Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 9 · Number 2 · 2023 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Original scientific article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2392347q
Received: 06.05.2023 · Revised: 03.06.2023 · Accepted: 05.06.2023 · Published: 10.07.2023

SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE PARACEL ISLANDS IN 1884-1945: AN APPROACH FROM THE RIVALRY BETWEEN FRANCE, CHINA, AND JAPAN

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Abstract: *The Paracel Islands are situated in the South China Sea geographic center and have an important strategic location for the military and the economy. Since 1884, France has represented the Vietnamese state as a protectorate to manage the archipelago. In the context of France seeking to expand its influence into the Asia-Pacific region, disputes over sovereignty over the Paracel Islands occurred during the colonial period between France (representing Vietnam), China, and Japan. The article aims to analyze the importance of the Paracel Islands in the policies of France, China, and Japan in general. Moreover, the specific activities of France in the struggle with China and Japan to affirm and protect sovereignty over the Paracel Islands would also be analyzed. Based on primary and secondary data, along with historical research methods, research methods in international relations, and other interdisciplinary research strategies, the article concludes that the Paracel Islands play an important role in the strategies of France, China, and Japan. Hence, the Paracel issue in this period has gone beyond the framework of traditional territorial disputes, becoming "internationalization" with consequences that persist to the present day. France's policy to exploit and administer the Paracel Islands was persistent, thorough, and systematic in the military, economic, political, and diplomatic spheres.*

Keywords: *Sovereignty Dispute; Paracel Islands; France; China; Japan*

INTRODUCTION

Paracels (Hoang Sa in Vietnamese/Xisha in Chinese) is an archipelago located in the North of the South China Sea (Bien Dong or, East Sea in Vietnamese/West Sea in the Philippines), stretching from about $15^0$45'-$17^0$15' Nto 111^0-113^0 E, i.e., about 120 nautical miles from Ly Son Island (Quang Ngai, Vietnam) (Van 2015). It is about 160 nautical miles from Paracel Island (the archipelago's main island) to the nearest coast at Hainan Island (China) (Nguyen 2012, 168), 450 nautical miles to the Philippines, and 620 nautical miles to Taiwan. The archipelago consists of about 37 coral islands, reefs, and half-submerged sandbanks and is divided into two groups of islands: Amphitrite (An Vinh, east) and Crescent (Luoi Liem, west) (Van 2015). The Paracel Islands are located in the South China Sea - a strategically critical body of water for countries in Southeast Asia, Asia-Pacific, and the whole world, with great potential for minerals and seafood resources as well as favorable conditions for economic development at the same time. The archipelago was under the administration of Vietnamese feudal dynasties from at least the 17th century, which continued to be fortified and maintained in the next two

centuries before the French arrived (Nguyen 2012, 185). As a state with sovereignty over this archipelago, the management and exploitation of Paracel Islands by Vietnamese feudal dynasties mainly focused on constructing infrastructure, granting fishing licenses and collecting fishing tax, organizing rescue, patrol, and protection, etc.

In 1884, the royal court of the Nguyen dynasty in Hue signed the Patenôtre Treaty to accept French protection in Annam (Trung Ky) and Tonkin (Bac Ky). With this treaty, the French were responsible for representing the feudal state of Vietnam in all foreign affairs and the defense of territorial sovereignty.

The sources of information used in this article can be divided into three categories: (1) official letters, reports, directives, decrees, and decisions of the French government and the French colonial administration in Indochina; French newspapers in Indochina at that time which were currently archived by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the French Republic (mainly in French), Vietnam National Archives II and Paracels Data Center of Vietnam. These are an important source that documents many issues relating to the Paracel Islands as well as French activities towards the archipelago; (2) published research works by Vietnamese and foreign organizations and researchers; (3) records of officials in the French colonial government in Indochina, records of court officials of Nguyen dynasty, and survey data collected by the authors.

This research is based on the utilization of these abundant sources. To supplement the findings of previous scholars, historical and logical research methods are employed, adopting an international relations-based approach.

The aim is to provide a comprehensive and in-depth perspective on the legality of France as the protector state of Vietnam, along with the specific French activities in the struggle with China and Japan to assert, exercise, and defend sovereignty over the Paracel Islands from 1884 to 1945. The article also uses interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary methods, such as analysis, statistics, comparison, etc., to observe, analyze and assess research issues more scientifically and objectively.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE PROCESS OF TAKING OVER THE PARACELS ISLANDS BY THE FRENCH

Since the 16th century, after the success of many geographical discoveries, the worldwide development of Western capitalism accelerated the search for colonies in the East. As a country located on the eastern edge of the Indochinese Peninsula, the crossroads of major cultures and a major bridge between mainland Southeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, Vietnam was soon listed among the targets of Western colonialism. Implementing colonial annexation, from the end of the 16th century, Western countries, especially France, gradually established their presence in Vietnam through Christian missions and trade. However, after two centuries of "peacefully" conquering Vietnam ended with no results, the French decided to invade the country utilizing military forces. In 1843, Prime Minister Guizot of France publicly declared French strategy in the Far East: "We need two guarantees in the Far East: a permanent naval base in Chinese waters and a solid colony adjacent to China, etc. France cannot be absent in such a large part of the world, while other European countries already have bases there" (Nguyen 2002, 264).

