

# How Vietnam may curb China's ambitions

China and Vietnam have overlapping claims in the South China Sea and there's hope diplomacy will prevail



*Vietnam Dragon Surveillance Illustration by Greg Groesch/The Washington Times more >*

By James Borton - - Thursday, June 6, 2019

## **ANALYSIS/OPINION:**

At the U.N. Secretariat building, sheathed in shiny aluminum, glass and marble and overlooking New York's East River, Vietnamese diplomats are soon to celebrate their nation's selection as a non-permanent member in the U.N. Security Council. As

a country that has experienced the tragedies of wars, including one drawn out and fierce conflict with America five decades ago, Hanoi's foreign policy role is now forged on peaceful cooperation, stability and independence.

While there are five permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, also known as the 'Big Five': China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States, there are a total of 15 U.N. member states who serve on the UNSC, the remainder of which are elected. Only the five permanent members have the power of veto, which enables them to prevent the adoption of any substantive draft Council resolution.

Vietnam's importance in international security has risen sharply since the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, when it successfully hosted Presidents Donald Trump, China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin along with other regional leaders in Danang, a coastal city in central Vietnam. Despite the failure of Mr. Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong-Un's meeting held earlier in the year, the summit successfully placed host country Vietnam in the peacemaker role spotlight.

Despite the challenges of endemic corruption, human rights and recidivist communist tendencies, Hanoi has received global recognition as a member of the international community since it adopted a market liberalization trajectory that has led to an impressive economic performance, a high GDP, a reduction in poverty and more political openness.

"Vietnam is proud to be a responsible member of the United Nations. Through the four decades that Vietnam has been a part of the UN, we have always been committed to the noble goal of the Organization — to build a world of peace, security and development," says Pham Binh Minh, minister of Foreign Affairs.

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Notably, Vietnam has leveraged greater integration with the international economic system, including through ascension to the World Trade Organization in 2007. In October 2007, Vietnam was also elected for the first time a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council by a positive vote of 183 out of 190 votes for the 2008-2009 term.

Vietnam's successful march to the U.N. was punctuated by remarkable strides made from 1995 to 1999, including the normalizing of diplomatic and trade relations with the United States. The country's integration with the West opened up opportunities to work with the world's developed and international organizations, including multilateral donors such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Also, Vietnam was one of the fastest-growing sources of American imports from Asia last quarter, a beneficiary of business shifts in response to increased American tariffs on Chinese goods.

Although not quite overnight, Hanoi has marched forward and become a member of ASEAN (1995), and APEC (1998). The U.S.-Vietnam bilateral trading agreement was signed in 2001 and accelerated the political will to speed up negotiations on Vietnam's ascension to the World Trade Organization (WTO.)

"During its first tenure in 2008-2009, Vietnam was praised by the United States for its positive contribution and the close voting alignment on key issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and counter-terrorism," states Carl Thayer, emeritus

professor at the University of New South Wales.

As a non-permanent member at the UNSC, Vietnam is poised to demonstrate its growing voice forged in ASEAN, to exercise its soft diplomacy skills and to extoll its embrace of international integration.

Now the global situation is more complicated and the relations among global powers, namely the United States and China and Russia has worsened. It's now approaching three years since the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague issued its landmark ruling in the Philippines vs. China case, resulting in a nearly unanimous victory for Manila and a call for the role of international law in settling South China Sea disputes peacefully.

"China and Vietnam have overlapping claims in the South China Sea and over the past decade or so Beijing has stepped up its pressure on Vietnam by reclaiming and militarizing islands and pressing Vietnam not to exploit oil and gas resources in areas near Vietnam's coast but where China also has claims. Hanoi hopes that building out its diplomatic ties will prompt Beijing to be more cautious in its dealings with Vietnam," claims Murray Hiebert, a senior associate of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

While freedom of navigation operations has increased in the South China Sea, signaling America's right of transit, Vietnam could be forced to show its hand if the Trump administration decides to assert itself further. This week's somewhat muted announcement by the United States that it is selling unarmed surveillance drones to Vietnam, has placed China on notice. As a result, there may be questions about what's the next diplomatic maneuver for Hanoi.

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