

## **Dispute over Paracel and Spratly Islands. - Naval Clash off Paracels. Chinese Occupation of Paracel Archipelago.**

A dispute between China and South Vietnam over the ownership of two archipelagos in the South China Sea, the Paracel Islands and the Spratly (or Spratley) Islands, led to a naval battle off the Paracels on Jan. 19, in which the South Vietnamese lost a gunboat and claimed to have sunk two Chinese ships, and resulted in the occupation of the Paracels by China.

The **Paracels**, known to the Chinese as the Hsisha (Western Sands) Islands and to the Vietnamese as Hoang Sa, consist of about 130 barren and waterless islands, none larger than a square mile, lying about 165 miles south-east of the Chinese island of Hainan and 225 miles east of Vietnam; they are divided into two main groups, the Crescent group to the west and the Amphitrite group to the east. The Chinese claim that they were visited by a Chinese navigator, Cheng Ho, in the 15th century, and were listed among China's coastal possessions by the early 18th century. *The China Sea Pilot*, published by the British Admiralty, states that they were "annexed by the Chinese Government in 1909, and are often visited by junks". The South Vietnamese Government, on the other hand, claims that the Emperor Gia Long of Annam established a company in 1802 to exploit the Paracels and personally planted a flag there in 1816; that the French Governor-General of Indo-China declared them part of Thua Thien province in 1932; and that sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys was transferred from France to Vietnam in 1919.

The **Spratly Islands**, known to the Chinese as the Nansha (Southern Sands) Islands and to the Vietnamese as Truong Sa, lie about 300 miles east of Vietnam and 300 miles west of the Philippines. China bases its claim to them on old maps, British Admiralty surveys, and their regular use by Chinese fisherman, whilst South Vietnam claims that they were shown as Vietnamese territory on the first maps issued by the Empire of Annam in 1834. The French Government formally took possession of them in 1933, despite a protest by Japan, which claimed to have occupied the Spratlys in 1917 and which formally annexed them in 1939 [see 3521 A]. Like the Paracels, they were occupied by the Japanese in the Second World War. In 1951 sovereignty over the Spratlys was claimed by both Vietnam and by the two Chinese Governments. The Philippines, which also claimed them in 1955, is reported to have occupied four of the 12 main islands, whilst the Chinese Nationalist Government has maintained a battalion of marines on another of them since 1957.

By the peace treaty of 1951, Japan renounced all claims to the Paracels and the Spratlys, but the treaty did not state to whom they belonged. At the San Francisco peace conference the Vietnamese delegation declared that Vietnam had recovered her sovereignty over them, but this claim was rejected by both the Chinese Communist Government and the Nationalist Government in Taiwan, neither of which was represented at the conference. Woody Island, the main island in the Amphitrite group, has been occupied by the Chinese at least since 1947, while South

Vietnam has maintained a small garrison for some years on Pattle Island, the largest of the Crescent group, to man a radio and meteorological station.

A crisis was precipitated when the South Vietnamese Government issued a decree in September 1973 incorporating the Spratly Islands into Phuoc Tuy province. Contracts for offshore oil exploration and exploitation south and south-east of Phuoc Tuy had been granted to four foreign companies in August [see 26222 A], and the decree made it legally possible for other contracts to be granted in the area off the Spratlys. The Saigon Government also announced its intention of carrying out surveys for oil off the central Vietnamese coast, opposite the Paracels.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement on Jan. 11, 1974, describing the South Vietnamese decree as "a wanton infringement of China's territorial integrity and sovereignty", and reaffirming China's claim to the Spratlys, the Paracels and two other groups of islands, the Tungsha or Pratas Islands (east of China and south-west of Taiwan) and the Chungsha (south-east of the Paracels). The South Vietnamese Foreign Ministry rejected the Chinese claim to the Spratlys and Paracels on the following day.

Following this public disagreement, warships were sent to the Paracels by the South Vietnamese Navy, which had not carried out a routine patrol in the area since Oct. 31, and found that a number of islands of the Crescent group had been occupied by the Chinese since that date. Naval clashes subsequently occurred between the two countries as a result of the dispute over the Paracels, which were occupied by the Chinese.

According to South Vietnamese accounts, 11 Chinese warships entered the Paracels area on Jan. 16 and landed troops on three of the islands—Robert, Duncan and Drummond. South Vietnamese troops which landed on Robert on the following day found no Chinese there, but removed a Chinese flag. On Jan. 19 a South Vietnamese patrol encountered a company of Chinese troops on Duncan which opened fire, killing two South Vietnamese. After a Chinese battalion had landed the South Vietnamese withdrew, and South Vietnamese warships bombarded the island. According to Chinese official statements, South Vietnamese warships began harassing Chinese fishing boats on Jan. 15, and landed troops in the next three days which tore down Chinese flags. On Jan. 19 troops which attempted to occupy Chenhang (Duncan) fired on Chinese fishermen, killing a number of them, whereupon the fishermen fought back and repelled their attack. The island was then, according to the Chinese account, shelled from the sea and bombed by South Vietnamese aircraft.