On 22 April 1857, Napoleon III - Emperor of France - decided to establish the "Commission de la Cochinchine" (Cochinchina Commission) to "reconsider" the Treaty of Versailles signed with Nguyen Anh in 1787 as a pretext to legally bring troops to invade Vietnam. Through 7 meeting sessions (from 28 April to 18 May of 1857), the commission concluded that "for the benefit of France in all three aspects of morality, politics, and commerce, it is necessary to proceed secretly and as quickly as possible to capture three main cities of the Kingdom of Annam (Vietnam)" (Nguyen 2002, 268). Based on this resolution of the Commission, Emperor Napoleon III ordered Rigault de Genouily - Vice Admiral of the Navy, to command the French fleet in the Far East to invade Vietnam in coordination with the Spanish army.

On 1 September 1858, the Franco-Spanish coalition opened fire on Son Tra Peninsula and captured Da Nang in an attempt to carry out a "lightning attack". However, facing resistance from the Vietnamese army and people, the French army was isolated and bogged down on the battlefield of Quang Nam - Da Nang. On 4 January 1859, Rigault de Genouily reported back to France: "We are going downhill in Da Nang. All means of improving the situation for the infantry and the navy were exhausted and void" (Nguyen 2002, 267). In the face of that tragedy, De Genouily proposed to redirect to Gia Dinh (Cochinchina - Nam Ky), reasoning that:

> Saigon is located next to a river that our [French] battleships can approach easily. Soldiers can also land and capture the city right away without having to carry weapons and food over a long distance, etc. Saigon is an important granary which provides a large part of food for people and soldiers in the imperial city of Hue. Usually, around March, rice-carrying boats will go north, so we will block them (Governor 1859, 31).

On 2 February 1859, Rigault De Genouilly sent two-thirds of his troops and 8 of his 14 battleships in Da Nang to the South and quickly captured Gia Dinh. Subsequently, the royal court of the Nguyen dynasty (in Hue) signed with France the Treaty of Saigon (1862), the Treaty of Saigon (1874), the Harmand Treaty (1883), and the Patenôtre Treaty (1884) to establish the French colonial rule in Vietnam, which led to the formation of three regions with three different regimes: the two protectorates of Tonkin (Bac Ky) and Annam (Trung Ky), and Cochinchine (Nam Ky) as a French colony. According to the terms of the Patenôtre Treaty, from 1884, France replaced Vietnam (Hue royal court) in all foreign affairs and the defense of territorial sovereignty (Christopher 2021, 667). Annam recognized and accepted France's protection. On the other hand, France would represent An Nam in all diplomatic relations (Raoul 1929). Annamese people living abroad were protected by France (Nguyen 2015, 124). Regarding the two archipelagoes of Paracels and Spratlys: "The French government has established its colonization of Annam and since these islands [Hoang Sa (Paracels) and Truong Sa (Spratlys)] belong to Annam, France has ownership and custodial responsibility towards this new territory" (Sauvaire 1933, 385-387).

On 17 October 1887, exercising the right to protect the French state, the President of France issued a decree to establish the Indochinese Union (Union Indochinoise) consisting of 6 regions: Cochinchina (Nam Ky), Tonkin (Bac Ky), Annam (Trung Ky), Laos, Cambodia, and Guangzhouwan. Then, in 1888, the French pressured the Hue royal court to sign Royal Edict No. 1 to turn the three cities of Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Da Nang (including the Paracels) into

concessions of France, with the same colonial governance mechanism as Cochinchina (Arthur 2002). At this point, the Paracels, in terms of international law, were completely separated from the administration of the Hue royal court and became a territory of the French Union.

From having the responsibility to protect, France managed to have full sovereignty over the archipelago.

FRENCH ACTIVITIES AGAINST CHINA AND JAPAN TO ASSERT, ENFORCE AND DEFEND SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE PARACEL ISLANDS

Struggle with China

Vietnam and the world were already aware of the Paracel and Spratly Islands from an early period, at least as early as the 14th-15th centuries. However, by the end of the 19th century, the feudal state of Vietnam had established sovereignty over these islands for two centuries following the legislation of that period. Notably, during this time, no disputes were raised by any country regarding Vietnam's sovereignty over these islands (Monique 1996, 33, 103). In 1895 and 1896, when the two ships of Le Bellona (Germany) and Imezi Maru (Japan) sank in the area of the Paracels while carrying copper for British merchants, the Chinese sent canoes to steal the copper and sold it in Hainan. The insurance company and representative of the British government in China demanded that the Chinese be held accountable; however, the Chinese government refused because "[...] the Paracel Islands (Hoang Sa) are not of Chinese ownership, and they are not administratively incorporated into any county of Hainan" (Monique 1996, 103), therefore China was not responsible for the issue (Indochina 1898a, 3). This event was reported by the French colonial government in Vietnam to the Governor-General of French Indochina on 31 August 1898 as follows:

> I urge you to pay special attention to some passages in the report concerning the British insurance company's claim in the hijacking of Le Bellona and Imazi Maru; in this regard, China has stated that the 'Paracel Islands are abandoned and do not belong to China, but to Annam' (Indochina 1898a, 4).

This is proof that until the end of the 19th century, the authority in the southernmost part of China had no idea about the Paracels (which are closer to China), let alone the Spratlys (which are very far from China) (Vu 2015, 355-356).

