

The Role of Victimisation in the Vietnam-China War of Words

Written by Huong Le Thu

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HUONG LE THU, JUL 5 2014

Since early May, media and public opinion have had a continuous supply of stories on the ongoing dispute between Vietnam and China. Analysis of both the Vietnamese and Chinese mass media provides insights into the fascinating tactics at play in this diplomatic war and reveals how the narrative of victimisation is an important tool for gaining international support.

The Beginning of the Crisis

On May 2nd 2014, the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) was placed on the disputed waters of the Paracel islands, approximately 120 nautical miles east from Vietnam's Ly Son Island and 180 nautical miles from China's Hainan Island – the area considered to be within the Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Not only did the deployment of the oil rig come as surprise to Vietnam, but so did the company of 80 ships (the number has since increased to over 100), seven military vessels, as well as aircrafts, to support the rig under the guise of being 'exploratory and research-oriented.'

The deployment of the HYSY 981 oil rig, accompanied by a full display of confidence from the Chinese, came as a surprise to the entire international community. Vietnam was taken aback by a sudden aggressive move by the giant neighbor, with whom it considered itself to have a proper relationship. Long-term efforts to mitigate the perception of threat from the disproportionately larger China, including Party-to-Party talks, Defense Ministers meetings, and a hotline for the maritime emergencies, seemed to go in vain.

Online Chinese civil support of the operation, which has since gone viral, used aggressive and provocative language, such as 'teaching Vietnam the lesson it deserves', flashing back to the rhetoric from the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979. Reluctant reaction at the ASEAN Summit, where leaders expressed 'serious concern' was the best backing the region could give Vietnam. Overall, the international community, although vaguely and without naming names, condemned actions that disrupt regional peace and stability. Even with such lackluster support, the international response was considered by the Vietnamese as a sign of support. From the first days of the crisis, the importance of presenting 'the hurt and the damage' was understood by both sides. Vietnam started documenting the ships' movements and posted the footage of Chinese ship attacks online. On the other side, China likewise publicly documented the number of clashes, which rose into the thousands.

The Repercussions of Anti-Chinese Riots

China quickly retaliated in what had emerged as an international public relations war, leveraging the unfortunate, yet spontaneous, violence directed by angry workers towards Chinese-run factories (as well as those run by other nationalities, including Taiwanese, Singaporean, Japanese, South Korean, as well as, ironically, Vietnamese). Ignorant and anger-driven rioters are reported to have been unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between these businesses as they sought targets for their outrage. China fell victim to the ethnic hatred of hostile Vietnamese and needed to withdraw their nationals from the dangerous environment. The media in the People's Republic of China (PRC) made much hay out of video footage of Chinese workers being rescued from the dangerous and chaotic

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conditions in Vietnam. For example, China devoted a whole section in the *Global Times* to cover the operations of evacuating their nationals.

As a result, Vietnam received extensive, high-profile, negative attention for the first time since the wars of the 1970s. According to Xinhua, Nationalist fever in Vietnam had gone too far, and he called on Hanoi to take full responsibility for the damage done to bilateral relations. Chinese media portrayed Vietnam as aggressive and “savage,” and unappreciative of its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) sources, and Beijing presented itself as the victim.

Calling to the International Arbitrary Measures

Vietnam’s Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, helped to shift negative public opinion to high-profile announcements at the World Economic Forum by expressing interests in developing closer dialogue with the Philippines. He also announced boldly, and perhaps for the first time since the normalisation of Vietnam-China relations 1991, that Hanoi would stand up and confront Beijing and that no invasion would be tolerated at the name of peace, stating that “Vietnam will not trade sovereignty to some illusive friendship/comradeship.” He also emphasised that Vietnam had exhausted all possible means of diplomatic communication, asking time and again for China to remove its mammoth oil rig from within Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) — requests to which Beijing remains deaf. The Vietnamese Coast Guards go up to the oil rig on average twice a day and communicate through megaphones asking the Chinese side to leave Vietnam’s EEZ. The messages are not listened to.

