not keep clear and was struck on the bows. The Vietnamese boat then began taking in water and sank. The fishermen were rescued and subsequently released after fulfilling necessary investigation and evidence collection procedures. China deplored the frequent infringement of its territorial waters in the Xisha Islands and called on Vietnam to inform its fishermen and regulate their activity to ensure they do not invade Chinese waters or make hazardous moves against Chinese law-enforcement.



USS Theodore Roosevelt off Da Nang on March 05, 2020. Source: PACFLT, US Navy

⁷ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1765751.shtml

Narratives are easy to manufacture and become impossible to verify, especially when one of the parties involved refuses to accept impartial investigation and judicial authority.

Geographically, the Paracel Islands are about 50 Km closer to China's Hainan Island than to Vietnam. They comprise two distinct groups: the Amphitrite Group to the East, which was occupied by the PRC in 1956, and the Crescent Group, to the West, which was in Vietnamese possession from about the same time. In January 1974, Deng Xiaoping, who went on to become China's paramount leader from 1978 – 1992, was placed in charge of the PRC's first ever amphibious invasion, intended to seize the Crescent Group from Vietnam⁸. The operation was an unqualified success and brought the entire Paracel group into Chinese possession, where it has remained ever since. China's official submission of the Nine-Dash Line claim to the UN, however, was on May 7, 2009, following which other ASEAN claimants protested. Thus, the China – Vietnam dispute about the Paracels pre-dates its dispute with other ASEAN nations on the South China Sea.

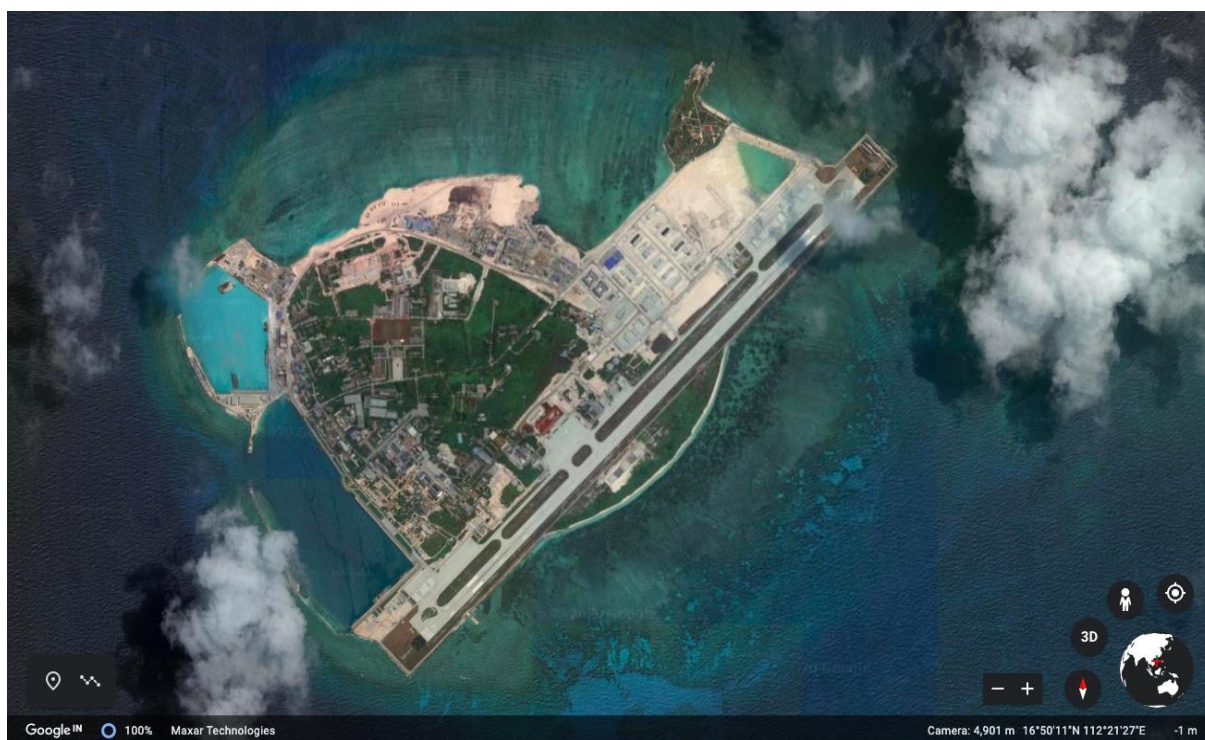
While Deng Xiaoping was orchestrating the success of his operation, the US 7th Fleet stood by and watched. President Richard Nixon was busy mollicoddling China after his February 1972 visit there. The US position, as expressed by then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to the Acting Chief of the PRC Liaison Office in Washington DC on January 23, 1974⁹, was that "The South Vietnamese government is making a number of representations to international organizations, to SEATO as well as to the United Nations. We wanted to let you know we do not associate ourselves with those representations. We are concerned, however, about the prisoners, and we noted that your government has indicated that the prisoners will be released at an appropriate time. We wanted to urge that this appropriate time be very soon, especially as there is an American included in that group. And that would certainly defuse the situation as far as the United States is concerned".

