

The South China Sea in the Age of European Decline

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The history of the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands in the period 1930–56 will be analysed here within a context of regional political and strategic developments. The focus will be on how French and British authorities estimated the economic and strategic value of the two island groups in various periods. The Paracels and Spratlys are studied the way one would examine the pawns in a game of chess. In themselves they are unimportant, but in certain situations they gain significance, and mediocre players may pay inordinate attention to their protection. There is also the faint possibility that a pawn can be changed into a queen, for instance if oil is discovered. In order to understand the constellations that push simple pawns into the limelight, they must be seen in relation to the general balance of forces on the chessboard, and the strategies of all players.

It does not form any part of this article's purpose to evaluate which state today has the better historical claim to the two island groups. Examples of such evaluations will be cited, but only as historical occurrences, not in order to support or refute them. This is a work of history, not law.

Historical Background

If the eighteenth century was 'the Chinese century' in the South China Sea (Blussé), then the nineteenth century was 'the European century'.¹ The South China Sea then came to be dominated by the British and

¹ It is often thought that the European domination of the South China Sea developed incrementally from the arrival of the Portuguese and Spaniards in the 16th century. This was not the case. The Portuguese and Spaniards tapped into local trade, and met stiff competition from the Muslim sultanates. In most of the 17th century regional trade was controlled by the Dutch East India Company, but towards the end of that century, when Japan forbade the export of silver, and the Dutch were forced

French navies, who made a common cause in subduing China and opening it up to European trade and missionary activities. Britain obtained its lease on Hong Kong after the Opium War in 1842. By the mid-1880s, France had established the French Indochinese Union as one of the ‘pearls’ of its empire, and in 1898 France acquired a lease to the territory of Kouang-tchéou-wan (around the current city Zhanjiang, which the French called Fort Bayard). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Japan and the United States appeared as rival powers in the South China Sea. Japan acquired Taiwan from China in 1895, and the United States conquered the Philippines from Spain in 1898. The Dutch navy also continued to play a role, with bases in the ports of the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia). A condominium at sea emerged between these five naval powers.

European trade in the region continued to rise until 1929, which marked the apex of European strength. With the world depression, Europe’s influence started its decline. Meanwhile, Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomindang was defeating or winning over one Chinese warlord after the other, thus creating a government with a legitimate claim to represent China as a whole. Militarist forces were gaining ascendancy in Japanese politics. Nationalist and communist movements in French Indochina were launching revolts. And the Far Eastern trade lost much of its value to France and Britain. The French economic historian Jacques Marseille has spoken of a ‘divorce’ in 1930 between the modern sectors of French capitalism and French colonialism.² After 1930 French financial capital showed little interest in the colonies which became protected zones for the most backward sectors of French industry (such as textiles). A period of European decline had set in which, for France, would last until its withdrawal from Vietnam in 1956 (not 1954!), and for Britain until the decision of 1965 to withdraw from east of Suez.

During the period of rising European power, neither Britain nor France had shown much interest in two uninhabited groups of minor islands which on European maps were marked as ‘the Paracels’ and ‘the Spratlys’—or just ‘Dangerous Grounds’. They were mainly seen as obstacles to shipping, and when they were surveyed, the main purpose

to leave Taiwan, Chinese junk trade expanded, and European influence diminished. To some extent, therefore, the ‘opening up of China’ by the British and French in the 19th century represented a European *return*. Leonard Blussé, ‘Chinese Century: The Eighteenth Century in the China Sea Region’, *Archipel*, 58 (1999): 107–28.

² Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français. Histoire d’un divorce* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1984).

was to help ships avoid them. Businessmen from several nations had explored the possibility of extracting guano from these islets, which were known for a fabulous bird life. The British colony of Labuan (an island north of Borneo that Britain acquired from Brunei in 1846) had in 1877 issued a license for a group of businessmen to plant the British flag on Spratly Island and the nearby Amboyna Cay, and to use them for commercial purposes. Nothing, however, had come out of this, except for an expedition ending in a murder case.³ In the 1920s, Japanese businessmen produced phosphates from guano in other parts of the Spratly area (Itu Aba) and the Paracels, but these activities were not just commercially motivated. The Japanese navy sponsored commercial activities as a means to penetrate Europe-dominated waters.

It is not necessarily a coincidence that the French navy should assert a French claim to the Spratlys and to the Paracels just as France was facing the threat from what one might call 'creeping Japanese assertiveness'.

French Annexation, 1930–37

In the 1910s–20s, the French Ministry of Colonies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs more or less agreed that the Paracel Islands were under Chinese sovereignty, and that France should not try to claim them either on behalf of itself or Annam. Therefore France did not protest in 1921 when the government of Guangdong province declared the Paracels to be under the administration of Hainan Island.⁴ Five years

³ Properly speaking it was not a murder case since the killer was not the one put on trial. The white businessmen working the guano on Amboyna Cay got into a dispute with their Chinese 'coolies', who complained of too little food. They attacked their employers (the latter reported), who then shot two of them dead. Two of the surviving coolies were sentenced to two years of prison with hard labour for their part in the attack. The verdict was pronounced by a court led by the Acting British Consul General in Labuan, assisted by a jury 'composed principally of Chinamen'. After this episode, the businessmen seem to have lost interest in the guano. Apparently they also forgot to plant the British flag. See documents attached to C. Howard Smith (Foreign Office) to the Under Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 21.11.31, and draft memorandum to the Law Officers of the Crown, Colonial Office (CO) 273/573/23, Public Record Office (PRO), London, and Acting Consul General Labuan to FO, No. 4, 30.10.79, T 161/622, PRO.

⁴ Note pour Monsieur le Jurisconsulte du Département (M. Naggiar) a.s. de la souveraineté sur les Iles Paracels, 6.5.30 (archivée le 7.6.30), page 74, dos. 215 sous-dos. Chine, série Asie 1944–1955, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (MAE), Paris.

later, in 1926, France refused an application from a French company to exploit guano in the Paracels. It also refused a similar application from a Japanese company. By 1926, however, China was divided into a number of warring states that had little capacity for looking after such peripheral interests as the Paracels. Actually, the Japanese had proceeded with their guano project, without authorisation from either France or China.⁵ By 1930, however, the French authorities in Annam (the central part of today's Vietnam, which formed a separate French protectorate within the Indochinese Union) started to actively push for a French claim on behalf of the protected state, based on the fact that Emperor Gia Long had officially taken possession of the islands in 1816, and that Emperor Minh Mang had sent a mission to erect a marker and build a pagoda there in 1835. The French Foreign Ministry was sceptical, in view of the fact that Annam had done little to uphold its claim, but concluded that it might be worth a try. If France could establish and maintain a presence in the islands, the claim would of course be strengthened.

A few years earlier, the government of the French colony Cochinchina (the southern part of today's Vietnam) had developed an interest in the Spratlys. On 23 March 1925, the Governor apparently decided, without much publicity, that Spratly Island would be under the administration of the province of Baria (later Bac Ria) in Cochinchina.⁶ As a directly administered French colony Cochinchina was a part of the French Indochinese Union, but not under the nominal authority of the Annamese emperor in Hue. In December 1927, the Japanese Consul in Hanoi (the capital of French Indochina) asked French authorities about the legal status of the reefs and islands situated off the Philippine island of Palawan (the Spratlys). This prompted the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prepare a study of the question in 1928. By then, France had started to fear that Japan might have designs on these islands. Two years later, on 13 April 1930, the commander of the French warship *Malicieuse* took formal possession, on behalf of France, of Spratly Island 'and the

⁵ Lettre du Capitaine de Corvette Le Corr      Ren   Pl  ven (d  put   de l'Assembl  e Nationale), joint    Pl  ven    Bidault (Ministre des Affaires Etrang  res), 31.1.47, dos. 214, sous-s  rie (s.-s.) Chine, fonds Asie-Oc  anie (AO) 1944-1955, MAE.

⁶ A Foreign Ministry study in 1946 said this had happened in 1929. Note du Service Juridique de MAE (first draft called 'Note pour la Direction d'Asie-Oc  anie    l'attention de M. M. de Boissezon et Salade'), Paris 6.8.46, sign   Noel Henry, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

islets depending on it'.⁷ Afterwards, the French crew reported to have rescued four marooned Chinese from starvation.⁸ The *Malicieuse* acted on instructions, dated 12 October 1929, from the Governor General of Indochina in Hanoi, who thought (at least he later claimed so) that he acted in consonance with the wishes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Contrary instructions from Paris reached the Governor General three days after the event. Once the Quai d'Orsay learned what had happened, it told the Governor General that it was surprised.⁹ However, as happened often in French colonial history, the government accepted and defended what its local agents had done. It now started to prepare legal arguments for French possession of the Spratlys.

From a legal perspective the claim, as described in the French press at the time, was somewhat innovative in that France did not at first, as was customary, claim a specific number of named islands. Instead, France considered the whole area between the degrees of Longitude 111 and 117 East, and Latitude 7 and 12 North, to belong to France.¹⁰ The concept was probably modelled after the Spanish–American treaty of December 1898, which had defined 'the archipelago known as the Philippine islands' as comprehending the islands lying within an area defined by a set of specifically defined geographic coordinates.¹¹ France sought to avoid any overlap between the area it claimed in the Spratlys and the area defined by the treaty of 1898 as belonging to the Philippines. The precise content of the French claim in 1930 was known only through press accounts; there was no proper declaration of annexation.

⁷ '... Aujourd'hui treize Avril mil neuf cent trente, jour de la fête du dimanche des Rameaux, j'ai pris possession au nom de la FRANCE de l'île SPRATLY située par 8, 39 Nord et III, 55 Greenwich et des îlots qui en dépendent. En signe de quoi, j'ai fait hisser sur l'île SPRATLY le pavillon français et je l'ai fait saluer d'une salve de 21 coups de canon. DELATTRE, Lieutenant de Vaisseau, Commandant [signature]...' Document signé par le commandant et l'équipage de la Canonnière 'Malicieuse'. Photocopie dans 'Note historique 842 sur Iles Spratleys et Paracelse', Carton 26, MAE.

⁸ Foreign Office (FO) draft memorandum to the Law Officers of the Crown, November 1931, Colonial Office (CO) 273/573/23, PRO, also in Treasury (T) 161/622.

⁹ Gouverneur Général Robin (Hanoi) au Président du Conseil (Paris), no. 2210, 31.12.30, sous-dos. 9, dos. 'Iles Spratley', Note historique 842, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ See map in CO 273/573/23, PRO.

¹¹ Extract from *The Washington Post* 6.1.1899, printed for the use of the British Foreign Office, March 1900, CO 273/573/23, PRO.

Apparently, the French occupation had been undertaken without knowledge of the British claim to two islands within the area. Spratly Island itself had been 'discovered' by the British whaler *Cyrus* in 1843 (and named after its captain); it had been surveyed by the *HMS Rifleman* in 1863, and as mentioned, Labuan had issued a license to three businessmen to exploit guano on Spratly Island and Amboyna Cay in 1877. On this occasion the businessmen had even been authorised to plant the British flag, and since then the two islands had been listed as British possessions in official British documents. A new license had been given to the Central Borneo Company in 1889 after the islands had been visited by a British ship who found no trace of actual exploitation by the former licensees. However, the Central Borneo Company also failed to exploit the guano.

In 1930, when learning about the French occupation, the British Consul General in Saigon asked the Governor of Cochinchina for an explanation, and afterwards reported to London that the French seemed to have made a mistake; apparently they had been unaware of the British claim.¹² A drawn out but silent dispute followed between Britain and France, generating a number of legal studies in London and Paris. The reason why the dispute was not made public may partly be that the Foreign Office did not want to disturb Franco-British relations in a region where the French navy and territories served as highly desirable buffers against threats to British possessions. Key Foreign Office officials also felt that Britain's own claim was weak in law and not really worth pursuing. The reasons they cited were that the British licensees had not really utilised the islands, and that Britain had never effectively administered them.¹³ On the other hand, the Foreign Office did not want to give up the British claim since it might be pursued in the future, if France should forfeit its claim. Therefore, while not officially protesting the French claim, Britain also did not recognise it. By contrast, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially protested the French annexation, and prepared its own claim to Spratly Island, based on its possession of Taiwan. Chiang

¹² Two messages from Consul-General Saigon to FO, 23.4.30, T 161/622, PRO, and CO 273/565/12, PRO. See also Geoffrey Marston. 'Abandonment of territorial claims: the cases of Bouvet and Spratly Islands', *British Yearbook of International Law* (1986): 337–56 (at p. 344), who refers to FO 371/14916, folder 407.

¹³ Another reason for the caution of the Foreign Office was that if Britain were to pursue its claim legally, it would have to employ arguments which could be used by other states in relation to other disputed islands, where Britain had much stronger stakes.

Kai-shek's Chinese government, or the government of Guangdong province, was also later said to have protested the French occupation, but the French Foreign Ministry did not register any such protest.¹⁴

Not everyone in London was happy about the pro-French stance of the Foreign Office. The Colonial Office accepted it, the Treasury too, and the Governors of Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements did not display any particular interest in the issue,¹⁵ but the Admiralty and the Air Ministry thought differently. They argued that Britain should push its own claim, since the Spratly Islands could have a strategic value as a refuelling station for seaplanes, and possibly as an area of naval manoeuvres.¹⁶ The idea seems to have been that the British navy should be able to lure hostile naval forces into the shallow waters of

¹⁴ 'L'occupation française ne donna lieu à aucune réclamation des Etats ci-après, qui pouvaient avoir des intérêts ou des droits à faire valoir: Philippines; Pays-Bas; Chine; Etats-Unis. Le Gouvernement britannique demanda des explications: celles-ci fournies, il s'en déclara satisfait (Avril 1930). Seul le Gouvernement japonais protesta...' Note du Service Juridique de MAE (first draft called 'Note pour la Direction d'Asie-Océanie (à l'attention de M. M. de Boissezon et Salade)', Paris 6.8.46, signé Noël Henry, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. A later French study said there had been 'une certaine émotion' in Chinese circles in Guangzhou and above all Hainan after the French annexation of the Spratly islands in 1933, but no official protests. Note sur les éléments d'échange possibles en vue d'un règlement de l'affaire des Paracels, Paris 'Juin 1947', MAE Asie-Océanie, marquée RB/GM, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. However, according to British intelligence, the Chinese minister in Paris 'was ordered to lodge protests with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' on 26 July 1933, the day following the French announcement of annexation. 'Data regarding ownership of the following island...', OIR intelligence memorandum No. 3436.50A, 15.4.47, FO 371/144419, PRO.

¹⁵ Governor of Hong Kong (W. Peel) to Lord Passfield, 19.9.30, T 161/622, PRO. Deputy of the Officer Administering the Government of the Straits Settlements (M. B. Shelley) to Lord Passfield (Colonial Office), 21.1.31, T 161/622, PRO. The Singapore government had asked the opinion of Mr. A. G. Colina, formerly Vanscolina, a long-standing resident of Labuan who had once been secretary of the Central Borneo Company. He stated that about nine years ago his attention had been drawn to the possibility of profitably working the guano deposits said to exist on Spratly Island and Amboyna Cay. However, 'I was never able to spare the time to visit them nor could I gather very much reliable information about them. I did, however, learn from Native sources that no safe anchorage for ships could be obtained in the vicinity and that it was unsafe to approach the island in rough weather. This information, which decided me against the venture, was subsequently confirmed by a Norwegian ship-master whose name I now forget. As far as I am aware, the neighbouring waters have never been properly surveyed and I very much doubt if it would be possible to charter a merchant vessel to visit the islands'.

¹⁶ '... the importance of this island from a Naval aspect is that it lies on the strategic route between Singapore and Hong Kong amongst a group of islands about half-way between these two places. The location of possible refuelling bases for light forces in the China Sea is at present receiving attention; and although the utility at the present time of this particular island for naval purposes may be doubtful, it

the Spratly area, and utilise Britain's superior charts and navigational aptitude to outfox them. In response to these military objections, the Foreign Office decided, on 21 November 1931, to refer the matter to the Law Officers of the Crown, who in July 1932 came up with a report more or less confirming the Foreign Office view:

In our opinion His Majesty's claim to sovereignty over Spratley Island and Amboyna Cay in April 1930 was of so doubtful a nature that it could only be laid before the Permanent Court of International Justice with a faint prospect of success. It is now well settled in general that an inchoate title to sovereignty may be acquired either by discovery or by reason of circumstances having an effect similar to discovery, but that the inchoate title thus acquired must be perfected within a reasonable time by an open and continuous exercise of sovereignty, of which the most common form is occupation in fact.¹⁷

The Admiralty did not change its mind,¹⁸ but an interdepartmental meeting decided, in July 1932, to refrain from pushing the British claim.

In the following year, the French government, in response to a British request for the (non-existing) text of the French official annexation, decided to publish such a proclamation in the *Journal Officiel* of 26 July 1933. The French concept of possession was now modified to make the French claim more compatible with customary international law. France no longer claimed an area defined by geographic coordinates, but instead claimed sovereignty to six named islands: Spratly, Amboyna Cay, Itu Aba, Les Deux Iles, Loaita, and Thitu.¹⁹

is undesirable that the French should establish themselves in the area'. Alex Flint (Admiralty) to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 27.8.30, T 161/622, PRO. Copy of the letter (M.02633/30) also in CO 273/565/12, PRO.