Due to early awareness of the strategic position of the South China Sea (including the Paracels and the Spratlys) in the exploitation of Indochinese colonies, the French government in the mother country and the colonial government in Indochina soon occupied and exercised control over the Paracels (and the Spratlys, too) with many activities in terms of politics, military, economy, science and technology, and diplomacy, as well as regularly reinforced the management of these islands. On 18 February 1929, the Minister of the French Navy (acting Minister of the Colonies), in reply to the Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding the Paracels, noted: "For this group of uninhabited islands (Hoang Sa), Annam has historical rights that are far

more difficult to dispute than those that the Republic of China may claim, and France is obliged to preserve the territorial integrity of the protected state" (Governor 1929, 32).

In 1899, Paul Doumer (Governor-General of French Indochina) proposed a scheme and asked the French government to build a lighthouse on the Paracel Islands (Sauvaire 1933, 385-387). The construction of this lighthouse was intended not only to assert sovereignty and serve ships circulating in the South China Sea, but as the French saw it, this would also serve as a significant source of maritime tax from international merchant ships passing through this area. According to calculations, a detour will slow down the course of each ship by 4 to 5 hours and cost it 200 to 300 French francs more. The amount will be huge if multiplied by 1000 ships (Cucherousset 1929a). Not to mention, the construction of the lighthouse will also further assert French sovereignty in the name of the protectorate of Annam: "The Governor-General of French Indochina has informed me that he also agrees with Mr. Pichou that we need to assert our sovereignty over these islands [the Paracels] on this occasion. And the best way to assert sovereignty is to build a lighthouse there" (Indochina 1899, 2). However, "the project implementation is halted due to the very expensive cost of building and maintaining the lighthouse. Our colonial budget needs to be used for more pressing needs" (Saix 1933).

Under French management, fishing activities in the Paracel Islands were quite active and usually occurred at the end of the Northeast monsoon period (Cu 2012, 85-87). Fishermen often caught sea turtles and cucumbers around the islands (Madrolle 1939). In addition to Vietnamese fishermen who caught fish and sea turtles and gathered seaweeds, some Chinese fishermen used nets to catch turtles and sea cucumbers, and Japanese fishermen mined and gathered seaweeds (Cucherousset 1929a). The French colonial government determined that the fishing of Chinese or Japanese fishermen in the Paracels did not lead to the establishment of their countries' sovereignty over these islands because "French fishermen also do the same on Terre Neuve, but the island is still of British possession" (Madrolle 1939). In order to support fishermen's work, the French colonial government intended to establish in the Paracels a seafood production and logistics facility for fishing, as well as took into account the use of modern fishing tools (such as bottom trawl) (Cucherousset 1928). However, a survey in the Paracels showed that, although many species of fish can be found there, the seabed in this area is rough, and there are many corals reefs, thus making it difficult to use industrial fishing nets (Sauvaire 1933, 385-387).

In 1898, the French colonial government intended to grant licenses for private companies to exploit the islands (Nguyen 2012, 185) and to build a supply depot in the Paracels for ships and boats, for which fees would be charged annually. In December 1898, the Minister of the Colonies of France sent a telegram to the Governor-General of French Indochina: "The Minister of Foreign Affairs informed me that Mr. Chabrier, a Paris-based journalist, has proposed the collection of the annual fee to allow for the construction of some supply depots for fishermen in the Paracel Islands" (Indochina 1898b, 3). However, for various reasons, this work was not carried out. The telegram dated 26 July 1899 from the Minister of the Colonies to the Minister of Foreign Affairs read:

> Through the telegram dated 5 October 1898 that you sent to inquire my opinion about collecting annual fees for granting licenses to establish supply depots for fishermen in the Paracel Islands, as proposed by the

> Paris-based journalist Chabrier. I am honored to inform you that, according to some of the information Mr. Doumer sent me (...) the fishermen who often cross the waters have no need for this, and the project also touches on a sensitive funding source. On the other hand, the lives of other fishermen would also be in danger if the government can only allow one of some countries to set up supply depots in the islands" (Indochina 1898b, 2-4).

Signs of the dispute between France and China over the Paracel Islands can be seen as starting from the event in May 1909, when Li Jun (李準) - Admiral of the Qing Navy, took a brief visit to some islands there (Hurng 2014, 174) and had some symbolic actions (planting the flag on Phu Lam Island, firing cannons) before returning to Guangzhou on the next day (Nguyen 2012, 186). Although the French consul in Guangzhou had sent a letter back to France reporting a violation of sovereignty, the French authority did not prevent the abovementioned survey because they thought that those actions of the southern Chinese administration were only "a naval rite in the expedition" (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1936). Furthermore, during that period, France was not interested in claiming ownership of the Annam islands, the state it protected under the Patenôtre Treaty. Additionally, France lacked awareness of all the issues concerning Vietnam at the time (including the country's sovereignty over the Paracels) (Monique 1996, 33); at the same time, the French colonial government was afraid that its prevention might give rise to a chauvinist movement among Chinese people that might be harmful to French interests in China (Dung and Chau 2015, 243), etc. For these reasons, France was not actively deterring the actions of the Southern Chinese administration. However, French Navy cruisers continued being sent to South China Sea islands for patrol. French researchers and social activists harshly criticized the attitude of the French colonial government in Hanoi for being slow to respond to the actions of China (Ho 2014).

