

Turns of Silence About a Massacre in the South China Sea



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Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam – Three decades ago, one of the twentieth century’s most flagrant atrocities took place. Strangely, offender and victim both remained silent. Twenty-six years later, when the former “quietly” taunted the latter about the massacre, the victim, again, kept silent. However, this month, the victim — Vietnam — finally chose to speak out at a July 10th nationally-covered press conference

announcing the release of a book detailing the incident. The one now choosing to remain silent may well be the offender: China.

Attending the press conference were some survivors and families of the courageous warriors who failed to return from the 1988 Gac Ma massacre. Whatever rationale Vietnam had for remaining silent for thirty years appears now to be eclipsed by concerns over China’s continuing expansionist threat.

The site of the atrocity was Gac Ma reef, known on Western maps as Johnson South Reef, in the Spratly Islands — an archipelago of 750 reefs, islets, atolls and islands. While several countries lay claim to ownership of the Spratlys, in March 1988 it boiled down to a Chinese and Vietnamese confrontation over three reefs in very close proximity to each other.

Anticipating an occupation of the reefs by the Chinese, three Vietnamese transport ships landed Vietnamese soldiers on Gac Ma to stake out their country’s claim. The three Vietnamese lightly armed ships presented no serious naval threat, their guns having a limited 500-meter range. After disembarking their soldiers late on March 13th, the Vietnamese transports made their way to two other nearby atolls. As dawn broke the next day, the Vietnamese on Gac Ma saw a Chinese naval force comprised of transports, with their own landing force, and destroyers. The Chinese saw Vietnamese flags flying over Gac Ma and one other atoll, known as CoLin.

The Vietnamese observed an assault boat, loaded with well-armed Chinese marines, launch out from a ship and head for Gac Ma. Lacking cover or concealment, the Vietnamese immediately formed a 360-degree defensive perimeter — their flag proudly flying in the center — creating a configuration known as “*the immortal circle*.” As the Gac Ma reef was totally submerged, Vietnamese soldiers standing on it appeared from a distance to actually be standing on the water. But it became clear to the Chinese this was a demonstration of Vietnamese resolve to defend the reef at all costs.

Fighting ensued as the Chinese tried to take the reef. When a Vietnamese lieutenant grabbed the flag to prevent its capture, he was shot in the head. The flag was then immediately picked up by Nguyen Van Lanh, who held on to it until he fell wounded. The fighting ebbed with the Vietnamese still holding their ground. They were overjoyed to see the Chinese withdraw and re-embark upon their ships. That joy, however, was short-lived. Nguyen, who miraculously survived his severe wounds, and other survivors found themselves strafed by intense machine gunfire from the Chinese ships. Despite the Vietnamese transports presenting no threat, they too were attacked and sunk.

The battle was captured in a video depicting the engagement. It is disturbing to see Chinese gunfire rake Gac Ma as the Vietnamese remained defenseless against the onslaught. Stoically maintaining their immortal circle, the Vietnamese simply awaited the inevitable end — eventually slaughtered like animals.

One can only imagine the helplessness the Vietnamese felt as the Chinese cut them down. Sixty-four Vietnamese lives were lost that day. Gac Ma was the equivalent of America’s Alamo, with the exception of the few survivors. One was Nguyen who, along with the others, would spend three years in captivity before being released.

Today, China occupies Gac Ma, having built it up as an artificial island upon which a base and airfield now sit. It appears also to be armed with surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles. Underneath all this lie the bones of the 64 Vietnamese soldiers whose remains were never returned.

The film of the Gac Ma slaughter was kept under wraps until it was posted in June 2014, surprisingly, by the Chinese. (Because this author wrote about it at the time, he was invited to speak at the press conference held this week in Ho Chi Minh City). But why did China post the video after 26 years of silence?

The answer lies with what happened in May 2014.

China dispatched a semi-submersible oil rig, Haiyang Shiyou 981, to the Paracel Islands. This was another island chain in the South China Sea of which ownership between China and Vietnam was disputed. As a result, many ship ramming and bumping confrontations occurred between the two countries, after which the video was posted. Undoubtedly, China released the video as a veiled threat to Vietnam — a warning that what happened in 1988 could well happen again.

Since the Gac Ma massacre, China has only increased its footprint in the South China Sea. Its strategy is to use the threat of military might, unchallenged by any regional neighbor, as the basis for staking ownership claims — claims contrary to international law.

China continues to illegally lay claim to various sites in the South China Sea to build its artificial islands, unfazed by the claims other states may have. This prompted the U.S. to conduct “freedom of navigation” (FON) operations near these islands. Such operations involve navigating within the internationally-recognized twelve-mile territorial water limit, claimed by all nations off their coastlines, as a demonstration the U.S. does not honor China’s claim. After a FON operation, China typically protests it as an illegal transit through its territorial waters.

A constant in a thousand years of Vietnam’s independence has been its historical confrontations with China. The two have fought many wars during that millennium — the last as recent as their thirty-day war in 1979. Although a strategic victory for China, Vietnam bloodied China’s nose — something China never forgot. In a way, China’s aggression against Vietnam in the South China Sea may be an effort to regain face. As China’s South China Sea policy challenges international law and regional stability, it may, ironically, bring two former enemies, the U.S. and Vietnam, together to challenge a mutual threat. Geopolitics do make for strange bedfellows!

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