¹⁷ Law Officers to Sir John Simon, W 8733/178/17, 29.7.32, T 161/622, PRO. See also Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

¹⁸ The Admiralty argued, on the basis of a number of records, that '... the discovery of these islands and reefs was made by British ships in every case and that the original as well as the later survey work in this dangerous area has been entirely carried out by British ships'. The Admiralty to the Under Secretary of State, FO, 23.2.33, CO 273/589/4, PRO. The Maritime Institute of Malaysia would 64 years later publish a book-length documentation of this survey: David Hancox and Victor Prescott, *Secret hydrographic surveys in the Spratly Islands* (Kuala Lumpur: MIMA, 1997).

¹⁹ Other European names for Spratly Island are Storm Island and Ile de la Tempête. Amboyna Cay has been referred to as P. Kecil Amboyna in Malaysia. Itu Aba, which is a part of the Tizard Bank and Reefs, is called Taiping Dao in Chinese and Dao Ba Binh or Dao Thai Binh in Vietnamese. What the French call Les Deux Iles is called North Danger Reef in English. Loaita is Nanyue Dao in Chinese. Thitu Island has later been referred to as Pagasa Island by the Philippines and Zhongye Dao by China. In Zhenhua Han, *History and Geography Studies on the South China Sea Islands*,

Evicted by Japan, 1937-45

Already in October 1936, before the Japanese invasion of China, the French and the British admiralties worried that Japan might intend to occupy Hainan Island, and use it together with Taiwan to challenge Europe's and the United States' naval hegemony in the South China Sea.²⁰ Chiang Kai-shek also warned Britain of this eventuality,²¹ which would prejudice the security of Hong Kong and of French Indochina. France also worried that Japan might try to establish a military presence in the Paracels. An Anglo-Chinese project for establishing a base in the Paracels had come to nothing, so now the French started secretly preparing a move to pre-empt a Japanese occupation.²² A French warship visited the Paracels in February 1937, and a report was written which stated that these islands had no commercial value, but could serve as a stepping stone (*jalón*) for Japanese southward expansion. The proximity of the Paracels to the coast of Annam made a Japanese presence intolerable. It was therefore proposed to set up a lighthouse, and to study the question further.²³

With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, the strategic situation became precarious from the French and British points of view. Taiwan, which had been Japanese since 1895, served as a base area for the war against Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese government, and the Japanese navy displayed a keen interest in preventing the shipping of supplies from Europe's Asian colonies to ports under the control of the Guomindang. In September 1937, the news that Japan had occupied Pratas Island west of Taiwan, increased French and British anxieties.²⁴

On 2 July 1937, the British Air Ministry had also reported a Japanese presence on Spratly Island and Itu Aba, the two largest islands in

there is a comprehensive list of what various Chinese sources have had to say about the numbers and names of islands occupied by France in the 1930s.

²⁰ Minute by D. of P. (S. H. Phillips), 6.10.36, ADM 116/3916, PRO.

²¹ British Embassy Nanking (H. M. Knatchbull-Hugessen) to Anthony Eden, 9.10.36, ADM 116/3916, PRO.

²² Le Ministre des Affaires Étrangères au Ministre des Colonies, No. 1584, 19.12.36, photocopie dans Note historique 842 sur Iles Spratleys et Paracelse, Carton 26, MAE.

²³ Le Vice-Amiral Esteva, Commandant en Chef FNEO, au Ministre de la Marine, no. 19 EM2, signé à bord Lamotte-Picquet, 16.3.37, 1BB4 74, Service Historique de la Marine (SHM), Paris.

²⁴ Admiralty (J. Lawson) to Foreign Office, no. M. 03656/37, 8.9.37, ADM 116/3916, PRO.

the Spratly area. This caused considerable worry. After the Foreign Office had waived the British claim in favour of the French in 1932, the French had, in the view of London's military analysts, failed in their duty to protect these islands against Japanese incursions. Holland was also deeply worried by these developments, since Japan had come to rely entirely on provisions of oil from the Netherlands Indies.²⁵ The British Admiralty and Air Ministry therefore developed a proposal to ask the French for a lease of either Itu Aba or Thitu, in order to construct a British airfield.²⁶ The French considered these islands to be the only possible landing sites in the whole group, since all the others, including Spratly, were 'submerged during the monsoon'.²⁷ It would be tricky to lease Itu Aba to the British, however, since France would then first have to evict a recently established Taiwanese fishing settlement (Japanese nationals). In 1938, the French and Japanese quarrelled diplomatically about the French occupation and the Japanese settlement in Itu Aba. The French took a long time to consider the British request, and before anything could be done about it, the news came that Japan had also occupied Spratly Island, which was closer to Indochina. Since there were no French forces on Spratly Island at the time, the Japanese did not meet any resistance. The British were furious, and on 19 February 1938, the Foreign Office asked the British Embassy in Paris to convey to the French government that if they did not intend to maintain their claim, 'we should wish to revive ours'.²⁸ At an Interdepartmental Meeting held in London on 30 March 1938 it was decided, subject to the opinion of the Committee of Imperial Defence, (a) that it was essential to prevent the establishment of Japanese air or submarine bases in the Spratly islands; (b) that it was extremely desirable to exclude Japanese nationals altogether; and (c) that in case the French Government were not ready to take action to exclude the Japanese without a promise of support from His Majesty's Government, it would be necessary to discover from the Committee of Imperial Defence exactly how

²⁵ British Secretary of State in British Delegation Geneva to Foreign Office, no. 34 (reporting a conversation with the Dutch PM), 15.9.37, ADM 116/3916, PRO.

²⁶ Minute with unknown signature, 28.10.37, CO 273/63572, PRO. See also Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

²⁷ According to a statement made by M. Hoppenot to the British ambassador in Paris: French Ambassador Paris (Sir E. Phipps) to FO, no. 251, 28.2.38, copy in CO 273/635/2, PRO.

²⁸ Anthony Eden to French Ambassador Paris (Sir E. Phipps), no. 40, 19.2.38, Copy in CO 273/635/2, PRO. See also Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

much support it would be possible to promise them. Immediately after the meeting, the Foreign Office asked the military authorities how much they would be willing to do to defend the French in the Spratlys. The Foreign Office also prepared itself for discussing the matter with Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the USA.²⁹ France demanded that the fishing settlement in Itu Aba comply with French regulations, but Japan refused. Britain urged France to occupy the islands 'with natives from Indo-China', and sent the survey ship *H.M.S. Herald* to the area in April 1938, to look for a suitable place to construct an airfield.³⁰ In June 1938, French Indochina charged a colonial official with the task of setting up a meteorological mission in Itu Aba.³¹

At this time France worried deeply about Japanese designs on Hainan, and suggested to Britain that they should ask China to neutralise the Chinese island and place it under temporary Anglo-French control.³² In the same month, France sent a mission to the Paracels with instructions to establish lighthouses and a typhoon warning station, and leave behind a detachment of 'Annamite police' at Woody and Pattle Islands. Their official task would be to combat piracy. The French had informed Chinese authorities about this move, and assured them that the action should in no way be regarded as prejudging the question of sovereignty. It was meant to prevent Japan from utilising the islands, a shared Sino-French concern. However, Japan had already established a military presence on Woody Island in January 1938, and on Lincoln Island in April,³³ so when the French forces arrived, they were met by two Japanese warships. The Japanese made no difficulty about allowing the French to land, and the ships' commanders exchanged courtesy visits. The French then proceeded

²⁹ 'Islands in the South China Seas', note from the Foreign Office, 27.4.38, CO 273/646/5, PRO.

³⁰ Minute signed E. M. Gent, 31.3.38, CO 273/646/5; 'Islands in the South China Seas', note from the FO, 27.4.38, CO 273/646/5, both in PRO.

³¹ Le Chef du Réseau Météorologique Sud au Chef du Service Météorologique de l'Indochine à Phu-Lien, Saigon 3.6.38, pièce annexe à Le Directeur P. I. du Service Météorologique de l'Indochine à l'Amiral Commandant les Forces Maritimes en Extrême Orient, no. 51/MET/D-60/ceuf, Saigon 28.8.51, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

³² Foreign Office to British Embassy Tokyo (Sir R. Craigie), no. 435, 25.6.38, and no. 449, 1.7.38, ADM 116/3916, PRO. See also Minute by S. H. Phillips (Admiralty), 6.7.38, same folder.

³³ Bulletin de Renseignements sur l'extrême-Orient et le Pacifique no. 13 du 2ème Bureau de l'Etat-Major des Forces Expeditionnaires Françaises en Extrême-Orient, 1.8.45, TT A 276, SHM.

to hoist the French flag, whereupon the Japanese Senior Naval Officer politely pointed out that the islands were Japanese and had been Japanese for the last sixty years.³⁴ The French and Japanese now both maintained a presence in the Paracels. The French kept garrisons in Woody and Pattle Islands. On Woody Island, there was also a heavy Japanese presence (150 men), but on Pattle Islands the French and 'Annamites' were alone. In June 1939, the two islands received the visit of the new French naval commander for the Far East, Admiral Jean Decoux who in the following year became French Governor General in Indochina.³⁵ The French and Japanese in Woody Island never seem to have fought each other.

In February 1939, Japanese crack forces made the anticipated landing on Hainan island,³⁶ and quickly overcame local resistance. This was followed up in the following month with a declaration claiming Japanese sovereignty to the Spratly islands. Japan informed the British and French authorities in March 1939 that it had incorporated the 'Sinnan islands', i.e., all islands between 7 and 12 North latitude and 111 and 117 East longitude (the same area claimed by France) under the Government-General of Taiwan (Formosa).³⁷ This time Britain protested loudly and at once. In an oral statement to a Japanese representative, the Foreign Office declared that Britain had never formally abandoned its own claim.³⁸ Then the Foreign Office

³⁴ R. G. Howe (FO) to the Secretary of the Admiralty, no. 1526, 11.7.38 and no. 1560, 14.7.38, ADM 1/9951, PRO.

³⁵ Compte rendu mensuel d'activité no. 4 (mois d'Avril 1939) des Forces Navales en Extrême-Orient, signé bord 'Lamotte-Picquet', Saïgon 5.5.39 par le Vice-Amiral Le Bigot, Commandant en Chef les Forces Navales en Extrême-Orient, et Compte rendu mensuel d'activité no. 5 (mois de Mai 1939) des Forces Navales en Extrême-Orient, signé bord 'Lamotte-Picquet', Saïgon 6.6.39 par le Vice-Amiral d'Escadre Decoux, Commandant en Chef les Forces Navales en Extrême-Orient, 1BB4 75, SHM. Decoux would succeed General Catroux as Governor General of French Indochina in June 1940.

³⁶ Tokyo (Craigie) to Foreign Office, no. 124, 10.2.39, ADM 116/3916, PRO.

³⁷ The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made the announcement: 'Spratly Islands are a group of small reefs lying in South China Sea off the coast of French Indo China. These reefs have long been ownerless. However in 1917 the Japanese began before Nationals of any country to embark upon economic development of the reefs which has continued ever since by investing a considerable amount of capital and erecting various permanent establishments. ... in order to eliminate such inconveniences and disadvantages have decided to place the reefs under the jurisdiction of Governor General Taiwan...' In an aide mémoire of 31.3.39 to the British government, the islands were called the 'Sinnan Islands' and said to be half way between Saïgon and Palawan. Craigie (Tokyo) to FO, no. 316, 31.3.39, FO 371/23543, PRO. See also Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

³⁸ FO to Craigie (Tokyo), no. 169, 1.4.39, FO 371/23543, PRO.

had second thoughts.³⁹ On 6 April 1939, when being asked about the matter in the House of Commons the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs referred only to the French claim, not the British. Anthony Wedgwood Benn asked if 'this island' did not also have strategic meaning for Britain itself, but the Foreign Minister just answered: 'Obviously this island is of great strategical importance'.⁴⁰ When Britain, four days later, sent a diplomatic note to the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, it did not refer to either the British or French claim, but merely stated that the Japanese claim lacked any legal foundation, and would 'complicate still further the situation in the Far East'.⁴¹ France, on its part, delivered a strongly worded protest to the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs.

At this time, Japanese–Taiwanese and Franco-Indochinese settlements lived side by side on Itu Aba and Spratly Island, just as on Woody Island in the Paracels. On Spratly Island, a French retired master mariner led a small group of Indochinese turtle fishermen. He had a wireless receiving and transmitting set. At the same time there were about eight Japanese who worked, according to the British consul in the French colony, 'with the help of natives', at collecting and shipping guano. As the Island was known to be only 8 feet high, 500 yards long and 300 yards broad, the humorous Consul remarked that 'the alleged annexation can hardly be said to be inspired by the need for vital space'.⁴² Regardless of British humour, the Japanese presence in the Spratlys did cause anxiety, and not just in Britain and France. The Americans and the Dutch were worried as well.⁴³

³⁹ Ronald and Howe minutes in FO 371/23543, PRO.

⁴⁰ 'The question of a protest is a matter which primarily concerns the French Government'. Newspaper clipping (perhaps from *The Times*), 6.4.39 in FO 371/23543, PRO.

⁴¹ Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

⁴² British Consulate-General Saigon (H. G. Walsh) to FO, no. 24, 1.4.39, FO 371/23543, PRO.

⁴³ The United States protested in Tokyo. The Dutch were speculating that the Spratly Islands might represent more economic value than the British and French had thought, and that the Japanese had a greater awareness of the island group's economic opportunities. Minute of conversation with the Netherlands Minister, signed in the Foreign Office by R. S. Howe, 3.4.39, FO 371/23543, PRO. In May 1939, Mr. Lovink, the Netherlands East Indies' Adviser for Far Eastern affairs advanced a theory, in conversation with a British representative, that the fact the area had been chartered as 'dangerous for navigation' had deterred other countries than Japan from making a thorough exploration: 'The central Japanese figure concerned in the Storm Islands group is one Sueji Hirata of Takao, Formosa and the Paracels Islands, who has been interested in the Storm Islands area since 1933. This man seems to be an adventurer of

Concerning the Paracel islands, the British authorities were not sure what to do if Japan were to push its claim and clash with the French. On the one hand they thought China had the best claim there. On the other hand the most effective way of opposing the Japanese occupation would be to back the French claim on behalf of Annam. On the first hand, again, the British did not trust that the French would resist Japan effectively. And if Britain abstained from recognising the French claim, and instead supported the Chinese, the British Navy could feel free to utilise the Paracels if need be. Then on the other hand again, the Paracel Islands had been found to be unsuitable for use as an advanced fleet base in operations for the relief of Hong Kong. The difficulties of defence against air and submarine attack were simply too great. And since it was most undesirable that the islands, which occupied 'an important strategic position on the route from Singapore to Hong Kong', should be allowed to fall into the hands of Japan, who might be prepared to spend the time and money required to defend the anchorage, the best would be that France assumed the task of keeping the Japanese out.⁴⁴ This reasoning was typical of British pragmatism, based on a combination of sound strategic and petty financial judgement. To defend the Paracel Islands against Japan was not worth good British pounds, but it would be nice if France could be induced to spend its francs on it.

The developments in Hainan and the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the period from the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 to the outbreak of the European war on 1 September 1939 foreshadowed what would happen to the whole of the region in 1940–42. This story is too well known to be repeated here. To be brief, French Indochina came under increasing Japanese pressure, and sought British and American assistance. Since Britain was now at war with Germany, and since France, on 22 June 1940, signed an armistice with Germany, the British were not willing to do anything effective to help defend the French colony. Nor was the United States.⁴⁵ In this situation, after hard negotiations and also some fighting, the French decided

sorts, interested in fishing and other enterprises, and is reported . . . to have controlled a concern whose capital was nominally for commercial purposes, but was in fact put at his disposal by the Japanese naval authorities'. British Consulate-General, Batavia to Foreign Office, no. 103, 3.5.39, FO 371/23543, PRO.

⁴⁴ Minute by C. G. Jarrett for the Head of Military Branch, 1.3.39, ADM 1/9951, PRO.

⁴⁵ The classic accounts of how France was 'deceived' by the Anglo-Americans were written by the Governor Generals of Indochina in 1939–40 and 1940–45: Général

to yield to a series of Japanese demands. French Indochina, under the authority of the Vichy government, signed agreements that made French Indochina, in practice if not in name, a Japanese ally. The USA reacted by instituting an oil embargo against Japan. Japan then decided to expand southwards with the aim of securing oil provisions from the Netherlands East Indies. French Indochina, in the same way as its local enemy Thailand, served as an important staging area for the swift Japanese southward offensive of early 1942, leading to the fall of Singapore, Manila and Batavia (Jakarta).

It is not easy to find out what happened to the Nippo-Taiwanese settlements in the Paracels and Spratlys during the rest of the Pacific War, at least not in French and British archives. Studies in Japan would be needed. By August 1940, the relationship between the Japanese and French missions in the islands had been reported to be correct if not cordial, but in October 1940, the Japanese cut off the radio communications of the French mission in Itu Aba, which was then ordered to repatriate to Indochina. French meteorological reports from Itu Aba ceased on 10 October 1940. This might therefore be considered the date when Japan fully occupied the island.⁴⁶ On Woody Island in the Paracels, the Japanese seem to have allowed the Franco-Annamite mission to stay at least until March 1945.⁴⁷ The fact that Japan acted less aggressively in the Paracels than in Itu Aba, may be a result of the Navy's forward strategy, which put greater emphasis on preparing for a southward offensive than maintaining the blockade against China. Before launching its southward offensive,

Georges Catroux, *Deux actes du drame indochinois* (Paris: Plon, 1959); and Amiral Jean Decoux, *À la barre de l'Indochine* (Paris: Plon, 1949).