Taking advantage of this indecisive attitude, on 30 January 1921, the local government of Guangdong Province signed Document No. 831, announcing the annexation of Paracel Islands (which they called Xisha) into Zhuyan District, Hainan Island, Guangdong Province. In response to China's action, on 6 May 1921, the French consul in Yunnan, China, sent a notice to the Governor-General of French Indochina about the benefits brought by the geographical location of the Paracels and the scrutiny of surrounding countries for islands in the South China Sea (Ha 2020, 103). This notice and contemporary public opinion (especially the French press in Indochina) prompted the French colonial government to further strengthen its control over the South China Sea after the First World War (Luu 2022, 46). On 8 March 1921, the Governor-General of French Indochina declared the Paracels and the Spratlys to be French territories. It argued that the annexation of the Paracels by the government of Southern China was completely unfounded (Governor 1930a, 12) and that this administration was not an entity representing China (Da Nang 2012, 626). In March 1925, the Governor-General of French Indochina reaffirmed the Paracels and Spratly as French territories (Truong 2014, 134). As part of the mechanism for protecting the general sovereignty over territorial waters of French colonies, on 9 December 1926, Alexandre Varenne - Governor-General of French Indochina, approved a Decree regulating the application of French Law dated 1 March 1898 to the colonies (including

Nam Ky, Bac Ky, and Trung Ky). Accordingly, this law prohibits fishermen from foreign countries from fishing in colonial territorial waters, defined as those three nautical miles from the baseline following the lowest tidal line (Phan 2009, 25). In addition, the French colonial government also assumed responsibility for its sovereignty in the Paracels and stepped up its patrol, control, and scientific research activities (Ha 2020, 105).

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, in order to strengthen control, ensure security, combat piracy, ensure maritime transport (Cucherousset 1931), as well as exploit economic benefits from seas and islands, the French navy regularly patrolled the seas to maintain security and assist sunken ships; at the same time, delegations were continuously sent to survey resources and affirm the protection policy of the French government over the Paracel Islands:

> Ships of French Indochina's Directorate of Customs and Excise occasionally visit here and there among islands of the archipelago and sometimes interfere with Annamese and Chinese fishermen who practice there, first and foremost to stop the practice of selling their catches along with women and children, or to prevent the smuggling of arms or opium (Sauvaire 1933, 385-387).

Starting from 1925, the French colonial government initiated marine surveys in the vicinity of the archipelago (Nguyen 2012, 185). In that same year, the Fisheries and Oceanographic Service of Indochina, led by Dr. Krempt, along with prominent French scientists including Delacour, Jabouille, and others, embarked on a survey mission aboard the trawler De Lanessan to investigate the geology of the ocean banks, marine life, and the impact of monsoon influences in the Paracel Islands. The survey report stated that:

> The archipelago is made up of 36 rock islands and numerous underwater ones. This poses as a danger for traffic on the water here. These islands are scattered in a wide area, between 15-17^0 N and 111-113^0 E, 150 miles east of Da Nang (Trung Ky Sea). During monsoons and high tides, it is difficult for ships to get close to these islands, etc. The ocean floor in the Paracels is at least 1,000 m deep, with a steep cliff of 40 to 100m from the sea surface (Indochina 1930).

Then, Dr. Krempt proposed establishing an observatory, a shortwave radio station, a lighthouse, and a haven for fishermen to shelter from storms and protect the boats of Annamese fishermen (Cucherousset 1925, 1-3).

In 1931, the dispute between China and France over the Paracels again emerged, as China was required to concede the right to exploit the excrement of seabirds on these islands to the Anglo-Chinese Development Company (Nguyen 1998, 43). Facing such absurd requirements, France presented historical and legal grounds for Vietnam's long-standing sovereignty over the Paracels, where France was the legal protector. At the same time, the French protested by sending a message to the Chinese legation in Paris about the intention of the Guangdong government to organize a bid to exploit bird excrement on the Paracels (Luu 2022, 51). Next, on 29 April 1932, the French colonial government continued to inform China of its sovereignty over

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the Paracels; its appeal clearly stated the historical titles and proof of occupation of the state of Annam and later France (Luu 2022, 52). Unable to refute the clear historical and legal evidence, the Chinese authority said that during the reign of King Gia Long, Annam was a vassal of China; therefore, the Paracels and the Spratlys also belonged to the Chinese feudal dynasty (Valero 1914). The vassalage of Vietnam to China was only ever nominal; Vietnam was always an independent sovereign State (Ferrier 1975, 180-181). In 1937, France offered to resolve the matter either amicably or through mediation. However, China did not respond to this proposal (Hurng 2014, 174). Commenting on these events, the 15 March 1934 issue of the La Croix said: "When China claimed (sovereignty) in 1909, France had been representing Annam with a view in its foreign relations and under the protection treaty, so France asserted the right of the protected state on the islands in question" (Dans 1934, 3).

In 1930-1938 the French Navy increased patrols, set up administrative units, and stationed troops on some important islands in the Paracels. In 1930, France conducted patrols and surveys in the Paracels by the warship La Malicieuse; in 1931, the ships Inconstant and De Lanessanwere sent by Indochina Institute of Oceanography to patrol, survey and claim sovereignty over the Paracels in the name of the state of Annam; in 1932, the gunboat Alerte was sent to the Paracels (Ministry 2013, 22); on the 7th and 10th of April 1933, dispatch boats Astrolabe and Alertewere sent to the Paracels to set up landmarks of sovereignty; at the same time definitively declared French sovereignty over the Paracels in July 1933(Jing and Andrew 2015). The French "patrol ships often sail around Phu Lam Island (Ile Boisee), Tay Island (Ile Onest) and Tree Island before stopping at Paracel Grand Island" (Jing and Andrew 2015, 1-2). At the same time, in 1938, the French colonial government re-erected the stele of Vietnam's sovereignty in the Paracels dating back to 1816 in the Nguyen dynasty and added the words: "République Francaise - Royaume d'Annam - Archipels des Paracels 1816 - Ile de Pattle 1938" (French Republic - Kingdom of Annam - Paracel Islands 1816 - Hoang Sa Island 1938)" (Nguyen 1998, 43-44), and sent a unit of guards to station on these islands. French and Vietnamese troops stationed in the Paracels were equipped with motorboats to patrol islands and drive away ships from other countries (Governor 1960, 4). Landing a Tonkin platoon on these islands proved that the French were particularly interested in the Paracels.