Vietnam emerged as heroic David confronting an expansionist Goliath, disregarding the overwhelming power imbalance in the name of freedom and independence. Following this came an announcement about bringing the case to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), for which Vietnamese diplomats presented the nation as one that is respectful of international law, abides by the rule of law, and is committed to peaceful resolution of the dispute. The 13th Shangri La Dialogue that took place the following weekend confirmed the much needed international voice of support for Vietnam.

China was criticised by the big powers in the region – Japan and US – for taking unilateral action that disturbed the regional peace. The Chinese voice was also clearly heard, once again playing the victim card by accusing Tokyo and Washington of “ganging up” on China and taking advantage of speaking first. In this narrative, China presented itself as a victim of unfair treatment, being alone against a group. In all its arguments against multilateral dispute resolution, including ASEAN’s engagement, China defended its bilateral approach with the logic that many against one would be unfair. The countries of the region perceive the real reason for this approach to be that it makes it easier for a large and powerful China to intimidate single countries (with the exception of the United States and perhaps Japan) than a bloc of allies.

Vietnam successfully deployed diplomatic rhetoric in order to appeal to the international community, aside from being domestically indecisive and inconsistent about its actions towards Beijing. Not only had other actors condemned China, but Hanoi itself gave Beijing a gentle tap on the shoulder to assure it that the relationship was still on good terms and that the conflict could be managed peacefully, provided China pulls out the oil rig. This stance conveyed a certain “maturity” on the part of Vietnam in its ability to bring bilateral quarrels to international and objective ends; a maturity that China has steadfastly refused to display from the very beginning of this crisis.

This war of words is not only being fought between China and Vietnam. Beijing has also accused Manila of violations of the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea). In the PRC view, this represents an attempt to pull Hanoi out of Beijing’s orbit and over to Manila’s side. That way, the Chinese media can portray both the Philippines and Vietnam in a negative light. The narrative here portrays the former as rebelling and the latter as weak-willed and easily trapped by Philippine intrigue.

Bringing the United Nations into the Dispute

The growing grudge from the Chinese side has brought the issue to the United Nations. Turning to a multilateral forum is new for China. Not so much for Vietnam, who had done so a month ago. China is following Vietnam’s

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example and attacking it with its own weapon. Beijing presents to the world stage its own version of the story, claiming that it is the one being disrupted by Vietnam's aggressive moves. According to a strict reading of UNCLOS, China's unilateral actions in the disputed waters have no justification. Nevertheless, the victim card is once again being played.

In terms of propaganda, Vietnam has to learn its skills from China. Victimisation is certainly more dramatically mastered by China and done on much larger scale, pulling out arguments such as Vietnam using the "China threat" theory to vilify China. While victimisation can have a wide impact in terms of gaining support, when over-done it can easily lose its credibility. The tool of victimisation in this context appeared to be clumsy and absurd rather than credible. Unwittingly, the outcome of Chinese actions gave the impression that Vietnam is one of the leaders in diplomatic tactics.

As only eight weeks have passed since the crisis started, the world is bound to witness—in between World Cup fever and other news cycles—further battles in the Vietnamese-Chinese war of words—and hopefully words only. To many observers, this is a perplexing experience, as Beijing policy is often diametrically opposed to the international image that Beijing attempts to put forward, suggesting that such image-building sound-bites (the "good neighbor policy," China's "peaceful rise") are little more than cynically crafted propaganda.

While both sides are playing up their victimhood to an international audience, the message is very different in the domestic realm. "Vietnam definitely rejects China's irrational points about the Paracels", "China is making up the facts in an outrageous way," and "Vietnam condemns China at the Law of the Sea Meeting" are among the everyday headlines splashed on the front pages of Vietnamese newspapers. On the Chinese side, statements such as "Small state should not irritate," "Hanoi has no hope in standing up to Chinese military," and "Vietnam fooling no one in the maritime disputes: Chinese experts say" have taken over the Chinese rhetoric. Clearly, on the domestic front, the victimisation tool is not as popular. Instead, portraying heroism and expressing strong opposition to the absurd claims of the other side falls on fertile nationalist ground on both sides.