⁴⁶ 'Il y eut des moments d'assez grande tension dans l'Archipel entre les occupants du camp français et du camp japonais. Malgré les rebuffades dont ils furent l'objet, nos représentants remplir [sic] avec fermeté la mission qui leur était confiée et, à la suite sans doute d'instructions venant de Tokyo, les Japonais se montrant plus courtois, les rapports entre les occupants de l'archipel finirent par devenir corrects sinon cordiaux'. Note de la Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Vichy), 10.8.40, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. Télégramme Decoux à Colonies (Vichy), no. 57, Hanoi 6.10.40 et no. 58, Hanoi 7.10.40; Le Secrétaire d'Etat aux Colonies (Platon) au Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires Etrangères, no. 57, Vichy 10.10.40; pages 68-72, dos. 262, s.-s. Asie, série Guerre 1939-1945 Vichy, MAE. Le Directeur P. I. du Service Météorologique de l'Indochine à l'Amiral Commandant les Forces Maritimes en Extrême Orient, no. 51/MET/D-60/ceuf, Saigon 28.8.51, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

⁴⁷ 'Postes de garde indigènes de l'île Pattle et île Boisée ont quitté îles après 9 mars 1945'. Haussaire Indo Saigon à EMGSN Paris, no. 5454, 3.6.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

Japan actually withdrew from several occupied territories on the Chinese coast. This reduced the strategic importance of the Paracels. The Spratlys, however, were probably seen to have a role in preparing for the attack against the Philippines.

For three years from the Japanese southern conquests in early 1942 to January 1945, the South China Sea was a 'Japanese lake'. Malaya, Singapore, Borneo, the Philippine islands, Taiwan, Hainan, Hong Kong and most of the Chinese coast were all under Japanese administration. Thailand was an ally, and French Indochina had been compelled to accept Japanese occupation, and important trading privileges. No allied surface vessels could venture into the South China Sea, although bombers and submarines increasingly threatened Japanese ships from above and below. The Japanese built a submarine base in Itu Aba, and used both the Spratlys and Paracels as weather stations and listening posts. In Indochina, the administration of Governor General Jean Decoux, which remained loyal to the French Vichy government, collaborated effectively with Japan. Decoux allowed the Japanese military to make use of Indochinese airfields, railways and ports, and served Japanese economic war needs through multiple deliveries, while jealously guarding French prerogatives in Indochina's internal affairs. Through this policy of collaboration, Decoux managed to preserve the French Indochinese state, including its army and navy. The latter, with cruisers such as the *Lamotte Picquet* and the *Dumont d'Urville*, had on 17 January 1941 won a decisive victory against the Thai navy in the battle of Koh Chang.⁴⁸ 'Since the armistice [the Franco-German agreement of 22 June 1940] the Navy has been, and still remains, the pillar of loyalism in Indochina', wrote the commander of the French Indochinese Navy on 1 June 1942. He was not exactly fond of the Japanese, but France had to gain time, so he was *playing* confident and cordial relations, he claimed.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ A rich documentation can be found in dos. 'Combat de Koh-Chang 17.01.41', TTD 821, SHM.

⁴⁹ 'Pour ce qui est Marine, tout va très bien ici. Le moral de tous est excellent et j'y veille par dessus tout. La Marine a été depuis l'Armistice et reste le pilier du loyalisme en Indochine. (...) Avec le Gouvernement Général les relations sont excellentes. Je me permets de penser que si l'Amiral Decoux a parfaitement réussi c'est en bonne partie parce qu'il a pu s'appuyer sur des collaborateurs marins que je lui ai fournis sans marchander. Le Gouverneur Général a dans ses services 15 Officiers et 90 Sous-Officiers, Quartiers-maitres ou Marins Européens. C'est beaucoup pour nous mais le résultat est là; il en vaut la peine. La question Japonaise est, à mon avis, le gros point noir de l'Indo-Chine. L'intention de ces gens là est trop certaine. Nous devons agir avec eux en souplesse pour gagner du temps. C'est toujours ce que j'ai fait dans

With the coming of the year 1945, the days of the Japanese domination and the Franco-Japanese condominium were counted. In Europe, the Vichy government was gone. The new French leader Charles de Gaulle despised Indochina's Governor General Jean Decoux for his collaboration, and secretly appointed the retiring Army commander in Indochina as the leader of a local 'Resistance'. In October 1944, the US Navy won the battle of Leyte Gulf, and this so decimated the Japanese navy that the United States could start contemplating offensive operations against new territories, such as Hainan, Taiwan, French Indochina, the Chinese coast, and Okinawa. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had long taken a strong interest in Indochina, which he wished to take away from France and place under an international trusteeship. He also wanted to do something effective to bolster Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese regime, and give it a more prominent role in the war against Japan. Thus he now asked his military planners to come up with a plan for the invasion of northern Indochina (Tonkin) in order to open a supply route to Chiang Kai-shek. They complied, and came up with a plan in late October 1944 for a Tonkin invasion. The planners found it necessary to make prior landings in Hainan to neutralise Japanese threats to the east flank and establish a land-based air support for the ground campaign and for the protection of carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. Their plan, however, made no mention of the Paracels. This omission is of interest to us here. Although the Joint Planners consistently dismissed the idea of invading Hainan and Tonkin as 'eccentric to the main effort' against Japan, planning for the realisation of Roosevelt's idea continued until late January 1945,⁵⁰ but the operational plans paid no attention to the Paracel islands. They did not even appear on the maps drawn by the planners.⁵¹ A French intelligence report on the Paracel and

mon rayon et je joue avec la Marine Impériale la collaboration confiante et cordiale'. Extrait d'une lettre de l'Amiral Bérenger, Commandant la Marine en Indochine, Saïgon 1.6.42, pages 199-200, dos. 262, s.-s. Asie, série Guerre 1939-1945 Vichy, MAE.

⁵⁰ Joint War Plans Committee, 'Appreciation and Outline Plan of Operations against Hainan Island', J.W.P.C. 289/1, 2.1.45, and 'Operations against Hainan Island', J.C.S. 924/12, 20.1.45, both in CCS 381 Hainan Island (10-30-44), Record Group (RG) 218, United States National Archives (USNA), Suitland, Maryland. The latest plan included a map of distances from Hainan to important targets that could be reached by air. On this map, which included the whole South China Sea, the Paracel and Spratly Islands were not included.

⁵¹ Joint Logistics Plans Committee Directive 'Indo China as a Substitute for the Burma Supply Route', J.L.F.C. 28/3/D, 21.10.44; Memo for the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Spratly islands, dated 1 August 1945 (before anyone knew what would happen in Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few days later), explains why: ‘Although these islands were of some interest in 1938 or 1940, the same is not the case today when Allied strategy leads directly to the principal targets while ignoring intermediary support points’.⁵²

Towards the end of 1944, the Japanese had come to anticipate a US invasion of Indochina. Their fears were reinforced by heavy US naval raids in mid-January 1945 along the Indochinese coast, Hainan and Taiwan. On 9 January, at a time when General Douglas MacArthur’s forces were about to complete the conquest of Luzon, a formidable naval force under the command of Admiral William Bull Halsey sailed through the Luzon strait into the South China Sea. Its mission was to destroy two important Japanese warships, the *Ise* and the *Hyuga*, falsely believed to have sought refuge in Cam Ranh Bay. When Halsey did not find his ‘fat target’, he instead sank 44 smaller ships, many of them French, the largest being the cruiser *Lamotte-Piquet*. This was a heavy blow to the French colonial navy, and the destruction of sea based and land way communications in Indochina by allied bombing had catastrophic effects for the Vietnamese population.⁵³ After having raided the Indochinese coast, Halsey proceeded to raid Hainan and Taiwan, before leaving the South China Sea again on 18 January.⁵⁴

Secretary with enclosure ‘Indochina as a Substitute for the Burma Supply Route, Report by the Joint Staff Planners’ and a draft ‘Memorandum for the President from Admiral Leahy’, 30.10.44 (documents delivered to Adm. Leahy on 31.10.44); Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) 401 (10-11-44); Joint War Plans Committee, ‘Appreciation and Outline Plan of Operations against Hainan Island’, J.W.P.C. 289/1, 2.1.45, and ‘Operations against Hainan Island’, J.C.S. 924/12, 20.1.45, both in CCS 381 Hainan Island (10-30-44), all in RG 218, USNA. The latest plan included a map of distances from Hainan to important targets that could be reached by air. On this map, which included the whole South China Sea, the Paracel and Spratly Islands were not included. See Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (London: SAGE, 1991), pp. 168–70.

⁵² ‘... si ces îles présentaient quelque intérêt en 1938 ou 1940, il n’en est plus de même aujourd’hui où la stratégie des Alliés les mène vers les objectifs principaux en négligeant les P. A. intermédiaires’. Bulletin de Renseignements sur l’extrême-Orient et le Pacifique no. 13 du 2ème Bureau de l’Etat-Major des Forces Expéditionnaires Françaises en Extrême-Orient, 1.8.45, TT A 276, SHM.

⁵³ The Indochinese railroads had already been severely damaged by US bombing, so the transport capacity both of the Japanese and the French had been crippled. With most of the small coastal ships now also destroyed, it became impossible to transport rice from south to north Indochina. This may have contributed significantly to the famine that cost some one million lives in north and north central Vietnam during mid-1945. While the northern populations starved, rice was used as fuel in the south.

⁵⁴ On 16 January (according to a US intercept), the German naval attaché at Tokyo had reported to Berlin: ‘The appearance in the middle of the South China Sea

What happened to the Japanese and French personnel and installations in the Spratlys and Paracels during Halsey's raid? Did he just ignore them, like the Joint Staff planners had done when drafting their plan for a Hainan-Tonkin invasion? Or did he destroy the French and Japanese installations in order to prevent the enemy from listening to his radio communications? Did he ever think about occupying the islands? We do not know, but when a French ship visited Pattle Island in the Paracels in May 1946, it found that the buildings constructed there before the war had been severely damaged, seemingly from bombing, but it was not possible to judge if this had been done from the air or from a ship.⁵⁵ A British ship inspecting Itu Aba and Spratly Island in April 1951, found the solid Japanese buildings in ruins. A tour of Itu Aba revealed the remains of 'what must have been a flourishing concern', said the Commander's report, 'before it was demolished by shellfire and/or bombing'. All buildings were of reinforced concrete, but 'the whole place was blasted by bombardment from the sea and air...'. This does not necessarily mean that the US Navy bombed the Japanese while they were still there. The British visitors thought the Japanese might have done the damage themselves, perhaps blasting the place before withdrawing. It also seems possible that the US Navy may have used the deserted island for targeting exercises after the end of the war. The British visitors in 1951 found graffiti and inscriptions in several languages, including American English.⁵⁶

After Halsey's raid in January 1945, Japan concluded that there was a strong risk of a US invasion of Indochina, and therefore proceeded to eliminate the French administration, which was rightly thought to be unreliable.⁵⁷ Japan defeated the French forces in a short war in March-April, where after the Japanese allowed the three Indochinese monarchies to proclaim themselves independent, and to start constructing new national institutions. After the Japanese

of strong Allied naval forces, the assembling of which the Japanese never detected, is regarded by the Navy itself as cause for deep shame'. War Department, Office of A.C. of S, G-2, SRS 306, 20.1.45, Magic Far East Summaries, Box 4, RG 457, USNA.

⁵⁵ Bulletin de renseignements sur les îles paracels, annexe au rapport de mission No 36/OFF du 26 mai 1946, joint à Haut Commissaire d'Argenlieu à Chef d'Etat-Major Général de la Défense Nationale (EMGDN), no. 194 EMP/3, sans date (photocopy in author's possession, probably from UU-sup 2, SHM).

⁵⁶ The Commanding Officer, H. M. S. Dampier to Commander-in-Chief, Far East Station, Singapore, No. 50/12/3834, 24.4.51, FO 371/92075, PRO.

⁵⁷ For the French preparations to assist an Allied invasion from the inside, see 'Rapport du Capitaine de vaisseau Commentry', 5.6.45, dos. 'Evénements du 9 mars 45', TTD 822, SHM.

surrender, the successful Vietnamese 'August Revolution' led the Viet Minh league to power in Hanoi, Hue and Saigon. A new Democratic Republic was proclaimed, with Ho Chi Minh as president. Similar events in Indonesia led to Sukarno's proclamation of independence, but in the British possessions in Malaya and north Borneo, there were no comparable revolts.⁵⁸

European Resurgence, 1945–49

Whereas the years 1930–1945 form a period of European decline and Japanese ascendancy in the area around the South China Sea, the first five years after the Japanese surrender were marked by European *return and reform*. The United States, as an extra-European power, was now the prevailing naval power in the region. It ruled Japan, retained bases, influence and economic hegemony in the Philippines, and was the main supporting power for Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese government. In most of Southeast Asia, however, it practised a hands-off policy, allowing the British, Dutch and French to re-establish colonial rule, often with American weapons. The three European powers were at this time engaged in an active effort to re-establish local prestige, and to thoroughly reform their imperial institutions. As in the past, their navies were prime instruments in demonstrating power.

After the Japanese capitulation, of course, the Allies gave priority to reoccupying the main, inhabited areas, and had no time to pay attention to the minuscule Paracel and Spratly Islands. In China, Chiang Kai-shek rushed to seize control of the territories abandoned by Japan, while a British naval force sailed at full speed up through the South China Sea to get in his way and reinstate British rule of Hong Kong. In the Philippines, the USA fulfilled its promise to grant independence, while securing a treaty on the lease of military bases. Britain reoccupied Singapore, Malaya and north Borneo, and the Southeast Asia Command of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten took responsibility for reoccupying the Netherlands Indies and French Indochina. Meanwhile, France and Holland were asking the United States for material support to equip and transport the forces needed

⁵⁸ See Stein Tønnesson, 'Filling the power vacuum: 1945 in French Indochina, the Netherlands East Indies and British Malaya', in Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson (eds), *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism* (London: Curzon Press, 1995), pp. 110–43.

to reinstate colonial rule. By September–October the first Dutch and French forces arrived in Jakarta and Saigon, and were helped by the British to reinstate control. In Northern Indochina, where Ho Chi Minh had established his Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a huge Chinese (Guomindang) army undertook the role of Allied occupying force, and of receiving the Japanese surrender. The stage had been set for the Indonesian and Indochinese resistance wars, or wars of liberation.

Under these circumstances, who found time to think about the Spratlys and the Paracels? The answer is Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, France's new High Commissioner in Indochina, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, and parts of the Philippine press. It took about a year from the conclusion of the Pacific War, but towards the end of 1946 both the Chinese and the French made moves to demonstrate their rival sovereignty claims in the two island groups, and parts of the press in the Philippines took an active interest in the question of the archipelago to the west of Palawan, as part of the domain of the former Sulu sultanate. The new independent Philippines was a newcomer to the scramble for the Spratlys. As a colonial power, the USA had never had designs on these islands, but had respected the parameters established in its 1898 treaty with Spain. In July 1946, Philippine Vice-President Quirino, who had eagerly tried to convince the USA to occupy the Spratlys on behalf of the Philippines already in 1938, stated at a press conference that the Philippines would claim the island group west of Palawan as essential to its security. The French Consul in Manila reported that the Philippine press was so eagerly demanding an active Spratly policy that the government had decided to undertake a study. However, although the US Navy had itself displayed an active interest in the Spratlys, it did not seem to encourage the Philippines to assert itself in this island group.⁵⁹ Not all Filipinos were enthusiastic. A humorous report, published in the Philippine press at the time, listed all the claims to this 'group of barren coral reefs', and remarked: 'Presumably the birds roosting on the Spratlys don't care who owns them'.⁶⁰ In August 1947, the French consul in Manila met Quirino, now foreign minister, and told him the island group he wanted west

⁵⁹ M. G. Willoquet, Consul Général Manille à MAE, no. 217 AS, 18.7.46, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE. For US disinterest, see also Francis Lacoste, Chargé d'affaires aux Etats-Unis à Bidault (MAE), no. 450/AS, 21.2.47, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁶⁰ AP News Report, written by James D. White and published in the *Philippine Liberty News*, 6.8.46, clipping in dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

of Palawan was the same island group (the Spratlys) that France had declared to be under French sovereignty in 1933. The French Consul reported that he had never seen anyone so surprised as Quirino when learning this news. He apparently had thought that the French were claiming islands further west, and that his islands were positioned between the area claimed by France and the Philippines proper. The French consul thought that after this encounter, the affair would be put to rest and filed by the Philippine authorities.⁶¹ Quirino, however, did not quite give up. In May 1950 he held another press conference, saying the Philippines would not push its claim as long as Chiang Kai-shek maintained control, but if there were a danger of Chinese communist occupation, the Philippines would assert its rights.⁶² A French report said the Philippine government had rejected a proposal from the Ministry of War to occupy the Spratlys, but that Quirino was harbouring the idea of buying the Spratlys from Chiang Kai-shek for money.⁶³

Despite the Philippine interest, the main quarrel in 1946–49 was between France and China, and they disputed both the Spratlys and the Paracels. A Shanghai journal claimed in January 1947 that the Chinese flag had been hoisted on Woody Island in the Paracels already in December 1945 by a meteorological mission from Taiwan. One wonders if this could be the former Japanese-Taiwanese settlement changing colours.⁶⁴ The Franco-Annamese settlement, as noted, had been forced to leave the Paracels after the 9 March 1945 Japanese coup against the French in Indochina. However, when the French frigate *Escarmouche* surveyed the Paracels one year later, in May 1946, it did not find any inhabitants, either Chinese or Indochinese,

⁶¹ M. G. Willoquet (Manille) à Sivan (Nankin) par voie de MAE (Paris), 18.8.47, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁶² On 17th May 1950, at a Press conference, President Quirino stressed the strategic importance of the Spratley Islands to the Philippines, but added that ‘as long as Nationalist China is holding them, there is no necessity for the Philippines to seize control’. He also asserted that during 1946, when he was Foreign Secretary, he had asked the US State Department for assistance in acquiring a foothold in these islands, but that no action had been taken. C.O.S. (50) 273, 27.7.50, p. 5, Dominions Office (DO) 35/2827, PRO.