Regarding this event, the *Affaires Étrangères* on 4 July 1938 reported: "In order to ensure maritime safety on the waters around Paracel Islands, the French Indochinese government has deployed Annamese security guards there" (La Vie 1938, 482). After returning to the mainland, Vietnamese soldiers who protected the Paracels were praised by the government and paid considerable respect: "A ceremony was held in Hue to honor the individuals who distinguished themselves in this work. This solemn ceremony ended with great appreciation to the guards and their equipment" (Echos 1939, 2).

In the early twentieth century, a series of shipwrecks occurred in the rocky snouts around the Paracel Islands, greatly affecting the movement of ships as well as business activities, market search, and colonial expansion to the East by Western colonial capitalist countries (France, UK, Netherlands, etc.). In 1929, after a survey trip to the Paracels, a delegation led by Perrier De Rouville proposed constructing four lighthouses on the islands of Tri Ton, Ran Bac, Linh Con, and Bong Bay (Foreign 1982, 4). In 1937, Chief Public Engineer J. Gauthier, on behalf of the French colonial government, sent a survey team to Paracel Islands to assess the conditions for

constructing a seaplane parking lot, as well as study the conditions for settlement here and find a location to build a lighthouse (Do 2019, 41). Also, in 1937, the two ships, Paul Bert and Astrolabe, transported people and materials for the lighthouse construction, which was completed in 1938 (Luu 2022, 56). The lighthouse was a concrete tower located on a strip of coral sand with coordinates of $16^{0}32'2$ N, $111^{0}35'8$ E, southwest of Pattle Island (Hoang Sa Island), which belongs to the Crescent Group in the Paracel Islands. The beacon was made by the Paris-based Barbier Company, Bénard et Turenne (Phuong 2014). It could burn continuously for six months by catalytic gas and could be seen from 12 nautical miles in normal weather conditions (Bui 2012, 78-79). French colonial government stationed a garrison here to guard the lighthouse day and night (Luu 2020, 11).

Along with the construction of lighthouses, the French colonial government also proceeded to build a radio and weather station in the Paracels to "issue weather warnings" (Sauvaire 1933, 385-387), as well as create a haven for fishermen to avoid storms and protect Annamese fishermen (Cucherousset 1925, 1-3). As early as November 1908, the Director of the Central Observatory under Indochina Meteorological Service proposed to build a weather and radio station in the Paracels:

> With this project, it is necessary to have a large amount of capital to ensure waterway traffic security in the South China Sea, especially in the Indochina coastal area, etc. According to the map of the Far East, we can see the benefits of this project. The remaining issue is whether we should let another country bear the full cost of building a meteorological station on Tri Ton Island or whether we will be responsible for this work. Either way, this project will profit us hugely (Ministry 2013, 18).

On 29 April 1911, the Director of the Central Observatory under the Indochina Meteorological Service continued to propose the construction of a weather and radio station in the Paracels:

> Let me not mention the considerable benefits of building such stations in the colony, as those are evident in terms of forecasting cyclones here. I have reason to believe that, for the reputation of French science, the Department of Education can hardly refuse to support a project that brings about many scientific and practical benefits (Indochina 1908, 19).

In 1937, the construction of the Paracel meteorological observatory, which later became known as "*Station d'Observation 836*", was carried out. Since then, the weather forecast has been conducted relatively accurately (Nguyen 1974, 195). In 1949, the World Meteorological Organization (OMM) officially recognized Paracel meteorological stations and registered them in the list of international meteorological stations as follows: "Phu Lam Station - No. 48859, Hoang Sa Station - No. 48860, Ba Binh Station (Spratly Islands) - No. 48419" (Tran 1974, 109). Also, during this time, France set up a radio station (TSF) in the Paracels to communicate with the mainland (Bui 2014, 78). *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires* on 4 July 1938 reported these events as follows:

> To ensure the safety of maritime navigation in this area, the Indochina government has installed permanent lighting. Small detachments of Annamese security guards were sent there to protect these structures, and a weather station was built on these islands to detect storms (p. 6).

On 15 June 1932, the Governor-General of French Indochina signed Decree No. 156-SC, establishing an administrative unit called Delegation of the Paracels (Délégation des Paracels) and annexed these islands to Thua Thien Province. This administrative unit was located far from the provincial capital and was headed by a French minister or officer. Its headquarters was based on Paracel Island (Nguyen 2017, 282) and managed by the military force on behalf of the Minister (Governor 1930a, 61). On 5 May 1939, Governor-General of French Indochina Jules Brévie continued to sign Decree 3282 to split the Paracel delegation into two units (Monique 1996, 97). At that time, the Paracels consisted of two administrative units called *Délégation administrative des Paracels* (Administrative Delegation of the Paracels) under Thua Thien Province, each headed by a Delegation of the Paracels (*Délégation des Paracels*): Nguyet Thiem (Crossant) and its neighbors; and An Vinh (Amphytrite) and other areas in the vicinity. Administrative envoys who headed these two agencies as representatives of the French legation to Thua Thien permanently resided on Hoang Sa Island and Phu Lam Island (Truong 2014, 133) and were entitled to allowances from the local budget of Trung Ky according to provisions (Bulletin 1930). Thus, under the administration of the French colonial government, the administrative bodies directly in charge of Paracel Islands were administrative delegations established under Decree 156-SC (1932) and Decree 3282 (1939) of the Governor-General of French Indochina. In terms of civilian forces, there were scientific research agencies, such as the Indochina Institute of Oceanography; customs force; military forces, including garrison troops, battleships, and cruisers (mainly of the French army) (Ha 2020, 119-120).

