

Reviewing Vietnam's 'Struggle' Options in the South China Sea

What are Hanoi's options to push back on Beijing?

By Derek Grossman

Once again, Chinese assertiveness against Vietnam in the South China Sea is on the rise. Beginning on April 3, a Chinese coast guard ship sunk a Vietnamese fishing vessel in disputed waters off the Paracel Islands, and ten days later, on April 13, Beijing redeployed the controversial Haiyang Dizhi 8 geological survey ship, which it had used last year to harass international drilling near Vanguard Bank, to Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). And on April 18, Beijing announced that it had established administrative control over the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands.

Following this new round of escalating bilateral tensions, Vietnam has publicly protested each Chinese move. But these statements have yet to alter Beijing's bad behavior. So the question naturally becomes: beyond publicly airing grievances, what else could Vietnam do to curtail Chinese assertiveness in the future?

As I have previously discussed, Vietnam's approach to international relations, and China particularly, is one of "cooperation and struggle." In other words, Hanoi has consistently sought to keep bilateral ties with Beijing cordial and productive in spite of simultaneously pushing back in the South China Sea and other areas of the relationship. Indeed, Vietnam refers to China as a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partner"—the highest distinction Hanoi offers any major power partner. Of Vietnam's three "comprehensive strategic partners" (China, India, and Russia), or closest major power partnerships, only China holds the additional title of being a "cooperative" partner — underscoring the exceptional priority Hanoi places on cooperating with its much larger northern neighbor.

But as I have argued, it became clear in the aftermath of the months-long standoff last year between China and Vietnam at Vanguard Bank that Hanoi should consider new ways to struggle.

At a bilateral level, for example, Hanoi has tended to compartmentalize its responses to Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and not allow them to disrupt other parts of the bilateral relationship. For instance, on April 21 and 23, Vietnam decided to move forward with China in conducting annual joint coast guard patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin. Although Hanoi and Beijing in 2000 were able to reach an agreement on Gulf of Tonkin delimitation, Vietnam is under no obligation to continue these joint patrols. Instead, it could send an unambiguous message to Beijing that other areas of the relationship will be negatively impacted, especially in the sensitive area of maritime policy. In another example of holding different parts of the bilateral relationship at risk, Hanoi could also decide to end participation in China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Hanoi is already highly suspicious of BRI projects, both within Vietnam and in neighboring Laos and Cambodia.

There are many other options to send a message bilaterally. For instance, Hanoi might make good on its threat in November to take China to international court over its sovereignty claims in

the South China Sea, as the Philippines did in 2013 and as Vietnam supported in 2014. I have heard anecdotally from government sources that this is under serious consideration at the moment. Separately, Hanoi could decide to no longer censor media reporting on China's assertiveness to further stoke already high anti-Chinese sentiment in the country, which would likely threaten Chinese business interests in Vietnam. Hanoi might also downgrade China's partnership status to simply that of "comprehensive strategic partner" to indicate that bilateral ties are suffering due to Beijing's actions in the South China Sea.

In the military domain, Vietnam could take a page out of Indonesia's playbook and dramatically escalate the potential for armed conflict to get China to back down during the next crisis. During a brief standoff in late December and early January in waters surrounding the Natuna Islands, the Indonesian military responded to Chinese coast guard and fishing boat incursions into Jakarta's EEZ by deploying naval ships and flying fighter aircraft over the airspace. Chinese ships reportedly retreated shortly thereafter. A similar Vietnamese response would likely involve deploying Gepard-class frigates, Kilo-class submarines, and Su-30MMKs to signal resolve, though doing so would potentially risk broader conflict and thus should be carefully calibrated. On the lower end of the deterrence spectrum, Vietnam could deploy coast guard and fishing militia forces (the latter of which Hanoi has recently been building up) on routine patrols of disputed features, in the same way Beijing has been doing for years. However, this option might be cost prohibitive and place a strain on scarce resources.

At the multilateral level, Hanoi also has viable options to intensify struggle. This year Vietnam is serving as both chair of ASEAN and a non-permanent member of the UNSC. Although coronavirus relief coordination has essentially hijacked the ASEAN agenda for 2020, Hanoi could still seek to drive members toward concluding a legally-binding Code of Conduct favorable to Vietnamese security interests. There are rumors that Hanoi may seek an extension of its chairmanship term, out through 2021, to give it more time to wield influence in this important venue. Meanwhile, within the UNSC, Hanoi has already issued a Note Verbale to counter Chinese sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. Vietnam could attempt to bring greater international prominence to the South China Sea via the UNSC in the future.

Vietnam might also look to continue deepening security partnerships with major powers — namely Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, but increasingly the United Kingdom and France as well — to assist Hanoi in deterring China's growing assertiveness in the region. Although it is highly unlikely Vietnam would join the "Quad" countries — Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. — in joint military exercises or patrols to signal unified resolve to counter China throughout the Indo-Pacific, it could instead serve as a dialogue partner on China issues. Either way, Vietnam is already apart of the "Quad Plus," along with New Zealand and South Korea, to cooperate on coronavirus relief efforts. Alternatively, Hanoi could look to like-minded ASEAN countries for support. In recent months, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia have all been angered by Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. Perhaps these three countries could conduct military exercises or patrols together. This idea has actually been floated unofficially in the Philippines.

Finally, Vietnam's latest defense white paper, published in November, opens the door to strengthening security cooperation with the United States. The paper reiterates Hanoi's "Three No's" defense policy — no alliances, no foreign bases on Vietnamese territory, and no aligning with a second against a third country — but also notes that "depending on the circumstances and specific conditions [my emphasis added], Vietnam will consider developing necessary,

appropriate defense and military relations with other countries.” This line strongly suggests that Hanoi could look to Washington for further assistance if Beijing’s behavior in the South China Sea does not improve. Hanoi could build upon the incredible momentum generated in recent years with Washington, punctuated on March 11th when the USS Theodore Roosevelt’s made a port call to Da Nang — the second time in three years a U.S. aircraft carrier visited Vietnam.

Regardless of its course of action, the good news is Vietnam has many reasonable options to struggle more against China in the South China Sea. Hanoi just needs to determine how far it is willing to go to make the point.

Derek Grossman is a senior defense analyst at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation, an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California, and a regular contributor to The Diplomat. He formerly served as the daily intelligence briefer to the assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs at the Pentagon.