⁶³ Colin (Manille) à MAE, no. 61, 22.5.50, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁶⁴ On 29 January 1947, the Shanghai newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* claimed that ‘le drapeau chinois a été arboré sur l’île Boisée le 12 décembre 1945 lors “d’une prise de possession par le service météorologique de Formose”’. J. Baeyens, Consul Général de France à Changhai à Meyrier, Ambassadeur de France en Chine, 29.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

only a few fishermen collecting turtles.⁶⁵ Two months earlier, on 6 March 1946, France had signed an accord with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, recognising it as a 'free state'. Later that month, High Commissioner d'Argenlieu had tried to impress President Ho Chi Minh by receiving him pompously on board one of his ships off the Indochinese coast. Now d'Argenlieu wanted to establish a naval mission in the Paracels. He asked Paris to confirm that this island group, as well as the Spratlys, were under French sovereignty. The main value of the Paracels would be as an advance post to be used for meteorological purposes, he said, but in the future its phosphates might also be exploitable.⁶⁶ Since d'Argenlieu and the French government were busy negotiating with Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese government while at the same time seeking to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to end the Chinese occupation of northern Indochina, the French did not immediately take action in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Chiang Kai-shek's government was making its own plans, and in August 1946, the French ambassador to Nanjing reported that China intended to occupy the Spratlys (for which he used the Japanese name *Shinangunto*).⁶⁷ Shortly afterwards, the French foreign ministry came up with its reply to the request from d'Argenlieu concerning the Spratlys and the Paracels.

The Spratlys were said to be of virtually no economic value, but with strategic interest due to the development of seaplanes. A clear distinction was made between the Spratlys, as French territory attached to the directly ruled French colony Cochinchina, and the Paracels, as Annamese territory under French protection. Although the Spratlys had no doubt been *res nullius* when France took possession of them in the 1920s–30s, and French sovereignty to them could not be contested, it would be desirable to reaffirm French sovereignty through naval reconnaissance, replacement of markers, establishment of a garrison and official pronouncements. This should not wait for the peace treaty with Japan since France had never accepted the Japanese

⁶⁵ Le Haut Commissaire pour l'Indochine (Haussaire) à MAE, no. 106 & 107, 3.2.46 et Haussaire Indo Saïgon à EMGSN Paris, no. 5454, 3.6.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁶⁶ D'Argenlieu (Saïgon) à MAE, no. 829 F; d'Argenlieu à Juin, Chef d'Etat-Major Général de la Défense Nationale, no. 194 EMP/3, 11.6.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁶⁷ Meyrier (Ambafrance Nankin) à MAE Paris, 5.8.46, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

claim.⁶⁸ The French Foreign Ministry wanted instructions to be sent to d'Argenlieu to take proper measures to reaffirm the French claim, but warned its ambassador in Nanjing against any initiative that could engender a Spratly quarrel with China. Since the Chinese had not protested in 1933, China could not contest French sovereignty.⁶⁹ In the following month, the French ship *Chevreuil* visited the Spratly islands, and found them uninhabited. It erected a cement marker on Itu Aba on 5 October 1946.⁷⁰

The Foreign Ministry found that eight features in the Paracels were 'real islands'. The Hue court had created a company in the eighteenth century to exploit these islands, and Emperor Gia Long had claimed them on behalf of 'Annam' in 1816. In the years 1909–37 the group had been contested between China and France (acting on behalf of Annam), and in 1938 France had occupied the Paracels in agreement with China, with the understanding that this was a measure undertaken to prevent Japanese expansion, and that it would not prejudice the sovereignty question. The study found that the nineteenth-century Annamese claim formed a historical basis for making a modern claim, but to satisfy modern principles, effective occupation would be needed, under some publicity. The problem, in the view of the French Foreign Ministry, was that since France claimed the Paracels on behalf of Annam, the government of Vietnam ought to be involved in the occupation, but to consult Ho Chi Minh's government was 'inconvenient'.⁷¹ From October to

⁶⁸ Note du Service Juridique de MAE (first draft called 'Note pour la Direction d'Asie-Océanie (à l'attention de M. M. de Boissezon et Salade)', Paris 6.8.46, signé Noël Henry, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁶⁹ Chauvel (MAE) au Secrétaire Général de Cominindo, no. 628 AS, 21.9.46; Chauvel (MAE) à Meyrier (Ambafrance Nankin), no. 382 AS, 21.9.46; tous les deux dans dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁷⁰ Lettre de C. C. Hiribarren, 2ème Bureau Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient à un Colonel et à Hunter, Saigon 19.5.49, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

⁷¹ 'Étant donné l'accord du 6 mars 1946 entre la France et le Viet-Nam, on doit se demander si l'Annam doit être associé, d'une manière ou d'une autre, à la réoccupation des Paracels. Une consultation préalable du Gouvernement vietnamien aurait de nombreux inconvénients pratiques; par ailleurs il n'est pas possible de hisser le drapeau annamite sans la participation de représentants de ce gouvernement. L'accord du 6 mars 1946 ayant seulement reconnu au Viet Nam des droits de souveraineté intérieure, son statut extérieur étant laissé en suspens, la situation n'a pas changé. C'est à la France qu'il appartient de faire valoir, pour le compte de l'Annam, les droits de celui-ci au dehors. Nous sommes donc fondés à procéder à une réoccupation des Paracels pour le compte de l'Annam. Il va de soi que, s'il y a une réaction de la part de celui-ci, il sera possible, après coup, de l'associer à l'opération en fonction du statut extérieur qui lui sera reconnu'. Note du Service Juridique (MAE)

December the relationship between Ho Chi Minh's government and the French Fourth Republic entered a period of crisis, and war broke out on 19 December 1946.⁷² An inter-ministerial meeting in Paris on 17 October decided to instruct d'Argenlieu to establish a meteorological station in the Paracels in order to mark the reoccupation of the archipelago.⁷³ The Minister of Overseas France instructed d'Argenlieu on 22 October to both establish a meteorological station and a garrison of local militiamen on behalf of 'Annam', but without involving the Vietnamese government.⁷⁴ Amidst the Franco-Vietnamese crisis d'Argenlieu does not seem to have found time to carry out this instruction. Thus China got to the Paracels first. The French ambassador to Nanjing warned that this might happen on 23 November, but this was the very date when the supreme commander of the French forces in Indochina decided to teach the Vietnamese a lesson and engage his naval forces in bombarding the port city Haiphong, the event that precipitated the outbreak of war one month later. The French sent a reconnaissance plane to the Paracels on 25 November, but did not detect any Chinese presence. The French Foreign Ministry instructed d'Argenlieu on 28 November to occupy the Paracels without delay.⁷⁵ D'Argenlieu, however, further postponed the operation, citing weather conditions and practical problems as the

sur la 'souveraineté française sur les Paracels', Paris 6.9.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. The note is printed as appendix 43 in Monique Chemillier-Gendreau, *La souveraineté sur les archipels Paracels et Spratleys* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1996). For an interesting cover letter from the Foreign Ministry to the Interministerial Committee for Indochina, see Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères (signé Chauvel) au Secrétaire Général du Comité de l'Indochine, 13.9.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁷² For detailed studies of the crisis, see Philippe Devillers, *Paris-Saigon-Hanoi* (Paris: Galliard/Julliard, 1988) and Stein Tønnesson, *1946: Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1987).

⁷³ Compte rendu de la réunion du Comité Consultatif pour l'Indochine du 17.10.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁷⁴ '...la réoccupation, qui devra faire l'objet de publicité, s'effectuera pour le compte de l'Annam sans que le Viet-Nam y soit associé'. Le Ministre de la France d'Outre Mer (Moutet) au Haut Commissaire de France en Indochine (d'Argenlieu), 22.10.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁷⁵ '...En présence des intentions manifestées par la Chine de réaffirmer sa souveraineté sur ces îles, il devient très important que notre pays puisse invoquer une priorité de réoccupation. Je vous serais donc reconnaissant de rappeler cette question à l'Amiral d'Argenlieu en lui demandant de détacher sans retard quelques éléments militaires dans l'archipel des Paracels'. Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères au Ministre de la France d'Outre-Mer, no. 3176/AS, 28.11.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

reason.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the Chinese arrived. The Chinese press was full of reports at this time about a southern expedition to reaffirm Chinese sovereignty to Pratas (Dongsha), the Paracels (Xisha) and the Spratlys (Nansha).⁷⁷

On 4 January 1947, while war was raging on the streets of Hanoi between French and Vietnamese troops, a Chinese detachment landed on Woody Island.⁷⁸ A spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared at a press conference a few days later, that the Chinese government had taken back the Paracel Islands, which had never ceased to belong to China.⁷⁹ And on 10 January, a French reconnaissance plane confirmed the presence of some twenty men waiving Chinese flags on Woody Island.⁸⁰ France protested formally to the Chinese government and in this protest, quite interestingly, claimed that France was upholding sovereignty to the Paracels on behalf of 'Viet Nam',⁸¹ thus using the new national name for the nation that France was in principle 'protecting' and in practice fighting. The name 'Vietnam' was anathema to d'Argenlieu, who insisted on calling the country 'Annam' and its dominant ethnic group 'Annamites'.

On 13 January, d'Argenlieu finally decided to take action. He sent a naval ship, the *Tonkinois*, to the Paracels, and instructed it to occupy both Pattle and Woody Island, in case there were only fishermen and no regular Chinese detachment there.⁸² When arriving at Woody Island

⁷⁶ 'La saison de la mousson augmente notablement la durée traversée 380 N (...) Rang-Paracels et rend accostage embarcations sur les récifs très délicat et parfois impossible ...'. Télégramme Haussaire Saigon à MAE et Défense Nationale, no. 298 à 302, 12.12.46, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO, MAE.

⁷⁷ New Taiwan Monthly quoted in R. Heydon (Australia House) to C. R. Price (Commonwealth Relations Office), 27.1.48, DO 35/2827, PRO. Excerpt in English of *China Mail* 19.12.46 and French translations from *Kung Sheung Jih Pao*, 24.12.46, and from *Sing Tao Jih Pao*, 8.1.47, all in dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁷⁸ Le Capitaine de Frégate Gilly, Attaché Naval près l'Ambassade de France en Chine à l'EMGDN, 26.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁷⁹ AFP reports in dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. An extract of the Central News Agency Bulletin about the Foreign Ministry spokesman's statement of 8.1.47 can also be found in FO 371/63462, PRO.

⁸⁰ Note pour le Haut Commissaire a.s. des Iles Paracels, Saigon 3.2.47, signé par le Conseiller Diplomatique au Haut Commissaire (Royère), dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁸¹ The French Foreign Ministry referred to 'les droits souverains que nous exerçons au nom du Viet Nam sur les Iles Paracels'. Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères à Haussaire Saigon et Ambafrance Nankin, 11.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁸² Haut Commissaire Saigon à EMGDN Paris, no. de circ. 36 EMHC, 13.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

on 17 January, the *Tonkinois* found a detachment of 3 Chinese officers and 60 men. Acting in accordance with d'Argenlieu's instructions, the French commander offered the Chinese to transport them to Indochina. He even tried to bribe them into it, and—at a distance—fired some shots in the air.⁸³ The Chinese commander radioed Nanjing about a French ultimatum. In Nanjing there was an uproar, and the French government worried that the incident could provoke a new Chinese intervention in Indochina, in support of Ho Chi Minh (the Chinese occupation forces had withdrawn from northern Indochina earlier in the year).⁸⁴ A diplomatic row ensued, and in the end France backed out. The *Tonkinois* sailed away from Woody Island and left a garrison just on Pattle Island. A pattern had thus been established which would last until 1974 (with an interruption of Chinese occupation 1950–55): Chinese troops held Woody Island in the Amphitrite Group, while French-directed Vietnamese forces held Pattle Island in the Crescent Group.⁸⁵ The Chinese occupants were in regular contact with Hainanese fishermen who occupied temporary settlements on the other Paracel islands, while the Franco-Vietnamese garrison did not have rival fishermen to help them carry out their mission. Vietnam's fishermen had only small fishing boats and would not normally go thus far out to sea. Many of them moreover were ethnic Chinese.

We will not here go into the details of the Sino-French incident on Woody Island in January 1947, or its ramifications (shortly after the incident the French government decided to replace d'Argenlieu as High Commissioner).⁸⁶ This might warrant a special study, but we must briefly examine the French Foreign Ministry's attempt to

⁸³ Haussaire Saigon à MAE, no. 50057, 20.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE. Haussaire Saigon à MAE, no. 50057–60, 20.1.47; Note pour le Haut Commissaire a.s. des Iles Paracels, Saigon 3.2.47, signé par le Conseiller Diplomatique au Haut Commissaire (Royère), tous les deux dans dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁸⁴ MAE à Haussaire Saigon (signé Chauvel), expédié 19.1.47 14h20, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE. Meyrier (Nankin) à MAE, no. 111 à 115, 21.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

⁸⁵ On 15 October 1950, troops from the French Foreign Legion were replaced by a purely Vietnamese detachment. Le Capitaine de Vaisseau Brachet à Haussaire, no. 3/EM2 26S, Saigon 23.1.51, dos. P01, UU-sup 02, SHM. A few years later, however, the Legionnaires were back.

⁸⁶ See Stein Tønnesson, 'The Paracels: The «Other» south China Sea Dispute', *Asian Perspective*, 26, 4 (2002): 145–69, p. 151. The government first reprimanded d'Argenlieu: 'Action du Tonkinois aux Paracels aurait pu provoquer grave incident diplomatique. Gouvernement ne peut que regretter que notre installation sur archipel ait pas été faite fin octobre, ainsi que je vous l'avais demandé. Estime également fâcheux que des instructions aient été données concernant une opération qui dépassait

resolve the dispute over the Paracels. What it did was to propose to China that the dispute be sent to arbitration, a suggestion which had already been made in 1937. France now even promised to withdraw from Pattle Island if China accepted arbitration.⁸⁷ Documents were prepared in Paris to serve as a basis for the French argumentation in case China should accept. These documents are open to interpretation. My reading of them is that the French Foreign Ministry more or less expected the decision to go against its claim on behalf of Annam.⁸⁸ One report mentioned the possibility of a bargain where France gave up Annam's claim to the Paracels if China in return abandoned its claim to the Spratlys. However, such a bargain would not, from the French point of view, be attractive, the report argued, since the Spratlys represented much less interest than the Paracels.⁸⁹ Today, with the prospect of finding oil and the possibility that the Spratly Islands might have a right to their own Economic Zones, this seems strange, but at the time the Spratlys were clearly even less valuable than the Paracels. D'Argenlieu's successor as High Commissioner in Indochina, who rapidly identified himself with the local interest, did not agree with the French Foreign Ministry's policy of abandonment. He argued that the Paracels were needed for meteorological purposes, and that France should not abandon the Annamese claim without first consulting legitimate representatives of Vietnam. His chief-of-staff argued in the same direction, emphasising the strategic location of the Paracels at the entry to the Gulf of Tonkin and right outside the strategic base at Cam Ranh Bay.⁹⁰

manifestement cadre reconnaissance navale sans prendre accord Affaires Etrangères et mon Département'. Cominindo Paris à Haussaire Indo Saigon, signé Moutet, no. de circ. 169D, 24.1.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. French governmental circles had already lost confidence in the Gaullist admiral d'Argenlieu because of his handling of the conflict with Vietnam. The Woody Island incident may have been the factor triggering the government's decision to revoke him.

⁸⁷ MAE (signé Baudet) à Ambafrance Nankin (Meyrier), no. 160-161, 12.2.47, dos. 214, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. Note d'audience, MAE Secrétariat Général, Paris 10.3.47, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁸⁸ '... il convient de rappeler que sur ce dernier terrain notre position a toujours été considérée comme assez incertaine', a French Foreign Ministry study said. It emphasised that Chinese authorities had manifested their claim to the Paracels on several occasions between 1909 and 1931 while France had not made any representations concerning Annam's claim before 1931. Note pour le Secrétaire Général a.s. Iles Paracels, MAE Asie-Océanie, marquée RB/MP, 18.3.47, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Le Conseiller de la République, Haut-Commissaire de France pour l'Indochine à MAE, signé (à sa main) Bollaert, no. 4320, Saigon 2.6.47; Pièce jointe à Haut

In some of the French documents one sees a realisation that the Annamese claim to the Paracels was far from solid, and between the lines one reads a feeling that perhaps it might be preferable to let China win the case. A Chinese victory of this kind could perhaps increase its trust in the workings of international law. However, Chiang Kai-shek's government does not seem to have had any confidence that the International Court of Law in the Hague would ever reach a decision in favour of a non-European nation in dispute with a European power. Thus China refused to go for arbitration.⁹¹ At the time, China may also not have seen an urgent need to resolve the dispute. The Guomindang may have preferred to pursue a policy of aggressive maritime irredentism, as part of its effort to regain some of its rapidly waning national legitimacy. In May 1947 the legislative body of the Republic of China urged the government to recover all of the Paracels from France, if necessary by force, and in addition asked the government to clearly 'delimit our territory'. This resolution probably forms the background for the issuing of the famous map with the u-shaped line consisting of eleven dots (later reduced to nine) around virtually the whole of the South China Sea.⁹² With irredentism often follows exaggerated expectations. By 1947 oil had not yet entered the picture, so guano had to serve the purpose. In June 1947, after an expedition to the Paracels, a Chinese professor claimed that they contained enough guano to produce fertiliser for the whole of south China.⁹³

The dispute between China and France over the Paracels remained unresolved in 1949, when the Generalissimo established his government in Taiwan. In May of the following year, after having lost Hainan, he withdrew his forces from Woody Island. It then seems to have remained unoccupied until December 1955, when a PRC

Commissaire à MAE et EMGDN, no. 839/EMP, signé P.O. le Colonel Le Puloch, Chef de l'Etat-Major Particulier, 14.6.47, tous deux dans dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁹¹ 'Affaire des Paracels', note du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, marquée RB/MP Asie-Océanie, 21.3.47, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

⁹² For the history and status of this map, see Peter Kien-hong Yu, 'The Chinese 'U-shaped Line' and its Importance in Viewing the South China Sea Strategic Zone', *Defence & Foreign Affairs: Strategic Policy* (April 1999): 16; and Zou Keyuan, 'The Chinese Traditional Maritime Boundary Line in the South China Sea and Its Legal Consequences for the Resolution of the Dispute over the Spratly Islands', *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, 14, 1 (1999): 27-55.