China opposed the actions of France in the Paracel Islands by relying on the terms of the Franco-Chinese Treaty that the two countries concluded on 26 June 1887. This treaty was signed by France (representing Vietnam) and China for border delimitation in the Gulf of Tonkin. It stipulated that the islands east of $105^{0}43'$ belong to China (Zou 1999) (including the Paracel Islands). Thus, China argued that by the treaty, it gained sovereignty over the Paracels from the French (Hungdah and Choon 1975, 11) because, at that time, France had sovereignty over Vietnam, including the Paracel Islands. However, the purpose of the Sino-French treaty was to determine the border between Tonkin (Vietnam) and China, as stated in its title mentioned (Treaty on the Delimitation between China and Tonkin) (Governor 1930a).

Moreover, the Paracel Islands are located in Trung Ky and were never mentioned in the negotiations to sign the treaty (Christopher and Dalbir 2021, 668). On 10 July 1938, Chinese Ambassador to France, M. Wellington Koo, met with French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bonnet, to express China's position on sovereignty over the Paracel Islands: "Currently, the presence of France in the Paracels is much better than the Japanese occupation; however, China also always reserves its opposition to the French occupation of the Paracel Islands" (Les iles 1938). In response to China's position, Minister Bonnet affirmed Vietnam's sovereignty (which the French now represent) over the Paracel Islands by citing historical data and affirmed that the presence of the French in the Paracels is inevitable to protect French interests (Nguyen 2016,

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51). France's actions demonstrate its determination to fight China to assert, enforce and defend its sovereignty over the Paracel Islands.

Struggle with Japan

After the Patenôtre Treaty in 1884, France imposed its domination on Vietnam and later Indochina with policies to expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. As a major power with vital interests in the region, especially at sea, France (a naval power at that time) greatly threatened Japan's strategic interests. Therefore, Japan first sought to expand its influence in the South China Sea to compete with France and sabotage China (Nguyen 2016, 51). In the early decades of the 20th century, Japan paid great attention to its interests in the South China Sea (including the Paracels and the Spratlys) to realize the goal of becoming a highly influential empire in Asia. In 1907, two Japanese citizens named Komatsu Shigetoshi and Ikeda Kinzo announced the discovery of the Paracels (Hoang Sa) and the Spratlys (Truong Sa), then proposed to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs the annexation of these two archipelagoes to the Empire of Japan (Granados 2008, 123-124). Since then, many Japanese fishing boats moved south and operated in the seas of the Paracels and the Spratlys (Kazumasa 1986). Japan's first violation of sovereignty was committed in the Spratly Islands in 1917 by the arrival of mineral exploration vessels in the Ba Binh and Song Tu islands. In 1917-1919, the Japanese held three surveys in this group of islands (Granados 2008, 445) and later built houses, harbors, and light rails to transport and exploit bird excrement there. These actions were carried out in the Spratlys until 1920 when the number of Japanese workers reached more than 300 (Nguyen 2018, 65).

After initially building a mining facility in the Spratly Islands, Japan sought to expand its influence and see stakeholders' attitudes by proposing to France a license to exploit resources in the Paracel Islands. On 20 September 1920, the Japanese company Mitsui Bussan Kaisha contacted the Commander of the French Navy in Saigon (Raul 2014, 26) and received a very general answer without a clear affirmation of French ownership of the archipelago at that time. This enabled Japan to realize its ambitions (French 1921). Japan conducted a project to exploit bird excrement in the Paracels without the permission of France or China (Tønnesson 2006, 4).

The Japanese established on Huu Nhat Island (named Robert in French) a small railway and a 300-meter-long wharf to exploit (Saix 1933, 237) resources on Phu Lam Island and Huu Nhat Island in the Paracels. Most of the mining workers came from Okinawa Prefecture (Japan) (Kazumasa 1986), while some were from China, and they were monitored by a Filipino manager (Cucherousset 1929b). The survey report on the Paracel Islands by a delegation from the Indochina Institute of Oceanography in 1926 said:

> In June 1926, as we arrived, they had already left as the resources were exhausted, and switched to mining on Huu Nhat Island (...) and apparently, the Japanese exploited phosphate mines with reserves of millions of tons. This company mainly exploits phosphate in bird excrement on sand and limestone found in the corals on the island's surface. This is exactly what the Japanese exploited first (Indochina 1930b).

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According to one document, in 1925, the Government of Taiwan, under Japanese rule, collected 7,200 tons of phosphate and 36,000 tons in 1926-1927. In 9 years (1919-1927), the estimated amount collected was 80,000-90,000 tons (Nguyen 2018, 67).