The clash on Duncan Island was followed by a naval engagement. The South Vietnamese Foreign Ministry alleged on Jan. 19 that the battle began when a Chinese escort ship opened fire on a South Vietnamese destroyer; naval sources in Saigon, however, stated on Jan. 21 that the South Vietnamese had fired first, on President Nguyen Van Thieu's personal orders, after Chinese ships had acted in a provocative manner by apparently trying to ram South Vietnamese ships. South Vietnamese spokesman claimed that two Chinese gunboats had been sunk and two ships heavily damaged, against one South Vietnamese gunboat sunk and three ships damaged. A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement of Jan. 20 merely stated that the South Vietnamese had fired on Chinese warships on patrol duty, which had returned the fire, "meting out due punishment", but gave no details of losses on either side.

Although the South Vietnamese claimed to have inflicted heavier damage than they received, their ships withdrew after the battle, leaving the Chinese in complete control of the Paracels. On Jan. 20 Chinese troops occupied Pattle, Robert and Money, the only islands still in South Vietnamese hands, and took prisoner 48 South Vietnamese and an American, who was officially described as a civilian employee of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

A Dutch cargo ship on Jan. 23 picked up 23 survivors from the lost South Vietnamese gunboat, two of whom subsequently died, while 14 survivors of the fighting on Money Island were picked up by fisherman on Jan. 29 after 10 days on raft. South Vietnamese casualty figures were given on Jan. 30 as 19 killed, 43 wounded and 101 missing or captured. The Chinese Government, which stated on Jan. 20 that the prisoners would be released "at an appropriate time", handed over five sick or wounded South Vietnamese and the captured American on Jan. 31. On Feb. 17 the last of the 48 prisoners whom the Chinese claimed to have taken in the battle for the Paracels—43 South Vietnamese soldiers, sailors and civilians—arrived in Saigon via Hong Kong, after having been held prisoner in China for a month.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union adopted a strictly neutral attitude towards the dispute. A State Department spokesman said on Jan. 20: "The United States is not involved. We have no claims and we support nobody else's claims." Dr. Kissinger, the Secretary of State, deplored the use of force in the dispute on Jan. 22, but said that he did not regard the Chinese claims to the Paracels and Spratlys as evidence that Peking wished to dominate the region. In Moscow the Tass agency published the Chinese statement of Jan. 20, but the Soviet Press and radio made no comment.

A North Vietnamese official said on Jan. 21: "Preservation of its territorial integrity is a sacred cause for every people. Disputes handed down by history, often very complex ones, sometimes arise and need to be examined carefully. The countries concerned must settle these problems through negotiations, in a spirit of equality, mutual respect and good neighbourliness." A spokesman for the South Vietnamese Provisional Revolutionary Government made a similar statement on the following day. *Le Monde* commented: "In the present circumstances Hanoi can neither openly criticize Peking, and thereby support the enemy in Saigon against an ally, nor support the Chinese, for fear of being accused of lack of patriotism. But when the leaders of the North speak of 'negotiations' they show that for them the issue has not been closed by the Chinese victory...."

The South Vietnamese Government requested on Jan. 20 an immediate meeting of the U.N. security Council to consider the Chinese "aggression". The President of the security Council, Sofer Gonzalo Facio (Costa Rica), however, stated on Jan. 25 that his consultations had shown that only the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Costa Rica and possibly Austria were prepared to support placing the question on the agenda, as against the minimum of nine votes needed. Of the other members, China, the Soviet Union, Byelorussia, Iraq and Indonesia were opposed, France had not made its position known, and the other four members had indicated that they would abstain. The South Vietnamese Ambassador in Paris stated on Jan. 24 that his Government would refer the question to the International Court of Justice.

South Vietnamese troops were reported on Jan. 31 to have landed on the Spratly Islands to reinforce those already stationed there since September 1978. The Chinese Government issued a formal protest on Feb. 4, and an official spokesman in Taiwan said on the same day that the Nationalist Government had also protested. A South Vietnamese statement issued on Feb. 5 said: "The Republic of Vietnam has maintained Army units and an administration on the islands for a long time. Faced with the armed aggression by Communist China at Hoang Sa, the Republic of Vietnam must naturally think of improving this defence and this administration."

The Philippine Government—which, as stated above, also claims sovereignty over the Spratly archipelago—protested to South Vietnam and Taiwan on Feb. 5 over the presence of troops of those countries in the Spratlys.—(Peking Review South Vietnamese Embassy Press Department, London - Times - Daily Telegraph - Guardian - Le Monde - International Herald Tribune)(*Prev. rep. Spratly Islands, Japanese Prewar Annecration, 3521 A.*)

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