⁹³ *United Press*, Hongkong 4.6.47, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

detachment set up camp there.⁹⁴ During this whole period, a French-directed Vietnamese force occupied Pattle Island, but for fear of complications, it did not utilise the vacuum created in Woody Island when Chiang Kai-shek's troops left. Both Woody and other islands continued to be used on a seasonal basis by Hainanese fishermen.⁹⁵

The years 1948 and 1949 did not bring major new developments in the South China Sea. The French Indochinese meteorology service received weather reports in this period from Spratly Island. Since these reports came through Manila, the French concluded that the US Navy must have established some kind of presence on the island, at least during certain periods.⁹⁶

Decline in Cold War, 1950–56

Whereas the years from 1945–49, at least the first half of the period, were characterised by European resurgence in Southeast Asia, the years 1950–56 formed a new period of European decline. The United

⁹⁴ A French intelligence report from late June 1950, just after the North Korean invasion of South Korea, said the PRC had postponed the occupation of the Paracels till after the successful conquest of Taiwan. A later report said the occupation of the Paracels had been delayed further by the Chinese intervention in Korea. SDECE no. 3707 AB/LB, date Information Agent 27.6.50 (valeur B/3); SDECE no. 5017/AB/LB (valeur X/4), date inf. Agent: 26.5.51, fiche enregistrée 8.6.51, tous deux dans dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM. In May 1955, a visiting French ship found a group of Hainanese fishermen on Woody Island, who did not have identity papers, and did not seem to do much fishing. In mid-December 1955, another French ship (the *Dumont d'Urville*) detected a far more important Chinese presence, and this was confirmed through aerial reconnaissance on 30 December 1955. Note d'Information, signée par le Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême-Orient, No. 3/EM2, Saigon 7.1.56, dos. 'Activités des forces maritimes . . .', UU-Sup. 32, SHM. Thus the PRC's occupation of Woody Island seems to have advanced gradually, and December 1955 may be as close as we can get to dating it. A British report in the following year said the PRC had occupied Woody island in December 1955: Briefing prepared for internal use in the FO, 1956, FC1082/4, FO 371/120937, PRO.

⁹⁵ In December 1950, the Vietnamese garrison at Pattle Island sent a small junk to Robert island, in the Crescent Group close to Pattle Island, where they arrested six Chinese 'fishermen' who said they were partisans of Mao Zedong. The Vietnamese thought they were not real fishermen, but had some kind of mission. They had been constructing houses and a tower on Robert island, and communicated with Woody Island in the Amphitrite Group. Compte-Rendu du S/Lieutenant Nguyen Kim Khanh, Officier de renseignements du Bataillon 'Vo Tanh', signé Faifoo 16.1.51, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

⁹⁶ Le Directeur P. I. du Service Météorologique de l'Indochine à l'Amiral Commandant les Forces Maritimes en Extrême Orient, no. 51/MET/D-60/ceuf, Saigon 28.8.51, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

States, the new Chinese People's Republic and a number of newly independent states and insurgent movements now became East Asia's main players. Holland had been forced by the United States to grant full sovereignty to Indonesia on 30 December 1949, keeping only West New Guinea (until 1969). Britain held on to Hong Kong, North Borneo and Singapore, and waged effective counter-insurgency warfare in Malaya, but the cost of the Malayan Emergency severely reduced the economic value of the only significant dollar-earner in the British Empire. France suffered its first disastrous defeat against Chinese-supported Vietminh forces in October 1950, scored some military successes in 1952–53, but then suffered the terminal disaster at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. After the Geneva conference had divided Vietnam in two, and France had been obliged to leave the northern part, the new southern leader Ngo Dinh Diem decided to put an end to the whole French presence. Thus, by 1956 the French army and navy had to close up their business, and leave their strategic base at Cam Ranh Bay. In the same year, of course, France and Britain suffered their dreadful defeat in Suez, after the United States had turned against them. The two powers lost control of the prime waterway between the home country and their Asian bases.

Several East Asian developments precipitated the European decline. The unification of the Chinese mainland under communist control brought significant change in the regional balance of forces. It stimulated not only the struggle of the Vietminh against France, but also communist-led insurgencies in other Southeast Asian countries. For some time the Korean War shifted attention to Northeast Asia, but the war in Korea also stimulated widespread fears of a Third World War, led the US Navy to 'save' Taiwan from invasion, and brought new attention to the strategic role of the Spratlys and the Paracels. Another significant factor was the foreign policy of the newly independent Philippines, where influential circles tried to build a case for establishing a 'Freedomland' (Kalaya'an) in the eastern half of the Spratly area. And in Vietnam two rival, internationally recognised states emerged as players on the international scene. In January 1950, Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam was recognised by China, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. In the following month, a rival Vietnamese government under former Emperor Bao Dai, which had been set up under French auspices, was recognised by the major Western powers. Thus both China and Vietnam had two rival regimes, and the nominal independence of Bao Dai's state forced France to tackle the question of whether the Paracels and Spratlys

should be left to Vietnam, or controlled directly by France. All of these factors formed part of the background for the peace conference at San Francisco, which led to the signing of a peace treaty with Japan on 8 September 1951. An additional factor which started to play a role in the 1950–56 period, but would only become significant later, was the discovery of oil in the shallow waters north of Borneo.⁹⁷ We shall now look at the effects of these regional developments on the dispute over the Spratlys and the Paracels, and examine how the decision-makers in Britain and France estimated their economic and strategic value.

The fall of the Chinese mainland to the communist forces, their subsequent invasion of Hainan in April 1950, and the outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950 led to renewed discussion among the European powers about the strategic value of the Spratly and Paracel islands. In 1949, the commander of the French navy in the Far East wanted to utilise China's temporary weakness to ameliorate the French position both in the Paracels and Spratlys, but the French Foreign Ministry issued stern orders to avoid any incidents with Chiang Kai-shek's forces, since this could stir up nationalistic and anti-French emotions.⁹⁸ The result was that France followed a cautious approach and did not occupy any new features in 1949–50.

Britain was also under pressure to take action. A letter from a British citizen was received in the Foreign Office in November 1949 expressing worries that Britain was not doing enough to bolster the position of non-communist powers in the South China Sea. The letter-writer saw a risk that the Paracels and Spratlys would eventually fall to communist forces. The Foreign Office was asked by Sir William Slim to reply. This prompted an interesting minute by R. S. Milward, who did not share the letter-writer's concern:

The islands are normally uninhabited and of little economic value. Strategically they were found before the war to be generally unsuitable as

⁹⁷ A third factor was the first United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1), leading to the 1958 Geneva Conventions on the Territorial Waters and Contiguous Zone, the High Seas, and the Continental Shelf. This factor will not be discussed here since it goes beyond the time limit we have set in 1956, and mainly concerns developments after the French withdrawal from Indochina.

⁹⁸ Le Vice-Amiral Ortoli, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient à Secrétaire d'Etat Chargé de la Marine, no. 36 EM2, Saigon 6.7.49; Le Secrétaire d'Etat Chargé de la Marine au Vice-Amiral, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême-Orient, no. 419 EMG/2, signé Deramond, Paris le 4.6.50; tous deux dans dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

bases although one lagoon offered a good stretch of smooth water for slying boats or float-planes. None seemed capable of being used by land-planes except at prohibitive cost; as posts for the observation of ship or aircraft movements they have potential value but are extremely vulnerable. No power has hitherto exercised consistent or resolute sovereignty over the islands for any length of time.

Milward could not find evidence that possession of the Spratlys and Paracels had represented an advantage for Japan during the war, and thought it was 'of little importance to prevent them from falling into hostile hands, at least until some naval and air power is able to fill the present vacuum in that corner of the world'. Since the Chinese Communists were particularly weak in air and sea power, Milward found fears of Chinese expansionism here 'groundless'.⁹⁹

In May 1950, Chiang Kai-shek withdrew not only the garrison in Woody Island, but on Itu Aba in the Spratlys as well. The meteorology service in Indochina noted that weather reports from the two islands ceased on 4 and 5 May respectively.¹⁰⁰ The withdrawal of the Chinese nationalist presence prompted much speculation in the media and intelligence circles that Chinese communist forces would soon arrive, and even that Russian submarine bases were to be constructed.¹⁰¹ It would, however, take until 1955 before a regular PRC presence could be confirmed in the Paracels, and until 1987–88 before the Chinese Navy took possession of any features in the Spratly area.

After the Chinese occupation of Hainan, Australia was among the many who worried about Chinese expansionism. In this connection

⁹⁹ Letter from John H. Lodge to Sir William Slim, 17.11.49, and minute by R. S. Milward, 30.12.49, FO 371/76038, PRO. These documents were not declassified by the PRO until 1 January 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Le Directeur P. I. du Service Météorologie de l'Indochine au Capitaine de Corvette Delmas, COMAR, signé Duhamel, Saigon 15.4.53, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM. On 5 May the radio reports ceased from 'Nansha'. This is assumed to be Itu Aba.

¹⁰¹ There were even rumours that General Lin Biao (a devoted landlubber) had personally inspected the Paracels. SDECE no. 3425 CB/LB, date Information Agent 10.6.50 (valeur C/2), dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM. The rumours were also heard by the Vietminh leaders, who were pleased to see a prospect of using the Chinese-occupied Paracels as a relay station for the provision of arms to the battlefield in central and southern Vietnam. Le Van Hien, *Nhat ky cua mot bo trung*, volume II, p. 236 (entry for 14 May 1950). (I would like to thank Dr. Christopher E. Goscha for providing this information.) In the following year, a French intelligence report—but of uncertain quality (C/5)—said that Lincoln island in the Paracels was being used as 'relai à mi-chemin de l'itineraire utilisé pour l'expédition clandestine d'armes entre l'île d'Hainan et les Communistes Vietminh d'Indochine'. SDECE no. 6531 XYZ/MB, 27.8.51, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

Canberra informally asked the United Kingdom if it might be prepared to seek trusteeship for Spratly and the neighbouring islands. The main argument was that although they had little commercial value, these islands had a 'certain strategic value'. They could:

... provide anchorages, sea plane facilities, and meteorological stations. Their strategic value was last considered by the United Kingdom Chiefs-of-Staff in 1938. Their conclusions then were that as these Islands lay on the direct route and almost half way between Hong Kong and Singapore, and were only about 450 miles from Saigon, it would be folly for ourselves or the French to accept the establishment on them by any unfriendly power of an air station, or a naval defence refuelling base for submarines and small craft.

The Australian request provoked an illuminating debate in British governmental circles about the strategic value of the Spratlys, and the conclusion was that it was negligible.¹⁰² The Admiralty and the British Chiefs of Staff had changed their view since the 1930s. They now advised the Foreign Office that the strategic value of the islands was questionable. In war, an enemy in occupation of the Spratly Islands could develop only 'a minor threat' to the sea routes from Singapore to Hong Kong and the Philippines. Possible airstrips in the Spratlys could only be used if the enemy had control of sea communications, and no foreseeable enemy had such control: 'So long as the Allies have peaceful relations with China, little strategic harm could come from a Communist occupation of the Spratleys, although strategic facilities in the islands could then be developed unchecked. In war, however, we feel that, with our superior naval strength, it would be a fairly simple matter to evict the Chinese from the islands and to destroy any installations there'.¹⁰³

¹⁰² J. P. Quinn (Australia House) to M. R. Metcalf (Commonwealth Relations Office), 21.6.50; Unsigned minute to Ross (Dominions Office), 23.6.50; Minutes by Mr. Huijsman (Colonial Office), undated but between 29.6 and 6.7.50, and by W. G. Wilson, 6.7.50; N. B. J. Huijsman (Colonial Office) to R. Ross (Commonwealth Relations Office), 17.7.50; M. C. James (Commonwealth Relations Office) to Captain M. E. Butler-Bowden (Ministry of Defence), 21.7.50; J.P. (50) 104 (Final), entitled 'Strategic Importance of the Spratley Islands', and dated 25.8.50; J.P. (50) 104 (Final), entitled 'Strategic Importance of the Spratley Islands', 25.8.50; Excerpts from J.P. (50) 104 (Final), entitled 'Strategic Importance of the Spratley Islands', 25.8.50, attached to Secretary COS Committee to J. C. Morgan (Colonial Office), 26.9.50; Commonwealth Relations Office to J. P. Quinn, 24.10.50, all in CO 537/5723, some also in FO 371/82022 and DO 35/2827, PRO. See also Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

¹⁰³ Excerpts from J.P. (50) 104 (Final), *op. cit.*

Therefore the British answer to Australia, conveyed at the height of the Korean War (but before the Chinese intervention in Korea), was entirely negative. Britain did not:

...consider these Islands to be of sufficient strategic importance to the democratic powers to warrant the United Kingdom Government taking any action (such as applying for trusteeship) which might cause a deterioration in our relations with Communist China at the present critical stage in Far Eastern affairs. We do not ourselves rate the possible occupation of the Islands by the People's Government of China in peace-time as more than a minor 'cold war' reverse, nor do we consider that even enemy occupation in war would be a serious strategic threat as long as the democratic powers retained control of the South China sea.

The British analysts agreed with Australia House that the only possible value of the Spratlys was strategic. From that point of view they saw no reason to deny ownership of the islands to France, although they did not wish their ownership to go to Japan, the Philippines, Nationalist China 'or, particularly, the Central People's Government of China'.¹⁰⁴ Influential officials in the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office agreed that the best solution would be to encourage the French to effectively occupy the islands.¹⁰⁵ Here there was continuity. Just as before the Second World War, London would prefer to see France waste its troops and francs on a matter of negligible importance rather than committing valuable British pounds and prestige.¹⁰⁶ Apparently, London did not see any reason to fear that the French sovereignty claims could be taken over by an unfriendly, independent Vietnam.

As mentioned, France had recognised Vietnam as a 'free state' in an agreement signed with Ho Chi Minh on 6 March 1946. France refused, however, to grant full independence and also would not accept the inclusion of southern Vietnam (the French colony Cochinchina) in

¹⁰⁴ Commonwealth Relations Office to J. P. Quinn, 24.10.50, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁵ They may have talked Australia into doing the job of encouraging France. In the run-up to the South Francisco peace conference, Australia informed France that it might support the French Union's claim to the Paracels, on the provision that French Union forces occupy them effectively. *Etats Associés à Haussaire Indo Saigon*, no. 60, 13.1.51, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

¹⁰⁶ 'It is conceivable that we might be able to induce the French to occupy the Nansha Islands with Viet-nam troops and fishermen, but in view of their commitments elsewhere it is unlikely that they would consent. If they did so they might be unable to maintain themselves in the islands'. Minute by R. S. Milward 17.4.51 concerning Admiral Fisher (Singapore) to Sterndale-Bennett (Singapore), 27.3.51, Cheke (Singapore) to Scott (FO) 30.3.51, and Scott to Cheke, 11.5.51, FO 371/92075, PRO.