The exploitation of phosphate by the Japanese in the Paracels, as allowed by the Commander of the French Navy in Saigon, was strongly condemned by the French Indochina press, as the Japanese paid no tax to Annam but still gets the right to exploit phosphate in the territory of Annam. Theoretically, only the French and Spanish have the same right as the Annamites (People's 2014, 12). Later, Japanese phosphate mining in the Paracels worried French officials that Japan might violate sovereignty over this archipelago. Therefore, the French government further tightened its control over the South China Sea. In addition to increasing patrols, control, and implementation of scientific research, etc., in 1921 and 1925, the Governor-General of French Indochina successively claimed French sovereignty over the Paracel Islands(Luu 2022,58). The successive claims of sovereignty and tightening of French maritime patrols sparked rumors that France wanted to take phosphate mining rights from Japan in the Paracels and the Spratlys. *L'Europe nouvelle* on 2 January 1921 commented:

> About three hundred kilometers off the coast of Annam, there is a group of wild rocks, which is the Paracel Islands. Recently, the Japanese consul wrote to the authorities in Indochina to ask if France claims sovereignty over the archipelago. The answer was given inconclusively. Not officially, but the person who drafted the plan thought that a submarine base in the Paracel Islands would be enough to block all the coasts of Indochina.

In 1927, Kurosawa, the Japanese consul in Hanoi, stated that, at the behest of the Japanese government, the Paracels were not discussed because Japan did not dispute the sovereignty over it with France as it was arbitrarily placed under the rule of the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan (Ministry 1975, 101). Countering Japan's arguments, on 25 July 1933, France continued to announce its unchanged position on sovereignty in the Paracels and the Spratlys. Shortly after that, on 21 August 1933, the Japanese Ambassador to France, Sawada, protested: "The sovereignty here belongs to Japan, and Japan has the right to exploit bird excrement here" (Kazumasa 1986).

After a period of tension, in August 1934, in a treaty signed in Paris with France, Japan firmly stated that it had no interest in the Paracel Islands (Monique 1996, 112). However, Japan's increased actions in the South China Sea worried France, so the French continued to conduct a series of activities to protect sovereignty over Paracel Islands. In February 1937, France sent a flotilla of cruisers named Lamotte-Picquet to investigate the situation in the archipelago. In October 1937, France sent a delegation to build a lighthouse on Paracel Island to assert sovereignty. Then, on 25 April 1938, the cruiser Duguay Trouin erected a flagpole and a stele stating sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and sent a unit of security guards to be stationed there (Service 1945). Also in 1938, Governor-General of French Indochina Jules Brévié signed a Decree to an administrative unit in the Paracel Islands under Thua Thien Province. In July 1938, the Governor-General of French Indochina directed the French army to seize the remaining island groups in the Paracels and issued numerous sovereignty claims.

On 3 July 1938, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced France's possession of the Paracel Islands: "Due to the remarkable occupation of the Paracel Islands, in July 1938, our [French] Ambassador in Tokyo recalled the previous annexation of the Spratly Islands to France" (Claudius 1938).

The Japanese government opposed France's sending troops to occupy the Paracel Islands. On 8 July 1938, a Japanese representative sent a diplomatic note of protest against France, arguing that: (1) in 1920, Japan wanted to conduct mining in the Paracels, so a letter was sent to the Indochina government to inquire about sovereignty over the islands. General Loumy replied that the Paracels did not belong to the sovereignty of France; (2) in 1921, Guangdong provincial government issued a Decree annexing the Paracel Islands to the administration of the Hainan Island government (Le Japon proteste 1938). Japan cited the second reason because, at that time, Japan was strongly promoting invading China and capturing Chinese islands such as Taiwan or Hainan was its number one priority (Nguyen 2016, 49). The French government argued that all of Japan's appeals were unsubstantiated and a fallacy aimed at various purposes, on the one hand, to intimidate Guangdong provincial government, and on the other hand, to threaten the European-American powers who were still maintaining normal relations with China, first of all, France, because "the general strategy of the fascist bloc is to attack France comprehensively" (Le Japon proteste 1938). Commenting on this issue, author Bernard S. (1938) said:

> Of all Western powers, France remains to be the most dynamic in the Far East. It shall be remembered that France did not tolerate the infiltration of Japanese troops into its Shanghai concession. At the end of June 1938, France gave another decisive testimony by occupying the Paracel Islands, which could become a naval base to threaten Indochina (p. 361).

In response to the arguments of the French press, on 12 July 1938, the Japanese newspaper L'Agence Domei issued a denunciation that France had brought six warships to the Paracels, as well as transported many weapons, equipment, and food for war to the archipelago(Les Iles Paracelles 1938). However, France completely denied this information and insisted on sending neither warships nor means of warfare to the Paracels.

After launching the invasion of China (1937), one year later (1938), Japan sent troops close to the Vietnam-China border. In preparation for the war in the Pacific, the South China Sea (including the Paracels and the Spratlys) played a critical role. Therefore, since the war broke out in the Asia-Pacific, Japan had clearly expressed its intention to seize the Paracels: "We, especially the naval forces, cannot leave the Paracels to be occupied as a military base because that would allow the naval forces of the powers to deploy new operations in the South China Sea region. We must tie this to the issue of national security and defense" (Indochina 1939). After seizing Hainan Island, despite French opposition, in March 1939, Japan invaded the Paracel Islands and announced the merger of both Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands into Japanese territory under the administration of the Japanese authority in Taiwan (Hurng 2014, 174) to serve the anti-American war in the Pacific. On 31 March 1939, in Tokyo, Japanese Foreign Minister M. Sawada met with the French ambassador to Japan, M. Henry Arsènre, to announce the decision of the Japanese government (Le Japon aux 1939). Immediately, the French ambassador to Japan

handed over a diplomatic note of opposition to the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs (La France 1939) and launched a press campaign to protest against Japan's actions. On 5 May 1939, Governor-General of French Indochina Jules Brévié signed a Decree to amend the Decree dated 15 June 1938 and established in the Paracel Islands two administrative bodies.