Observations of the fights taking place in the realm of public opinion are not only interesting in terms of their ability to gain international support, but they may reveal more about the nature of the parties involved, with what is not being said being especially illuminating. There are certainly similarities between the quarrelling neighbors, which have adopted comparable tactics for information control.

The aforementioned riots provide a perfect example. The cause remains unknown, while the effects of the riots were magnified, with repercussions known only to the affected parties (compensation and possible sanctions like warnings of withdrawal of investments). The slow response from Beijing who waited 48 hours to strategically 'utilise' the events, and censored Chinese blogs and social media posts about the incidents, shows sophistication in information control. While it is fascinating to listen to the new public complaints on both sides to see what they want the world to know, what is not receiving public attention is even more informative.

Public Scolding

Up until the crisis broke, all difficult cases were solved between Hanoi and Beijing, often behind closed doors. Since the parties involved are no longer able to talk to each other, they target their rhetoric at the external audience instead, in a campaign competing for international support. Even the first high level talk since the deployment of the oil rig by State Counselor Yang Jiechi to Hanoi on 18th of June proved that the room for negotiations is very small. Vietnam, for the first time, is openly opposing China in an uncompromising way. China also used the opportunity of high profile meeting to 'scold Vietnam for hyping up the situation'. Although the visit was far from being constructive, back in China domestic press portrayed it as moral and diplomatic victory.

As the diplomatic talks absorb international attention, Beijing is sending off the second oil rig at the same time. There is no stronger message than this – although the confrontation is happening on different fronts and the words announced to the media front have little to do with what is happening on the waters. With the strong likelihood that Beijing will send more oil rigs to the boiling waters, more rounds of diplomatic and media warfare are likely.

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Beijing's intention behind the visit is to show the world its good will to handle the crisis. At the same time, it tells Hanoi not to internationalise the problem and conveys the message that both parties agree to handle the crisis properly. But what China understands as properly is not agreed by Vietnam. The interaction reflects the pattern of asymmetric relationship where China tells Vietnam what not to do and what is 'proper'. This inconsistency suggests that China is more comfortable on bilateral, rather than multilateral, terms. The attempt of bringing the complaint to the UN did Beijing no favours, hence the visit might have been China's new tactic of 'normalising' the crisis and convincing the world that it is manageable between Hanoi and Beijing.

Conclusion

Victimhood is not a foreign concept in Chinese or Vietnamese nationalism. Education in China from early years teaches students about the century of humiliation and how China fell prey to the Western imperialists. The victimisation of a passive past is aimed at justifying what the Chinese see as 'China's rejuvenation (rather than what the world sees as China's rise)'. In Vietnam, the sense of resistance against foreign invasions, starting with Chinese through Japanese, French, and American, also carry elements of victimhood. Vietnamese victimisation has been portrayed in a narrative of heroic defender. Both forms of victimisation narratives serve to reinforce the nationalist sentiments in the countries.

In the current context, the victimisation narrative in media and diplomatic warfare has played a key role in the first phase of confrontation. For Vietnam, it seems to be the only way that it can gain much needed international support, with the exception of lodging the complaint to the ITLOS. For China, although it is not going to give up on the PR ground, it is likely to continue oil rig explorations with or without international support. As the situation deteriorates, both sides need to realise that the effect of the victimisation narrative will wear out as the stories of unlawful acts continue to multiply.

About the author:

Dr Huong Le Thu is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. She is interested in Vietnam-China relations, as well as issues related to norm building in regional (ASEAN) community. She has published opinion pieces with East Asia Forum, Asia Sentinel, and the Diplomat.