Thus, the recent statement from the US State Department¹⁰ expressing serious concern and describing the incident with the Vietnamese fishing boat on April 02, 2020 as "the latest in a long series of PRC actions to assert unlawful maritime claims and disadvantage its Southeast Asian neighbours in the South China Sea" stands in stark contrast with the position taken by the US on the Paracels in January 1974.

⁸ Bill Hayton, "The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia", P 73

⁹ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v18/d66>

¹⁰ <https://www.state.gov/prcs-reported-sinking-of-a-vietnamese-fishing-vessel-in-the-south-china-sea/>



Woody Island. Source: Google Earth

Woody Island, off which the incident occurred, is deep within the Amphitrite Group, which has been in China's possession since 1956. It is the location of Sansha, a prefecture level city established in July 2012 as the seat of China's administration for several island groups in the South China Sea. It is also the location for a PLA garrison command, has a Chinese population of over 1000 people, and facilities such as a seaport, an airport, banks, shopping centres and a City Hall, all under Chinese administration. This being the case, it is difficult to understand how fishing off the island can be considered "normal fishing activity", or the assertion that China's action "violates Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and endangers the legitimate interests of Vietnamese fishermen"¹¹. It is easier to believe that the occupants of the fishing boat were indulging in deliberate provocation that they knew could inflame the Chinese dragon, perhaps testing whether China would be deterred by the commitment demonstrated by the visit of the Theodore Roosevelt group to Da Nang. The actual facts can be established only through an impartial investigation. Such an investigation is not on the cards.

On the other hand, the increased frequency of China's coercive actions against foreign fishing vessels in the South China Sea provides a discernible indicator of unilateral assertion in defending its claimed resource rights within the Nine-Dash Line. The involvement of a Coast Guard vessel in this incident projects to the international community that its ships are policing territories that it

¹¹ http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns200404161321

controls. The incident can thus be portrayed as one of justifiable law enforcement action on its part, particularly to the domestic population, rather than belligerent maritime coercion. It could also be intended as a signal to Ha Noi that it is erring in cozying up to the US at a time when that country is not in a position to respond to China's actions¹².



Leaders at the 14th East Asia Summit. Source: Singapore Ministry of Communications and Information

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia¹³ (TAC), to which Vietnam acceded in 1992 and China in 2003, calls for the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion and the settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means. But neither treaty commitments nor the apparently greater challenges of dealing with a raging pandemic are likely to come in the way of geopolitical games being played in the South China Sea. It is thus evident that multilateralism in dealing with common security challenges will have to co-exist with unilateral geopolitical ambitions. How long ASEAN will be able to hold on to the principles espoused by the TAC as also its dreams of an enforceable Code of Conduct while Chinese unilateralism adversely impacts the livelihood of its large fishing communities, remains to be seen.

¹² http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-04/03/content_9784343.htm

¹³ <https://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976/>



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