



Chinese Foreign Minister Calls on Resolved Land Border Disputes with Vietnam to Influence Pending Chinese-Vietnamese Maritime Disputes

OE Watch Commentary: China's *People's Daily* recently published Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech commemorating the 20th anniversary of the delimitation of the China-Vietnam land boundary. As the first excerpt highlights, the foreign minister focused on the historic relationship between China and Vietnam, drawing on the two country's shared socialist path and history of national liberation. The foreign minister also recalled his own role in the negotiations that led to the border agreement. He offered up a conciliatory tone toward finding mutually-beneficial border solutions in stark contrast to Chinese actions elsewhere, primarily the South China Sea, where China and Vietnam dispute ownership over numerous features.

However, Wang Yi used the speech at the border in the company of Vietnamese officials to double down on the shared history between the two countries. He highlighted mutual respect and cooperation in regards to the land border issue as the way forward for yet unresolved maritime territorial claims. He called on China and Vietnam to "resolve maritime issues at an early date," at the same time offering Vietnam a partnership to maintain the "peace and stability" of the South China Sea.

The speech also illustrated the Chinese approach to solving its border disputes, favoring a bi-lateral approach rather than a multi-lateral approach. Although China and Vietnam continue to have maritime border disputes there is a history of bi-lateral partnership. According to the transcript, Wang Yi's speech mentions the Beibu Gulf twice. The Beibu Gulf, or Chinese name for the Gulf of Tonkin, was demarcated by a French colonial treaty in the late 1800s. The treaty stipulated that the maritime border between the two countries was a straight line southward from where the two countries' land border touched the sea. The treaty was known by the Chinese as one of the unequal treaties, treaties imposed on the Chinese by the European colonial powers when China was politically and militarily weak. Indeed, the French treaty gave Vietnam most of Tonkin, or Beibu Gulf, and brought Vietnamese territorial waters very close to China's Hainan Island in violation of standard maritime boundary principles. The Beibu Gulf agreement between China and Vietnam was reached in December 2000 and took effect in June 2001. The current line bends in the general shape of Hainan Island giving the Chinese an equal amount of the gulf.

Wang Yi suggests that if the two countries can solve that former maritime issue, and celebrate closure regarding prior land border disputes, both China and Vietnam can solve any remaining territorial disputes, including the South China Sea. This one-on-one approach is a second track of diplomacy in opposition to what was originally stated as a Declaration of Conduct between China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) for resolving disputes in the South China Sea. The ASEAN nations, which also include Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, have competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. While these four states have sought a mutual Code of Conduct relating to boundary issues and resolving the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, China has dragged its feet.

As the foreign minister's speech seems to suggest, China would prefer to continue to approach its issues with the other claimant states bilaterally. In many ways the published speech presents nothing new in Chinese-Vietnamese border issues. It also is not a sure thing that Vietnam will accept past agreements between the two countries as a standard to follow as they negotiate on-going disputes. **End OE Watch Commentary (Billingsley)**



Chinese messaging. Rock monuments located on Hainan Island. Inscriptions read Taiwan Island (left) and Hainan Island (right), both considered Chinese territory by the PRC.

Source: Photo by Dodge Billingsley

“China and Vietnam have accumulated valuable experience in delimiting the land boundary and completing the demarcation of the Beibu Gulf. The two countries are fully capable and wise to continue negotiations and consultations to further resolve the maritime issues.”

Source: “王毅：我们愿同越方把中越陆地边界维护好、管理好、利用好 (Wang Yi: We are willing to work with Vietnam to maintain, manage and utilize the land border between China and Vietnam)”, *People's Daily Overseas Network*, 3 September 2020. http://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1675858642651967993&wfr=spider&for=pc&sa=vs_ob_realttime

Excerpt 1: China and Vietnam are socialist neighbors linked by mountains and rivers, and the traditional friendship between the two peoples has a long history. In the arduous struggle for national independence and national liberation, the two sides fought side by side, shared life and death, and forged a deep friendship of “comrades and brothers.” In advancing the cause of socialist construction in line with their own national conditions, the two sides go hand in hand and work in the same boat to push the all-round cooperation between the two countries to a new level.

Excerpt 2: We must learn from the successful practice of land borders to resolve maritime issues at an early date. China and Vietnam have accumulated valuable experience in delimiting the land boundary and completing the demarcation of the Beibu Gulf. The two countries are fully capable and wise to continue negotiations and consultations to further resolve the maritime issues. We must implement the important instructions of the top leaders of the two parties and two countries, focus on the overall situation of bilateral relations and the needs of long-term cooperation, actively carry out dialogue and consultation, find a basic and long-term solution acceptable to both sides, and jointly maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.