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CHINA-VIETNAM: SPAT OVER THE SPRATLY ISLANDS

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(As of 1000 March 17)

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**CHINA-VIETNAM: SPAT OVER THE SPRATLY ISLANDS**

**Highlights**

- Vietnam is unlikely to counterattack China in response to China's March 14 attack on Vietnamese vessels in the Spratly islands. (C)
- Vietnam is unable to counter Chinese naval forces in the Spratly islands, even if it committed all available naval assets to the disputed islands. As well, Vietnamese aircraft would have difficulty operating effectively in the Spratly islands area. (C)
- China's attack has caused considerable concern among ASEAN countries. The Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan have placed their military forces in the area on alert. But none of these countries are likely to intervene in this China-Vietnam dispute. (C)
- We expect China to continue its efforts to strengthen its presence in the disputed island group. (C)

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1. The Spratly island group in the South China sea is a scattered group of islands and reefs claimed in part or in whole by five countries: Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and China. These islands are of possible regional strategic importance and may be rich in oil. Over the years, all of these countries have established permanent garrisons on natural or man-made islands and reefs in the island group. Chinese and Vietnamese garrisons in the Spratly group are close as 24 kilometers from each other. (S/W)

2. In order to increase the strength of its claim to the islands, China dispatched in January 1988 several construction barges and support vessels to Fiery Cross reef, apparently with the intent of establishing facilities for a permanent garrison. China also sent a naval task force of up to four major war-ships and five logistic vessels to provide protection and to support construction activity. In response to this action and the alleged blocking of Vietnamese supply ships by China, Vietnam placed its forces in the islands and its mainland naval and air force units on alert. It dispatched available naval vessels to the Spratly group. It has also begun to repair, to provision and to refurbish other available naval vessels. (S/W)

3. On 14 March, two Chinese warships attacked and sank a Vietnamese transport ship, heavily damaged a landing ship, captured nine Vietnamese sailors and apparently damaged and left burning a third Vietnamese vessel which was attempting to come to their aid. Following this incident, tensions increased both in the Spratly group and along the Sino-Vietnamese border. Since the incident, China has deployed long-range aircraft to within range of the Spratly islands, placed its marine brigade on alert for possible deployment and increased its naval strength in the islands to approximately ten major surface warships and ten support ships. The Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan have placed their military forces in the area on alert and have expressed considerable concern over the incident. But none of these countries are likely to intervene in this China-Vietnam dispute. (S/W)

4. Vietnam is at present completely unable to counter the Chinese naval force, even if it committed all available naval forces to the disputed islands. While it is possible for Vietnamese aircraft to reach the area, their limited range and equipment reduces their effectiveness. Given this situation, it is unlikely that Vietnam will counterattack in the area and will instead be forced to content itself with rhetoric.

(S/W)

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5. This display of force by China has caused considerable concern among the ASEAN countries, especially those with claims to the Spratly islands. China's action is interpreted as an indication of its intent to push its claim over the Spratly islands by whatever means required. We expect China to continue its efforts to establish a permanent position on Fiery Cross reef and to strengthen its overall presence in the disputed region. (C)