In June 1940, France was occupied by the Nazis. Taking advantage of that opportunity, the Japanese fascist administration increased its pressure on the French colonial administration in Indochina and gradually aimed to replace France. After entering Indochina, Japan constantly forced France to make concessions by signing treaties in favor of Japan on all aspects of economy, military, culture, and ideology and gradually dominated Indochina. In order to legitimize its occupation, on 30 August 1940, Japan pressed France to sign a treaty for Japan to extend military authority across Indochina against the Allies. However, the French still maintained its ruling apparatus of the protector state, and Japan recognized French sovereignty (Ho 1975, 100). During the expansion of the occupation zone in the Asia-Pacific, Japan organized the construction of military structures, infrastructure, and submarine bases on several islands in the Paracels and the Spratlys (Michael and Jonathan 1997, 162).

From mid-1943, the war situation changed unfavorably for Japan, as Japanese troops were repulsed on a series of battlefields and suffered heavy losses in the Philippines, Burma, etc. In order to monopolize Indochina, on 9 March 1945, Japan carried out a coup d'état to oust France. All French troops in the Paracels and the Spratlys were taken prisoner, and the Japanese directly administered the two archipelagos. As World War II came to an end, Japanese troops gradually withdrew from the Paracels and the Spratlys. In May 1945, a detachment of French soldiers landed on the two archipelagoes and remained there for several months. From 20th to 27 May 1945, Admiral D'Argenlieu, High Commissioner of Indochina, also dispatched the speedboat L'Escamouche to take control of the situation in the Paracels (Nguyen 2010, 228). Then, with successive defeats on the Pacific battlefield, on 15 August 1945, Japan announced its surrender to the Allies. This event caused the Japanese troops throughout Indochina to lose their will to fight. On 2 September 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established; in principle, the entire land territory and territorial waters of Vietnam must be returned to the administration of the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. After September 1945, Japanese troops completely withdrew from the Paracels.

CONCLUSION

Based on the exploitation of abundant sources (in French, English, Vietnamese), this article aims to clarify the activities of France in the struggle with China and Japan to enforce, assert and protect sovereignty in the Paracel Islands.

First, Vietnam and the world knew about the Paracels and the Spratlys very early (at least from the 14th-15th centuries). Before the French arrived, the feudal state of Vietnam was the only country to establish sovereignty over these islands in two centuries, according to the legislation of that period, without encountering any disputes from any country, and the whole world was aware of it. As the owner of these islands, the feudal state of Vietnam had carried out many activities such as organizing surveys and exploitations, erecting stelae, building temples,

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protecting fishermen, setting regulations on rewards and penalties, fulfilling obligations to ensure international maritime safety and rescue of victims in the Paracels.

Second, Vietnam lost to the French invasion and was forced to sign the Patenôtre Treaty (1884) to accept French protection. Clause 2, Article 1 of the Treaty states: "Annam recognizes and accepts French protection. Meanwhile, France shall act on behalf of Annam in all foreign relations" (Duong 1981, 234). According to the Decree dated 17 October 1887 of the President of France, Vietnam was separated into three regions under the Indochina Federation. In terms of international custom and law, all activities of Vietnam (including the exercise of sovereignty over seas and islands) after the signing of the Patenôtre Treaty to 1945 (when Japan replaced France) were carried out by the French colonial government in Indochina and the French government.

Third, during the colonial administration in Vietnam, France never claimed to deny the sovereignty of Annam, which it was responsible for protecting. Although in the early stages, due to the lack of thorough understanding of all the problems in Annam and the interests of France, the colonial authority had to weigh the options, leading to the lack of determination in the struggle to protect sovereignty in the Paracels. However, when China and Japan voiced their claims to the Paracels, the French fiercely opposed and intensified their political, economic, scientific, military, and diplomatic activities. They regularly strengthened their management role in the islands. French activities in the Paracels are continuous, transversal, and systematic. In fact, until before the Japanese army seized the Paracels, the French had built lighthouses, set up weather and radio stations, erected sovereign stelae, organized marine surveys, conducted patrols, monitored and organized garrison troops, established administrative units, and annexed the Paracels to Thua Thien Province.

Fourth, it can be seen that in this period, the Paracels had gone beyond the framework of traditional territorial disputes and become an issue of "internationalization". As with many other related issues, the territorial dispute over the Paracels during this period acted as an excuse through which the parties took advantage of the opportunity, scrutinized others, and even used it to "bargain" or "deal" for their benefit.

In general, based on the above sources and analysis, it is shown that France, even before and after the Second World War, even when it was strong or weakened, attached great importance to the issue of Indochina in general and the issue of sovereignty over the Paracel Islands in particular. After all, those actions aimed to maximize the protection of French rights and interests. However, objectively speaking, those actions also contributed to the maintenance, development, and stricter organization of Vietnam's exercise of sovereignty over seas and islands from 1884 to 1945.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
This research is funded by Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) under grant number B2022-18b-03.

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