

# Detering the Dragon in the South China Sea

President Obama at the end of May made a trip to communist Vietnam, a place many Americans still think of with a mixture of anger, frustration, and sadness. The long Vietnam War had a profound impact on American society and the US military, and it took decades for relations between the two nations to thaw. Obama's visit was not unprecedented, but it was rare: He is just the third sitting US President to visit the nation in the past four decades.

From the national security perspective, the highest profile outcome of Obama's Vietnam trip was his announcement the US would end a long-standing ban on selling military hardware to Hanoi.

"The United States is fully lifting the ban on the sale of military equipment to Vietnam that has been in place for some 50 years," Obama said May 23 at a joint press conference with Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang. "Sales will need to still meet strict requirements, including those related to human rights," Obama noted. "But this change will ensure that Vietnam has access to the equipment it needs to defend itself and removes a lingering vestige of the Cold War."

Why does the United States care if economically tiny, distant, communist, and authoritarian Vietnam has the ability to defend itself? Obama said the only thing he really could, politically—that this decision is about a general improvement in relations between the two nations in a region of growing military and economic importance.

The decision to lift the arms-sale ban is "not based on China or any other considerations," Obama made a point of saying. It is "based on our desire to complete what has been a lengthy process of moving towards normalization with Vietnam."

In reality, it is about China. Of course it is about China. Vietnam is but one in a long line of Southeast Asian nations enduring a severely troubled relationship with their neighborhood's intimidator. In but one example of the tensions, China recently moved a huge oil rig into disputed South China Sea waters midway between Hainan island and central Vietnam, despite repeated objections from Hanoi.

"With respect to the South China Sea—although the United States doesn't support any particular claim—we are supportive of the notion that these issues should be resolved peacefully, diplomatically, in accordance with international rules and norms, and not based on who's the bigger party and who can throw their weight around a little bit more," Obama said. That is a good principle, but China is clearly not interested in international rules and norms when it comes to the South China Sea.

China claims the vast majority of the sea as its territorial waters, a claim that is contested by most of the other nations ringing the vital waterway. China's claims overlap with similar but much smaller territorial-waters claims put forth by Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

More troubling, China has overtly and incrementally taken highly questionable steps to bolster its control and sovereignty claims in the region. It has reinforced and expanded a series of reefs and shoals (creating artificial islands) in and around the Spratleys in the center of the South China Sea, claiming the land and in some cases even building military-grade air fields on these remote outposts. Fiery Cross Reef, in the center of the sea, has been greatly expanded by China and now boasts a 10,000-foot runway—on land also claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, and previously Malaysia.

These moves have been met with broad international condemnation, to no effect.

"The United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, and we will support the right of all countries to do the same," Obama said, but US efforts to date have preserved freedom of navigation only. The US has been unable to prevent further Chinese military expansion into the sea.

China's intransigence has "exposed the hollowness of America's naval predominance. American might has not deterred the construction spree; and it is hard to see how, short of full-blown war, the new islands will ever be either dismantled or snatched from Chinese control," read a June 4 column in *The Economist*.

It gets worse. In mid-May, a pair of Chinese fighter jets buzzed a US Navy EP-3 spyplane on routine patrol in the South China Sea's international airspace. "Having insisted its island building in the Spratley archipelago was for purely civilian purposes, the Chinese Defense Ministry used [the] row last month ... to argue for 'the total correctness and utter necessity of China's construction of defensive facilities on the relevant islands,'" *The Economist* noted.

It is not enough for the US to have the world's most powerful military. For the nation to defend freedom, commerce, and international norms, nations such as China that are used to getting their way by intimidating their neighbors need to believe the US and its partners will defend their common interests. Thus far, China has been undeterred.

During the Cold War, the US needed to convince the Soviet Union it would go to war to defend America's NATO allies. In the nuclear era, that meant convincing the USSR that the US would be willing to risk the destruction of New York or Washington to defend Berlin or Brussels.

Thankfully, the tension is lower today, but those in China's shadow seek similar US security.

That is why Vietnam is now part of a long line of nations aligning more closely with the US to defend themselves against Chinese intimidation. The US must work more closely with Vietnam—and Australia, Brunei, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and others—to preserve freedom and security in the Western Pacific. ★

**Arms sales to Vietnam may be a trifle, but the message is paramount.**