Ho Chi Minh's republic. The war that broke out between France and the Democratic Republic in December 1946 lasted until June 1954. In 1948–49, France negotiated an agreement with former emperor Bao Dai, who had lived in exile since 1946, to establish an alternative, first autonomous, then nominally independent state, with Saigon as capital. In these negotiations, France conceded to Bao Dai what it had refused to concede to Ho Chi Minh: the inclusion of Cochinchina in Vietnam. France abandoned all its sovereign rights in Cochinchina by a treaty which was ratified by the French National Assembly in early February 1950. Then the USA, Great Britain and some other Western countries were ready to recognise Bao Dai's state. The Franco-Vietnamese treaty had been preceded by an exchange of letters in March 1949, where the Paracels, but not the Spratlys, were mentioned as part of Vietnam.¹⁰⁷ This allowed some French decision-makers to argue that the Spratlys had been attached to Cochinchina in the 1920s only administratively, that they were not integral parts of Cochinchina, and thus would remain French territory.¹⁰⁸

France was considering in 1949 to send a naval mission to Itu Aba and Spratly Island, and the commander of the French Navy in the Far East asked Paris for permission to use force to expel any occupants from other countries.¹⁰⁹ As always, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pleaded caution. Before sending ships, the navy should ascertain through aerial reconnaissance that the islands in question were not militarily occupied.¹¹⁰ Firm instructions were issued to this effect. Paris was not apparently aware that the French reconnaissance seaplanes (Catilinas) could not go as far as the Spratlys. Thus nothing was done. After hearing reports that Itu Aba might still be under occupation by Chinese nationalist troops, it seems that France in the

¹⁰⁷ Under pressure from nationalist Vietnamese politicians, the French High Commissioner said in April 1949 that he had personally assured His Majesty Bao Dai that he considered the Paracels to be dependencies of the Crown of Annam. Fiche sur la situation juridique des Paracels, Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient, 2ème Bureau, Saigon 16.9.54, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁰⁸ Fiche a/s de l'Île de Itu-Aba, Commissariat Général de France en Indochine, non signée, non datée (sans doute 1953), dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹⁰⁹ Se Secrétaire d'Etat chargé de la Marine au Ministre de la Défense Nationale, no. 567 EMG/2, signé P.O. Le Contre-Amiral Deramond, 20.7.49, dos. 215, s/s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹¹⁰ Note pour le Ministre, 30.7.49, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE. Le Ministre de la Défense Nationale (signé Ramadier) au Secrétaire d'Etat chargé de la Marine, no. 372 DN/FA.OM, 2.9.49, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

end decided to visit only Spratly island, not Itu Aba.¹¹¹ The aerial reconnaissance did not take place until August 1951.¹¹² The crew saw no signs of activity in the Spratlys. Still France did not move.

As early as May 1950, however, the French High Commissioner had started to worry that the Philippines might send forces to the Spratly Islands to forestall a communist annexation. He thus asked the French embassy in Manila to brief him on the Philippines' intentions, so the French and Vietnamese governments could defend the rights of France and Vietnam.¹¹³ Thus he considered both France and Vietnam to have rights in the Spratlys. This was not the view of the French Foreign Ministry. A long memo of the same month concluded that the claim to the Spratlys, in contrast to the Paracels, was made in the name of *France alone*, based on the principle of 'first occupation'. No mention was made of the fact that the Spratlys had been administratively attached to Cochinchina.¹¹⁴

France had always recognised that the claim to the Paracels was made on behalf of Annam (from 1948–49 always called 'Vietnam'). As mentioned earlier, France had in 1947 tried to persuade China to send the dispute to arbitration, and was preparing for the eventuality that China could win. By 1950, the legal advisor in the French Foreign Ministry no longer felt the matter could go to the International Court of Justice, since the Soviet, Yugoslavian, Polish and Chinese judges would be inclined to take a less than impartial approach. Thus he concluded that the dispute over sovereignty to the Paracels should be left unresolved until the 'governmental dualism' in Vietnam and China had been resolved.¹¹⁵ The French government also did not

¹¹¹ Fiche a/s de l'Île de Itu-Aba, Commissariat Général de France en Indochine, non signée, non datée (sans doute 1953), dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹¹² Fiche sur Îles Spratley, Forces Maritimes d'Extrême orient, 2ème Bureau, datée Saïgon 16.8.54, dos. Îles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

¹¹³ 'Afin de me permettre, le cas échéant, de demander aux Gouvernements Français et Vietnamien de réaffirmer officiellement les droits de la France et du Vietnam sur cet archipel, je vous serais reconnaissant de bien vouloir me faire parvenir toutes informations qu'il vous aura été possible de recueillir sur les intentions réelles du Gouvernement philippin à ce sujet'. Télégramme de Pignon (Haut Commissaire Saïgon) à MAE pour Manille, no. 322, 21.5.50, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹¹⁴ 'A la différence de la revendication sur les Paracels, à l'occasion de laquelle la France agit au nom du Viet-Nam, notre revendication sur les Spratly est faite au nom de la France seule, sur la base du principe du 'premier occupant'. Note a.s. Îles Spratly, MAE Asie-Océanie, 24.5.50, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹¹⁵ Note pour la Direction d'Asie, A. S. des Paracels, 25.5.50, appendix 11 in Chemillier-Gendreau, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

feel that the dispute over the Paracels was a vital French interest, and instructed the High Commissioner, in June 1950, that in case the PRC landed forces on Pattle Island, the garrison in place should only offer 'polite' resistance and not resort to violence. Also, the High Commissioner should replace the French military garrison with a uniquely Vietnamese force.¹¹⁶ However, these instructions were changed six months later, after the French colonial army had suffered its grievous defeat against Chinese-supported Vietminh forces at Cao Bang, and China had intervened in Korea. Then the garrison in the Paracels was told to resist at all cost any attempt to invade.¹¹⁷

The question of whether the Spratlys were French or Vietnamese was brought to the fore in May 1951, when a French businessman asked for permission to exploit the guano in these islands. France then had to make up its mind as to who should decide. The High Commissioner in Indochina, in his capacity as advisor to the Vietnamese government? The Vietnamese government itself? The Ministry of Associated States, which was responsible for relations with Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos? Or the Ministry of Overseas France, who was responsible for the French colonies in the Pacific, the Caribbean and Africa? The request was sent to the Minister for Associated States, Jean Letourneau. He forwarded it, however, to the Minister of Overseas France, arguing that the Spratlys had never been claimed or occupied by Annam, had only administratively been attached to the French colony Cochinchina, and should now be considered French territory, on a par with the French territories in the Pacific. The French Foreign Ministry supported this view.¹¹⁸ The Ministry of Overseas France seems to have enthusiastically supported the guano project, and the High Commissioner, when consulted, had nothing against issuing a licence. The exploration would, however,

¹¹⁶ Le Ministre de la Défense Nationale au Ministre de la France d'Outre-Mer, no. 401/DN/FA.OM, 6.6.50, dos. 215, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. The garrison in Pattle Island had also previously been instructed to be cautious and avoid violent conflict: Note pour le Général, Commandant les FTCVP, signé Le Général de Corps d'Armée Carpentier, Commandant en Chef les Forces Armées en Extrême-Orient, Saigon 6.2.50, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

¹¹⁷ Consignes pour la garnison de l'île Pattle, signé Le Général de Brigade Lorillot, Commandant les Forces Terrestres du Centre Vietnam et des Plateaux, no. 2863/FTCVP/3S, 29.12.50, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

¹¹⁸ Jean Letourneau, Ministre d'Etat, chargé des relations avec les Etats associés au Ministre de la France d'Outre-mer, no. 02369/AP/4, 7.5.51 et le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères au Ministre d'Etat (Letourneau), no. 439 AS, 16.5.51, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

have to be done at the businessman's own risk, he said. No military protection could be offered.¹¹⁹

Yet the Foreign Ministry was sceptical, citing the danger of creating difficulties with China. Another problem also turned up. The businessman in question was not based in Indochina, but the Philippines, and seemed to be associated with a Filipino businessman who was trying to encourage the Philippine government to support business activities in the Spratlys. Against this background, an interdepartmental meeting in Paris decided that the Ministry of Overseas France should refuse the concession, and a letter of refusal was drafted.¹²⁰ In the end the businessman abandoned the project.¹²¹

By September 1953, the French Foreign Ministry maintained the view that the Spratlys belonged to France, not Vietnam: 'These islands, French, were not attached to Vietnam in 1949, when the former colony of Cochinchina was ceded to this Associated State. They therefore depend on the Ministry of Overseas France'.¹²² In 1955, after the French forces had withdrawn from north Vietnam, a new French businessman applied for permission to exploit the Spratly guano. This time he was a good patriot: a reserve officer who had been awarded the Colonial Medal for past services, and solidly based in Saigon. The Ministries of Overseas France and of Foreign Affairs agreed that permission should be granted, but felt they could not issue a guarantee for future utilisation since the status of the Spratly islands might be changed in result of negotiations between France and Vietnam.¹²³ Now the Vietnamese government in Saigon entered the scene. Its Ministry

¹¹⁹ Haussaire à MAE, no. 796-797, Saigon 17.5.51, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

¹²⁰ Minutes from a meeting in the Ministry of Overseas France, 15.1.52, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

¹²¹ E. F. Mialhe, Président-Directeur de AMIBU Inc. Export Import à Jacques Roux, Direction Asie, Bordeaux 29.5.52, Ambafrance Tokio à MAE, no. 949/54, 13.5.52, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. Copie d'un télégramme de la Légation de France à Manile, 8.8.52, transmise à EMIFT/2ème Bureau 11.8.52, copie datée Saigon 23.8.52, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

¹²² 'Ces îles, françaises, n'ont pas été rattachées au Vietnam lors de la cession à cet état associé de l'ancienne colonie de Cochinchine, en 1949. Elles dépendent, en conséquence, du Ministère d'outremer'. Note a/s des îles Spratley, signée J. R. [J. Roux], MAE, 8.9.53, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. See also Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères au Ministre de la France d'Outre-Mer, no. 1989 AS, 27.11.53, même dos.

¹²³ M. Armand Vella au Ministre de la FOM, Paris 22.3.55; FOM à MAE, no. 124 AP/6, 9.5.55; FOM à MAE, signé Le Directeur des Affaires Politiques, 20.8.55; MAE à FOM, no. 1608 AS, 27.8.55, tous dans dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE.

of Public Works asked the French to assist them with transporting an economic expedition to the Spratlys. The Commander of the French forces recommended against the request. In 1949, when the island Poulo Condore had been ceded to Vietnam together with Cochinchina, the Spratlys had not been mentioned. They could therefore be retained by France, he argued.¹²⁴ The French Ministry of Associated States asked the opinion of the French Foreign Ministry, who prepared yet another ‘note’ claiming beyond doubt that the Spratlys belonged to the French Union, not Vietnam, citing several reasons. One of them was that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had failed to protest when the People’s Republic of China claimed the Spratlys as Chinese. The note ended by suggesting the construction of a French meteorological station in the Spratlys, and the Foreign Minister told the Minister of Associated States that French authorities should ‘reserve, with all desirable clarity and firmness, the rights of France to the Spratly islands’, while avoiding, if possible, to discuss the matter with the (South) Vietnamese authorities. If need be, the Vietnamese should be told that a public quarrel might serve the interests of certain foreign powers.¹²⁵ This was in July 1955.

In order to sort out the overall legal developments, we must again take a step back. The peace treaty signed with Japan in San Francisco on 8 September 1951 was ambiguous as far as the status of the two island groups is concerned. It stated that ‘Japan renounces all rights, title and claim to the Spratly Islands and to the Paracel Islands’, but did not say to whom Japan ceded its rights. None of the rival Chinese governments participated at the conference. Thus the Republic of China on Taiwan negotiated its own separate treaty with Japan in

¹²⁴ Le Général de Corps d’Armée P. Jacquot, Commissaire Général de France et Commandant en Chef en Indochine p.i. à Monsieur le Secrétaire d’Etat, Chargé des Relations avec les Etats Associés, no. 3958/SPD/AFG, Saigon 16.6.55, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹²⁵ ‘J’estime, en conséquence, qu’il conviendrait, le cas échéant, de réserver, avec toute la netteté et la fermeté désirables, les droits de la France sur les îles Spratley. Il m’apparaît cependant que nous n’aurions pas intérêt—notamment dans l’état actuel de nos relations avec l’Etat du Vietnam—à soulever nous-mêmes la question de souveraineté sur ces territoires. Je verrais, au contraire, des avantages à ce que le Général Jacquot, s’il lui semble que les autorités de Saïgon cherchent à évoquer le problème, s’efforce d’écarter pour le moment toute discussion, en faisant valoir, s’il en est besoin, qu’une controverse franco-vietnamienne à ce sujet aurait vraisemblablement pour résultat de raviver les prétentions de certaines puissances étrangères sur les îles Spratley’. Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères au Secrétaire d’Etat, chargé des relations avec les Etats Associés, no. 406 AS, 16.7.55, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

the following year. This treaty, which was signed on 29 April 1952, included a sentence that seemed to recognise Chinese sovereignty to both island groups.¹²⁶

In San Francisco, the Soviet Union and its allies supported the Chinese claim, and the failure of the conference to agree on this score formed part of the background for the refusal of the socialist camp to sign the peace treaty with Japan.¹²⁷ France and Bao Dai's Vietnam, who both signed the San Francisco treaty, of course defended their own claim(s) at the conference, but settled for ambiguity. One of the reasons why the peace conference did not seek to resolve the sovereignty issue is likely to have been the existence of the two rival non-present Chinese regimes, who both claimed the Spratlys and the Paracels. It was considered preferable to remain ambiguous rather than provoke hostile reactions in both Chinas. Yet the prospect of seeing the Paracels and the Spratlys under the control of a hostile communist government induced some countries, such as Australia, to adopt a hostile attitude to the Chinese claim in general, and to offer support to the French.¹²⁸ For the United States and several other participating states, it was difficult to accept any of these claims since one risked to favour the communists and the other was colonialist.¹²⁹ The issue was further complicated by the Philippines' attempt to play on Cold War sentiments to promote its own non-communist claim.

Cold War divisions had a significant role to play. However, another factor may also have affected the decision at San Francisco to remain ambiguous as to the sovereignty status of the Spratlys, although this was never mentioned: the still existing British claim. Britain was influential in San Francisco, and wanted to retain ambiguity in order

¹²⁶ For the issue of the South China Sea islands at the San Francisco peace conference and in the Sino-Japanese peace treaty, see Marwyn S. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea*, (New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 77–81.

¹²⁷ For the expression of such support in Soviet newspapers, see: Chataigneau (Ambafrance Moscou) à MAE, 28.8.51, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹²⁸ Australia even hinted to France that it might recognise the claim of 'the French Union' to the Paracels. Padovani (Canberra) à MAE, no. 5, 8.1.51, dos. 215, s/s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

¹²⁹ A news report issued by the mainland Chinese news agency *Xinhua*, two weeks before the peace treaty was signed, said the paragraph on the Spratlys and Paracels was being introduced at the last moment, as the result of a secret deal between the USA and France. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles offered the islands as 'pocket money' to France, *Xinhua* claimed, in return for French support to the peace treaty. French translation of *Xinhua* report, dated 23.8.51, quoted after *Kiai Fang Je Pao*, 24.8.51, appendix to Royère (Shanghai) to MAE, no. 256/AS, 8.9.51, dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944–1955, MAE.

not to prejudice its old claim. In October 1947, the Foreign Office had already started to prepare the British agenda for San Francisco. It argued in an internal note that Japan should be compelled to renounce any claims or rights to the islands Spratly and Amboyna Cay. However, it would not be necessary to specify the names of those islands or decide to whom Japan would cede them. His Majesty's Government was not prepared to contest the French claim to sovereignty which it considered to be 'good in law', but it would also not go as far as to 'admit' the claim of France since Britain's own claim had not formally been abandoned.¹³⁰ Therefore it was best to leave the question of sovereignty undecided. This seems to have remained the British view. In 1949, in the same interesting memo quoted earlier, the Foreign Office's R. S. Milward specified what he saw as the British position:

It has already been agreed at the official level that the Peace Treaty terms offered to Japan should be so worded as to imply a renunciation of her claim to these islands; but this treaty will leave the sovereignty open to dispute between Britain, France and any other nations who choose in future to interest themselves in the islands, until the vacuum is filled and some claimant becomes able to exercise a more real and permanent sovereignty than has been possible hitherto.¹³¹

In the Sino-Japanese peace treaty of 29 April 1952, Japan 'renounced all right, title and claim to Taiwan (Formosa) and P'eng-hu (Pescadores) as well as the Spratly and the Paracel Islands'. The fact that the Spratly and Paracel islands were mentioned specifically in the Sino-Japanese treaty, together with Taiwan and the P'eng-hu islands, *seemed to* indicate that Japan ceded the two island groups to China.¹³² However, shortly after the treaty had been signed, France expressed misgivings in Tokyo. A meeting was held where representatives of the Japanese Foreign Ministry expressed a certain embarrassment. They

¹³⁰ Foreign Office Memorandum attached to F.E. (o) (47)69, 14.10.47, copy as appendix II in C.O.S. (50) 273, 27.7.50, p. 5; D. J. Cheke (Foreign Office) to C. R. Price (Commonwealth Relations Office), 10.10.47, both in DO 35/2827, PRO. See also Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 355. The note did not accurately render the British position from the 1930s. At that time neither the Foreign Office nor the Law Officers of the Crown stated that the French claim was 'good in law', only that Britain's own claim, if ever there had been a claim, was too weak to serve as a basis for refuting the French claim. A myth had been established in the Foreign Office that the French claim had been considered 'good in law', and this myth was repeated in several British documents over the following years.

¹³¹ Letter from John H. Lodge to Sir William Slim, 17.11.49, and minute by R. S. Milward, 30.12.49, FO 371/76038, PRO.

¹³² Samuels, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

admitted that the treaty text could give the impression that Japan had recognised the Chinese claim, although this was not the case. Taiwan had insisted strongly on including the Spratlys and Paracels in the same paragraph as Taiwan and the Pescadores, and in the end Japan had given in. However, in the view of the Japanese government, Japan had only confirmed the same renouncement it made at San Francisco and did in no way take position as to the legal status or future devolution of the two island groups. This, by the way, was also the case for Taiwan and the Pescadores. France was well satisfied by this answer, and first thought of asking Tokyo to issue a public statement. However, in order not to disturb their relations with Taiwan, France and Japan agreed to just exchange letters between themselves, with no publicity. The formal Japanese letter, dated 23 May 1952, read: 'I concur with your understanding that Article 2 of the Peace Treaty between Japan and the Republic of China signed on April 28, 1952, should not be construed as having any special significance or meaning other than that implied by Article 2, paragraph (f), of the Treaty of San Francisco'.¹³³ Thus, France could convince itself that in a subtle way it had nullified China's gain.

This happened at a time when the USA took over most of the funding of the French war in Indochina. In May 1950, a month before the outbreak of the Korean war, the United States had announced its intention to aid the French war effort in Indochina, and by 1952 the United States was bearing some 40 percent of the war cost.¹³⁴ France's dependence on US support continued to grow in the next two years, culminating in the failed effort to save the base at Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. Meanwhile, US naval ships became frequent visitors in Indochina's ports. Under these circumstances, France could no longer fight its own colonial war, but had to portray it as a part of the free world's struggle to stem, or roll back, the communist tide. In order to achieve US support, France eagerly promoted the domino

¹³³ MAE à Ambafrance Tokio, no. 702-703, 6.5.52; Ambafrance Tokio à MAE, no. 949/54, 13.5.52; Ambafrance Tokio à MAE, no. 1007/1009, 21.5.52; MAE à Ambafrance Tokio, no. 807, 26.5.52; Ambafrance Tokio à MAE, no. 1071, 30.5.52, tous dans dos. 213, s.-s. Chine, AO 1944-1955, MAE. The quoted letter from the Japanese Foreign Minister, dated 28.5.52, is in Japanese with an English translation, is in sous-dos. 52, dos. 'Spratley', Note historique 842, vol. 26, MAE. See also Note pour le Secrétaire d'Etat, MAE Asie-Océanie, marquée PLG/GM, 14.5.52, dos. 215, même série, MAE. Research would be needed in the Japanese archives to find out what the Japanese attitude was to this exchange of letters.

¹³⁴ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War. The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996, 3rd edition), p. 25.

theory. In this perspective, the Paracels and the Spratlys were a kind of mini-dominoes.

The French war effort, and also Bao Dai's client regime, profited from the inflow of American money during the height of the Korean war. In early 1953, the French ambassador to Tokyo reported that the US Commanders in the Far East were considering the war in Korea and Indochina as two fronts in the same overall war against China and its backer, the Soviet Union. The aim was to subject China to sufficient pressure to make it withdraw from its Korean adventure, stop supporting the rebels in Indochina, and break off from Moscow. He recommended that France utilise the fact that the Americans were thinking so aggressively to attract more American support for the effort in Indochina. The allied navies should be used to maintain a partial blockade of the Chinese coast. He wanted Paris, Washington and London to adopt a joint Asia policy.¹³⁵ The British were at this time contemplating the possibility of having to evacuate Hong Kong. In this connection they asked France if they could be permitted to use the Paracels as a preliminary anchorage for the fleet needed in the operation. French military authorities in Indochina were helpful in assembling hydrographical and other documentation for this purpose.¹³⁶ A French naval ship captain visited Pattle Island and wrote a sad report about the degeneration that had set in since responsibility for its protection had been left in the hands of the Vietnamese themselves. His description of Pattle Island can stand as a symbol of France's waning presence: 'Here dies . . . , slowly, a few vestiges, still beautiful, of French greatness, an esplanade and noble alleyways, well built edifices, a small paved port—all somewhat worrisome tokens of abandoned ambitions, but which will be silenced, little by little, by the blow of the monsoon'.¹³⁷ He visited Woody Island too, which he found deserted, but with vestiges of past Japanese activities.

¹³⁵ Dejean, ambassadeur de France à Tokyo à MAE, no. 53 à 69, 25.1.53, copie diffusée par le Haut-Commissariat de France en Indochine, dos. 'Activités diplomatiques en Asie . . .', UU-sup. 33, SHM.

¹³⁶ Le Contre Amiral Blanchard, Commandant la Marine en Indochine au Vice Amiral d'Escadre Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient, no. 61 E.M.3, Saigon 28.2.53, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

¹³⁷ ' . . . il y meurt aussi, lentement, quelques restes, encore beaux, de grandeur française, une esplanade et de nobles allées, des édifices bien construits, un petit port maçonné—témoins un peu gênants d'ambitions abandonnées, mais que taira, petit à petit, le souffle de la mousson'. Rapport du Capitaine de Corvette Aubertin, Commandant l'*Ingénieur en Chef Girod*, signé à bord 30.7.53, pièce jointe au Comptendu de renseignements no. 18, 2ème Bureau, no. 56 E.M.2, Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient, Saigon 12.8.53, dos. Po1, UU-sup 02, SHM.

The war scare in 1952–53 did not necessitate to evacuate Hong Kong. General MacArthur was replaced as commander in Korea, and the kind of moderation that Britain had advocated, prevailed at last both in Korea and Indochina. The Korean armistice more or less reconfirmed the pre-war border close to the 38th parallel. Then the planned peace conference for Korea in Geneva was turned into an Indochina conference instead, and shortly after the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 8 May 1954, Britain's Anthony Eden and France's Pierre Mendes-France made a deal with China and the Soviet Union, whereby Vietnam was partitioned along the 17th parallel. This did not mean that France withdrew from Vietnam, only from the north. The French stayed in the south for two more years, until South Vietnam's new prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem threw them out, and the French Far Eastern Navy held on to its strategic base in Cam Ranh Bay as long as possible.

After the Geneva agreement, the French Far Eastern navy even pushed for renewed assertiveness in the South China Sea. Apparently it wanted to compensate for the army's losses on land by solidifying its own position at sea. The loss of north Vietnam would open up the possibility of maritime communications between Vietnam and China. The French navy wanted to collect intelligence on the movement of Chinese and Vietnamese vessels. During the years 1952–54 the French had developed a good capacity for monitoring the radio communications of the Viet Minh and its Chinese helpers. They now wanted, in addition to using a specially equipped ship, to set up a listening post in the Paracels.¹³⁸ The navy also argued that France should once more visit and take possession of Spratly Island and Itu Aba. It had been a mistake not to do so in 1949. The navy also tried to convince Paris that Itu Aba was valuable: Its guano could be exploited, the Japanese had constructed a little port, an airfield could be built, and it had already served meteorological purposes in the past.¹³⁹ Not long after this, the application from the French businessman in Saigon (referred to above), for exploiting guano in the Spratlys, turned up.

However, France now had other priorities. The navy found it difficult to get qualified personnel for signal intelligence in the South China

¹³⁸ Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême-Orient à Monsieur le Secrétaire d'Etat aux Forces Armées, no. 361/EM2, Saigon 13.10.54; Le Secrétaire d'Etat aux Forces Armées (Marine), signé P. A. Le Capitaine de Frégate Hello à Monsieur le Ministre des Etats Associés, no. 1789 EMG/2, 1.12.54, tous deux dos. 'Mission navale française . . .', UU-sup. 33, SHM.

¹³⁹ Fiche sur Iles Spratley, Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient, 2ème Bureau, datée Saigon 16.8.54, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM.

Sea, since it was needed in the Mediterranean, where France faced a mounting revolt in Algeria.¹⁴⁰ This was difficult for the naval authorities to accept. The navy was first in and last out in Indochina. It had been in the vanguard of colonisation in the mid-nineteenth century; the first period in the history of French Indochina is generally referred to as ‘The Admirals’ (*Les Amiraux*). Now, in March 1955, Admiral Jozan, commander of the French naval forces in the Far East, was trying to save at least some of the work of his predecessors amidst the French decline. He insisted that France should hold on to its strategic base at Cam Ranh Bay, and not give it up to the South Vietnamese state. He also wanted to maintain an establishment in Poulo Condore (Con Dao), and to establish a French presence in the small island Bach Long Vi (in the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin), and he urged that France disregard earlier statements to the effect that the Paracels were Annamese, in order to establish a French garrison there. The development of radio-electric warfare and tele-guided weapons could make these islands into important strategic assets.¹⁴¹

These of course were dreams, but in the year before Suez, it was still possible for a French naval commander to express imaginings in the form of official proposals. He even realised a part of his dream. The warship *Commandant Robert Giraud* conducted a survey of ‘the French Spratly archipelago’ in May 1955, and an exercise in the use of new electronic devices was held in the Paracels.¹⁴² However, a far more resourceful competitor had emerged. A US military mission had been established in Vietnam during the latter phase of the Indochina War, who was dealing directly with the Vietnamese authorities. According to French intelligence, the Americans were planning to set up radio-electric aerial navigation stations at strategic locations, including the Paracels.¹⁴³ In November 1955, the French decided to send a

¹⁴⁰ L’Amiral Nomy, Chef d’Etat-Major Général de la Marine, signé P. O. Vice-Amiral Rebuffel, no. 1788 EMG2, 1.12.54, dos. ‘Mission navale française...’, UU-sup. 33, SHM.

¹⁴¹ Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d’Extrême Orient à Monsieur le Général d’Armée, Commissaire Général de France et Commandant en Chef en Indochine, no. 87 EM3, signé Jozan, Saigon 23.3.55, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁴² Note de Service no. 160/E/TS (très secret), signé Capitaine Pacallet, 28.4.55, dos. ‘Mission navale française...’, UU-sup. 33, SHM. Instruction pour le Capitaine de Frégate, Commandant le ‘Francis Garnier’, no. 15 EM/3, signé Capitaine de Vaisseau Hébrard, Chef d’EM, Forces Maritimes d’Extrême Orient, 3^{ème} Bureau, 7.1.56, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁴³ Note de renseignements, no. 21 EM/o, Forces Maritimes d’Extrême Orient, Etat-Major, Saigon 18.10.55, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

mission to Woody Island in order to verify if it harboured any Chinese communist troops disguised as fishermen, and in December they prepared themselves for sending a commando, to prepare for the extraction of phosphates.¹⁴⁴ The real purpose was no doubt to establish a military presence, possibly in cooperation with US services, so when the Chinese People's Republic finally resolved to occupy Woody island in the same month, it was not one day too early.

The legal status of the Spratlys and Paracels was left unresolved. As for the United States it always maintained a remarkable neutrality, or passivity, in the legal dispute. The only time it had protested any action in the Spratlys, was in 1939 when Japan annexed the archipelago, and this protest was not made in defence of anyone else's claim. At San Francisco the USA seems to have favoured ambiguity, just as the United Kingdom. After the Geneva accords of June 1954, the Manila Pact of the same year, and in connection with the setup of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1955, the USA felt it needed more information about the legal status of the Spratlys, since several of its allies in the region (Taiwan, the Philippines, Britain, France and South Vietnam) had conflicting claims. In August 1955, therefore, the State Department asked the British Foreign Office to help clarify the legal position of the so-called 'Dangerous Grounds'.¹⁴⁵

The British replied in October by recounting the history of Britain's association with Spratly Island and Amboyna Cay, and emphasised that Her Majesty's Government had never acknowledged the claims of other countries. The Foreign Office added that in the British view, all the other features in the area were, with one possible exception (Itu Aba) 'reefs and shoals, some of them being listed as covered at all states of the tide, and therefore uninhabitable and incapable of appropriation and occupation'. The Foreign Office held that only Spratly Island, Amboyna Cay and Itu Aba could be legitimately subjected to a claim of sovereignty. An internal Foreign Office minute moreover ascertained that 'we regard our claim as still valid'.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Le Capitaine de Vaisseau Hébrard, Chef d'Etat-Major à 'Dumont d'Urville', no. 204 EM2, 14.11.55, dos. 'Renseignements sur les pays du Sud Est Asiatique (juillet-décembre 1955)', UU-sup. 33, SHM. Instructions pour le Capitaine de Frégate Commandant la Marine à Cam Ranh, no. 452 EM/3, signé Champenois pour Hébrard, 30.12.55, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁴⁵ Copy of memo from American Embassy to Foreign Office, 30.8.55; Foreign Office to the Embassy of the USA, 12.10.55, CO 1030/396, PRO.

¹⁴⁶ In the British archives, the note to the US State Department is accompanied by an internal memorandum, including a map of the Spratly area with two lines

1956: A Key Year

1956 is a key year in the disputed history of the South China Sea. France was ousted from South Vietnam and silently, if not publicly, left its claim to the Spratlys in the hands of the US-supported South Vietnamese regime. In the Philippines, the Cloma brothers launched an attempt to erect a 'Freedomland' in the Spratly area, provoking Taiwan to reoccupy Itu Aba, which had been left unoccupied since 1950. Meanwhile, the PRC solidified its newly established military presence on Woody Island in the Paracels. Among today's claimants, only Brunei and Malaysia could not yet let their voices be heard. British North Borneo and Sarawak would gain independence only through their inclusion in the Malaysian Federation in 1963, and Brunei remained British until 1984. The British claim to Spratly and Amboyna Cay had never been made in the name of those territories, but it survived 1956 in the same silent way as previously: Britain neither pushed nor abandoned it.

In the 1930s the dispute over the Spratlys and Paracels had been mainly a Franco-Japanese affair, with a weak and war torn China as the third party. From 1945 to 1956 the main dispute had been between France on the one side and the two Chinese regimes on the other. With France leaving the scene in 1956, the dispute was both intensified and localised, with the Philippines, South Vietnam, Taiwan and China in the leading roles. The stage was set for a new era. In view of the great importance of this transformation, we must look into the year 1956 in more detail, from the point of view of the two losing powers in the Suez crisis: France and the United Kingdom.

In January 1956, the French warship *Francis Garnier* received instructions to visit the Spratly Islands, in order to destroy all foreign sovereignty markers and erect new French ones.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, although the French knew there was now a permanent Chinese

under Spratly Island, Amboyna Cay and Itu Aba, and one line under twenty-two other features. The minutes say that all the islets other than Spratly, Amboyna and Itu Aba are sometimes covered by the sea and thus 'incapable of being occupied, of being annexed, or of having territorial waters'. The line under the twenty-two other features probably means that the Foreign Office had examined the possibility that they might be above water at all times and thus capable of appropriation. Confidential note no. D 1081/10, 12.10.55 with a minute and map by South-East Asia Department, CO 1030/396, PRO.

¹⁴⁷ Instruction pour le Capitaine de Frégate, Commandant le 'Francis Garnier', no. 15 EM/3, signé Capitaine de Vaisseau Hébrard, Chef d'EM, Forces Maritimes d'Extrême Orient, 3ème Bureau, 7.1.56, dos. P01, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

garrison in Woody Island, France prepared a complete survey of this island in the eastern Paracels. Shortly afterwards, the French prepared to send a mission, including a member of the US advisory team in Vietnam, to the Paracels. Its task would be to relieve the garrison on Pattle Island, carry out landing exercises, conduct surveys and study the possibilities of phosphate production. The mission was first instructed to visit just Pattle, Robert and Lincoln Islands in the western Crescent group, not Woody or any other islands in the eastern Amphitrites, since it 'seemed to be the object of systematic incursions by foreign elements, most probably coming from People's China'.¹⁴⁸ However, the American participant tried to persuade the French to include Woody Island in the project, and saw this as the primary target. It had just then been ascertained through aerial reconnaissance that there was a significant Chinese presence there.¹⁴⁹

On 21 February 1956, *Francis Garnier* approached Woody Island and spotted the presence of 'elements' hoisting the flag of the People's Republic of China, around thirty people, four engines, three barracks under construction and, north of the island, a small ship.¹⁵⁰ After receiving the report from this mission, the French navy seems to have lost interest in the Paracels. Its commander complained that it would be a burden for France to provision the South Vietnamese forces on Pattle Island.¹⁵¹ This was only some months before Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem threw out the French, and replaced them with American advisors. In April, the French navy complained that South Vietnamese

¹⁴⁸ '... paraît faire l'objet d'incursions systématiques d'éléments étrangers, vraisemblablement en provenance de la Chine Populaire'. Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'EO à l'Ambassadeur de France en Mission Extraordinaire Haut Commissaire de la République Française auprès de la République du Viet Nam, no. 32 EM/3, signé Champenois, 14.1.56; Instructions pour Monsieur le Capitaine de Corvette Commandant le L.S.T. 'Golo', no. 34 EM/3, signé par le Capitaine de Vaisseau Hébrard, 16.1.56, tous deux dans dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁴⁹ Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'EO à l'Ambassadeur de France en Mission Extraordinaire Haut Commissaire de la République Française auprès de la République du Viet Nam, no. 46 EM/3, signé Champenois, 20.1.56, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁵⁰ Le Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême-Orient au Commandant en Chef en Indochine (with reports from *Francis Garnier* enclosed), No. 94 EM/3, Saigon 23.2.56, dos. 'Activités des forces maritimes...', UU-Sup. 32, SHM. Compte rendu de mission, Aviso 'Francis Garnier', no. 11 OP, Uraga 4.3.56, dos. Po1, UU-Sup 2, SHM.

¹⁵¹ Le Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême-Orient au Commandant en Chef en Indochine, No. 113 EM/3, Saigon 6.3.56, dos. 'Activités des forces maritimes...', UU-Sup. 32, SHM.

authorities were carrying out an unauthorised inspection of the French base at Cam Ranh Bay.¹⁵²

In 1955, the Philippines had tried to persuade the United States to finance the erection of an early warning radar station in Itu Aba, but had not been successful. Then, in mid-May 1956, the lawyer Tomas Cloma announced the establishment of a 'Freedomland' (Kalaya'an) in the Spratly area, and the occupation of Thitu and Itu Aba by a private party of some thirty Filipinos, led by his brother Filemon, who would set up a fishing centre.¹⁵³ The Cloma brothers seem to have enjoyed the backing of Philippine vice-president Carlos P. Garcia, who supported Cloma's action in a public statement on 17 May, but not by president Ramon Magsaysay, who seems to have felt embarrassed by all the fuss the Cloma brothers created.¹⁵⁴ The venture of the Cloma brothers set off a spate of claims and counter-claims. The Philippines did not make an official claim itself, but set up a special interdepartmental committee, led by a member of the Foreign Ministry's legal division. The committee reserved the term 'Spratlys' for the isles and reefs in the immediate vicinity of Spratly Island itself, and west of it, and claimed that there existed an archipelago *between* the Spratlys and the main Philippine islands. This interposed archipelago, which included Itu Aba and Thitu was, in the view of the committee 'unowned, unoccupied, unsurveyed and unclaimed'.¹⁵⁵

The governments in Beijing and Taipei were both quick to protest the setup of the Philippine 'Freedomland', and both reiterated the Chinese claim to the Nansha (Spratlys). A series of high-level meetings were held between Taiwan and the Philippines to prevent any violent incident. Taiwan apparently rejected a proposal from the Philippines to send the dispute to US arbitration. Instead, in early June, Taiwan decided to send a naval force to Itu Aba and other Spratly islands, under the command of Commodore Yao.¹⁵⁶ China did not send any

¹⁵² Le Vice-Amiral Jozan, Commandant les Forces Maritimes d'Extrême-Orient au Commandant en Chef en Indochine, No. 150 EM/3, Saigon 9.4.56, dos. 'Activités des forces maritimes . . .', UU-Sup. 32, SHM.

¹⁵³ British Embassy Manila to Foreign Office, 4.6.56, 1082/3, FO 371/120937, PRO.

¹⁵⁴ Boizet (Manille) à MAE, no. 191 AS, 12.6.56, pp. 317–318, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956–1967, AO, MAE.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ G. Cattand (Taipei) à MAE, no. 247, 1.6.56; Cattand à MAE, no. 254, 6.6.56, pp. 292–294 et 309, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956–1967, AO, MAE. Telegram from N. L. O. Tamsui to C. in C. F.E.S., 8.6.56; N. L. O. Tamsui to C. in C. F.E.S., 11.6.56, copies of both in FO 371/120937, PRO. At Spratly Island, the Taiwanese destroyed

forces to the distant Spratlys, but seems to have used the occasion to permanently occupy Robert Island in the western Paracels, not far from Pattle Island, which remained under South Vietnamese occupation.¹⁵⁷ On 1 June, a month before the last French forces had to leave South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem's government in Saigon added to the spate of claims and counter-claims by stating that not only the *Hoang-Sa* (Paracels), but also the *Truong-Sa* (Spratlys) had always been parts of Vietnam.¹⁵⁸

The Vietnamese statement forced France to join in the chorus. At first, French diplomats did not take Tomas Cloma seriously. The French chargé d'affaires in Manila reported to Paris about the declaration of 'Freedomland', but seemed unaware that his own country had claims in the area. In his first report, he called the affair a 'ridiculous quarrel' of 'pygmies' which could provide China (PRC) with a pretext to intervene with force, and thus aggravate international tension. This 'petty affair' should never have been allowed to leave the columns of the local press and of the American magazines, he felt.¹⁵⁹ The poor French diplomat must have been surprised when he received instructions from Paris to enter the quarrel of pygmies himself. Shortly after the Diem government had made its statement, the Quai d'Orsay informed China (Taiwan) and the Philippines of the French rights to the Spratly islands. French ships were regularly visiting the islands,

the French markers, and set up their own, and a flag: Dumont d'Urville à Marine Paris, no. 51152, groupe date-heure 25 10 45, probably 25.7.56, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM. A French warship observed the Chinese (Taiwanese) marker on 21 July, but did not remove it: Le Contre Amiral Douguet, Commandant Provisoire des Forces Maritimes du Pacifique à Monsieur l'Ambassadeur de France en Mission Extraordinaire, Haut Commissaire de la République au Vietnam, no. 25 EM2, Saigon 6.8.56, dos. Po1 (dos. Spratley), UU-sup 02, SHM. On 22 August, a South Vietnamese warship planted the South Vietnamese flag on Spratly Island: British Embassy Saigon to Foreign Office, no. 363, 31.8.56, FO 371/120937, PRO (citing the Vietnamese press).

¹⁵⁷ Saigon (Stephenson) to Foreign Office, 11.6.56, FO 371/120937, PRO.

¹⁵⁸ Copy from *Viet Nam Presse*, 1.6.56, dos. Iles Spratley, UU-Sup 12, SHM. Also quoted in Saigon à MAE, no. 1613, 2.6.56, page 300, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956-1967, AO, MAE. In the view of the South Vietnamese Foreign Ministry, the Spratlys had been a part of the former Cochinchina: 'Le transfert au Viêt-Nam de la souveraineté sur tout le territoire vietnamien entraîne donc automatiquement le transfert de la souveraineté de la France sur les îles Spratley, rattachées à la Cochinchine'. Interview du Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires Etrangères, *Vietnam Presse*, Saigon 8.6.56, page 311, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956-1967, AO, MAE.

¹⁵⁹ Jacques Boizet, Chargé d'Affaires de France A. I. aux Philippines à MAE, pages 288-289, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956-1967, AO, MAE.

and the last visit to Itu Aba had taken place only four months earlier.¹⁶⁰ When news reached Saigon about what France had said in Manila and Taipei, this provoked strong Vietnamese reactions, but the new French ambassador to Saigon did not make any representation on behalf of the French claim to the government of South Vietnam. He was unhappy with the French position, and urged Paris to quickly resolve the issue, either by ceding its claim in favour of Vietnam's, or restating its own claim officially.¹⁶¹ The French government, however, preferred to remain ambiguous. Meetings were held in Paris by officials of various ministries.¹⁶² They were in two minds. On the one hand they did not want to disturb France's already difficult relationship with South Vietnam, and some French decision-makers wanted the Spratlys to belong to Vietnam. On the other hand they did not want to go through the constitutionally obligatory process of asking the French National Assembly to ratify the cession of yet another French territory. It took nine months to reach a conclusion. By then France had lost all interest in the Spratlys. Therefore it was decided to just remain passive. France would neither reaffirm its claim nor open negotiations with Vietnam concerning the issue.¹⁶³ Thus the French claim seems to have entered the same status as the British: it was neither abandoned nor pressed.

As of 1956, there were four active claimants in the Spratlys: the Republic of China (Taiwan), the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Vietnam, and France. The Philippines, although at the origin of the imbroglio, was not yet officially a claimant. Nor did Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam make any claim. Hanoi

¹⁶⁰ MAE à Saigon, no. 1799 et Manille no. 99, 4.6.56; MAE à Manille, no. 101–102, 5.6.56; MAE à Taipei no. 139, 5.6.56, pages 304–307, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956–1967, AO, MAE. For a British report that France retained its own claim, see Manila (Clutton) to Foreign Office, no. 91, 11.6.56, FO 371/120937, PRO.

¹⁶¹ Hoppenot (Saigon) à MAE, no. 1764/1766, 19.6.56, page 325, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956–1967, AO, MAE.

¹⁶² MAE à Saigon, no. 2009, 29.6.56, page 329, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956–1967, AO, MAE.

¹⁶³ 'De cet échange de vues, il ressort qu'il convient de nous abstenir de toute démarche auprès du Vietnam soit pour réaffirmer notre souveraineté sur les Spratly, soit pour en négocier la cession'. Note a/s: des Spratly, MAE, Direction Générale des Affaires Politiques, Asie-Océanie, 15.3.57; MAE à Saigon (communiquer à Taipei, Manille, Djakarta, Hongkong), no. 860/61, 29.5.57, signé Daridan, pp. 412–413 et 417, dos. 522, s.-s. Chine 1956–1967, AO, MAE. According to a preparatory note written in the Quai d'Orsay this solution had two advantages: 'a) elle nous permet, sans heurt avec les Vietnamiens, de retirer notre épingle du jeu; b) elle évite de soumettre au Parlement la cession des Spratley'. Note a/s: Iles Spratley, MAE Direction Générale des Affaires Politiques, Asie-Océanie, 8.3.57, pages 401–409, même dos.

seems, at this time, to have supported the claim of the Chinese People's Republic.

What happened in 1956 to the passive British claim? The Foreign Office watched with amazement the storm in the South China 'teapot', and did not want any part of it. As British colonies, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak were not yet in a position to raise their voices, but the British Commissioner General for Southeast Asia (in Singapore) could speak on their behalf. He made an attempt to establish that there had been historical connections between Borneo and the Spratlys, and asked the Foreign Office to brief him on the status of the British claim.¹⁶⁴ Thus the Foreign Office had to once more dig into its files and come up with a position paper. Again, British officials noted that the islands were 'scattered, normally uninhabited and of little economic value', and that they were 'generally unsuitable as military bases'. Accordingly the Foreign Office found it unlikely that the PRC would 'commit sufficient forces to them to create the possibility of any international incident'. The Foreign Office more or less agreed, as one official expressed it, to 'neglect this rather obvious opportunity of restating a claim'.¹⁶⁵ The Foreign Office was determined to remain silent. However, its position did not go unquestioned, and the man who questioned it was Prime Minister Anthony Eden himself, and he had a new reason.

As of 1956, the main economic value of the Paracel and Spratly Islands was still thought to be their guano. The British Foreign Office noted in December 1955, after it had been ascertained that the PRC was occupying Woody Island, that it contained phosphatic guano deposits, believed to amount to more than 1 million tons. The Japanese had extracted some 95,000 tons during their three-year occupation: 'While the deposits are very small in relation to world resources, they could provide a useful supplement to the supplies of phosphatic fertilisers of China, whose indigenous resources of these are in the early stage of development'.¹⁶⁶ Guano deposits in the Spratlys also continued to be mentioned as a resource to be exploited. In July 1955, the Borneo Pacific Company Limited, a new Hong Kong-based

¹⁶⁴ Telegram from Singapore (Office of the Commissioner-General for the UK in South East Asia), signed J. A. C. Cruikshank, to Foreign Office, no. Q.1081/1/56G, 1.6.56, CO 1030/396, PRO. Also in FO 371/120937, PRO.

¹⁶⁵ Minutes by D. C. Symon (2.6.56), James Murray and Mayall, FO 371/120937, PRO.

¹⁶⁶ Briefing prepared for internal use in the Foreign Office, 1956, FC1082/4, FO 371/120937, PRO.

corporation, had probed the possibility of obtaining a British license for certain explorative activities in the Spratlys. The British authorities had understood this to be another request for exploiting guano, and the Foreign Office had advised that the company should be discouraged from making a formal request, 'since the grant of a license would purport to resuscitate the United Kingdom claim and a refusal would give the appearance of having given it up altogether'.¹⁶⁷ However, it is possible that the company was not really thinking about guano, but rather about oil.

The first oil had been struck on Borneo in 1897, the year when the Shell Company was formed. In 1941, the embargo against Japan, cutting off supplies of British oil from Borneo and Dutch oil from Sumatra, had triggered the Japanese decision to expand southwards. Only thirty-five of seventy-five British oilmen on Borneo had survived the Japanese occupation.¹⁶⁸ After the war, Shell was back again and in the 1950s cast its eyes on offshore possibilities. In the beginning of June 1956, just as the war of words was raging over 'Freedomland', the Shell Company Borneo contacted the British authorities in Singapore, asking them to transport one of the company's geologists to Spratly Island. The Commander-in-Chief of the British Far East Station proposed to send the survey ship *Dampier* and asked for guidance as to whether the commanding officer on board should be instructed to hoist the British flag and take formal occupation of the island.¹⁶⁹ This proposal was not favourably received by the official in charge in the Foreign Office, who found the moment 'inopportune' for one of Her Majesty's ships to convey to Spratly Island a geologist representing a British firm for the purpose of surveying the prospects of drilling oil from the sea-bed there, 'particularly as the island may, for all we know, be under Philippine or Chinese Nationalist occupation. We had much better stay well clear'.¹⁷⁰

Thus the Foreign Office drafted a telegram to the Commissioner-General in Singapore that the British claim had never been abandoned but had also never been pressed, as it was considered 'too weak, in view of the lack of effective exercise of sovereignty, ever to be likely to win acceptance before the International Court'. This remained the

¹⁶⁷ The Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Officer Administering the Government of Hong Kong, no. 69, 14.1.56, CO 1030/396, PRO.

¹⁶⁸ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), p. 354.

¹⁶⁹ Singapore (Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia, Sir R. Scott) to FO, No. 242, June 5, 1956, PREM 11, PRO.

¹⁷⁰ Minute signed C. T. Crowe, 8.6.56, FO 371/120937, PRO.

position. Britain did not wish to become involved in the dispute. The Commanding Officer of *Dampier* should therefore ‘not, repeat not, in any circumstances hoist [the] British flag or take formal occupation of the island’, and it would be most inadvisable for one of her Majesty’s ships to convey the Shell company’s geologist to Spratly Island: ‘We should stay well clear’.¹⁷¹

However, before the telegram was sent, it needed approval from above. In the Foreign Office, like in other ministries, texts are prepared at lower levels and pass upward for signature by the boss, the boss’s boss, and so on until it can be signed on the proper level. In the present case, the telegram was properly signed and approved on every level until it reached the top. The last to approve it was the Foreign Secretary who then, for formality’s sake, sent it on to Prime Minister Anthony Eden. This was the month before Egypt’s leader Gamal Abdul Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. Eden cared for oil. He read the draft, did not approve, but instead minuted:

‘Foreign Secretary.

And give up the oil?

AE.

June 14’

The draft telegram went back not only to the Foreign Secretary but to its real author on the lower level. He composed a long memo, concluding that it would be much better that no oil should be found because if oil were found in this area the islands and reefs would become ‘a serious bone of contention and a cause of tension. As it is, it is to be hoped that the present flurry will pass over and the islands revert to their normal state’. His superiors discussed what to say to the oil thirsty Anthony Eden, and decided in the spirit of ‘Yes, Minister’ to just ignore him.¹⁷² Anyway, by the time they reached this decision, the unapproved telegram had already been dispatched.

No Shell geologist was transported on a British ship to the Spratlys. The Commissioner General in Singapore agreed to shelve the plan,

¹⁷¹ FO to Singapore (Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia) No. 646, 12.6.56, PREM 11, PRO.

¹⁷² Minute signed C. T. Crowe, 15.6.56, with comments by D. Allen, Sir I. Kirkpatrick, Lord Reading and the unreadable initials of (presumably) Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, 15-16.6.56, FO 371/120937, PRO. It was Allen who suggested it might not be necessary to reply to the PM. Kirkpatrick, Reading and Selwyn Lloyd agreed.

which had been based on ‘a remote possibility that Spratly may be a source of oil’.¹⁷³

End of story. As of 2005, neither Britain nor France seems to have officially abandoned their claim in the Spratlys, although no one expects them to pursue it.

Conclusions

This study has revealed two patterns, which may have relevance also for other countries than France and Great Britain, and for other periods than 1930–1956. First, there was a tendency in many quarters, particularly among the men-on-the-spot, and among their spokesmen in the public media and politics, to exaggerate the economic and strategic value of the Paracel and Spratly islands. Internal government files show that when more detached analyses were made, both island groups were found to be of negligible value. The answer that the United Kingdom gave to Australia in October 1950 is the best case in point. Australia had wanted Britain to establish a trusteeship in the Spratly Islands, in order to deny them to communist China. The request was thoroughly discussed, and the British Chiefs-of-Staff agreed on the following assessment (referred to but not quoted above):

- (a) The Spratly Islands are of no appreciable strategic value to the Allies, whose only concern would be to deny these islands to a potential enemy.
- (b) Occupation of the Spratly Islands by Communist China in peace might be considered a minor Cold War reverse for the Allies.
- (c) Enemy occupation in war would not, so long as we retain control of the South China Sea, be a serious strategic threat.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia (Sir R. Scott, Singapore) to FO, No. 274, June 15, 1956, PREM 11, PRO. Also in FO 371/120937, PRO.

¹⁷⁴ The same document characterised the Spratly Islands as follows: ‘The islands are a considerable distance apart from each other and are uninhabited. They are coral islands, only a few feet above high water, and the biggest, Itu Aba in the Tizard Bank is about one mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. They are surrounded by coral, and afford very poor anchorages, except in the case of Tizard Bank, which forms a lagoon where an anchorage for shallow craft could be obtained. It would be possible to build limited air strips on any of the main islands of Spratly, Amboina Cay, Itu Aba and Mischief Reef. Tizard Bank could be used as a refuelling point for submarines and as a seaplane alighting area, and the main islands would be possible sites for meteorological or radar stations’. Excerpts from J.P. (50) 104 (Final), entitled ‘Strategic Importance of the Spratly Islands’, and dated 25.8.50, CO 537/5723, PRO.

It is important to notice the difference between occupying the Spratly islands and controlling the South China Sea: The former is not a key to the latter. Control of the sea is a matter of naval strength and command of the air. In wartime, a garrison in an isolated Spratly islet would be extremely vulnerable, and of little value to its home country. For a power that does not command the sea it is dangerous to place troops in such exposed positions. For a power that does command the sea it is superfluous.

Second, the French and the British attributed more importance to possession of the islands in periods when they felt threatened by other powers than in periods when they were confident in their own strength. Marwyn S. Samuels, author of the best of all books on the dispute in the South China Sea, also noted in 1981 that 'China's concern for these relatively obscure islets, reefs and rocks grew proportionately to the weaknesses of its own position in the region'.¹⁷⁵ Today we might add that, from the mid-1990s a rising China tended to play down its irredentist struggle for the *Nansha* (Spratlys). This could be a sign of maturity.

¹⁷⁵ Marwyn S. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 24.

