



# Before the Nine-Dash Line: France's Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea (1930-1956)

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## **Before the Nine-Dash Line: France's Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea (1930-1956)**

*By Paco Milhiet and Didier Ortolland*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As the colonial power in Indochina (1862-1954), France formally asserted sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands during the 1930s. However, the geopolitical upheavals of the Second World War and the process of decolonisation progressively undermined French ambitions, ultimately leading to its withdrawal from the region. This brief, ambiguous, and contested presence foreshadowed contemporary disputes in the South China Sea.*

### **COMMENTARY**



Map of the South China Sea

Source: US Department of State, Limits in the Seas, No. 150, People's Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>.

Covering nearly 3.5 million square kilometres, the South China Sea is dotted with a multitude of maritime features – islands, islets, rocks, low-tide elevations, reefs, and cays – that have long attracted competing claims from regional powers. From the early twentieth century onward, Japan, amid imperial expansion, showed growing interest in these strategically located, guano-rich islands. The declining Qing dynasty of China likewise sought to assert its presence in the area to counter Japanese imperialist ambitions. Another actor, already established in the region, would soon turn its attention to these contested waters: France.

### French Indochina and the South China Sea

Driven by a [triple ambition](#) – religious, commercial, and strategic – France began its conquest of Indochina in 1858 with the siege of Tourane (Da Nang). This led to the gradual colonisation of the entire Indochinese peninsula: Cochinchina became a colony in 1862, the Kingdom of Cambodia a protectorate in 1863, followed by Annam and Tonkin in 1884, the Chinese enclave of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan in 1898, and, finally, Laos in 1899. As for the islands in the South China Sea, they initially attracted little interest from French administrators because of the risks they posed.



A few hundred kilometres further south, in the Spratly Islands, similar dynamics were at play, albeit with some differences in detail.

### **The Spratlys: A Possession in the Name of France Alone**

The Spratly Islands consist of about twenty emergent structures and around a hundred reefs. Located off the main Singapore-Hong Kong route, they attracted even less interest from the French authorities than the Paracels.

Similarly, Paris reconsidered the area in response to the growing Japanese [presence](#). Like other archipelagos in the South China Sea, Japanese entrepreneurs exploited guano, notably on Itu Aba, from the beginning of the 20th century. The French authorities were also concerned that Tokyo would establish a seaplane base. In 1930, a French gunboat officially took possession of Spratly Island, one of the islands in the cluster. The operation was [repeated](#) in 1933 on five other islands, triggering a protest from Tokyo.

Unlike the Paracels, this claim was made in the name of France alone, and the Spratlys were administratively attached to Baria in Cochinchina – a colony whose legal status differed from that of Annam (a protectorate). As the archipelago increasingly became a source of tension between Paris and Tokyo, the French government [proposed](#) referring the dispute to international arbitration, but Japan had other plans.

### **Japanese Occupation and French Eviction**

In 1939, Japanese forces invaded Hainan, the Paracels, and the Spratlys. As France capitulated in Europe, the situation in Indochina became [confused](#), with the Japanese entering the territory in 1940. Admiral Decoux, the Governor-General of Indochina, loyal to the Vichy government, collaborated with Japanese forces while maintaining minimal autonomy. A surprising manifestation of this ambiguous situation occurred in the Paracels, where Japanese workers and Franco-Annamite soldiers [cohabited](#) on Woody Island throughout the war.

At the end of hostilities, with Japan defeated and neutralised, the Sino-French dispute over the Paracels briefly resumed. In 1947, just days apart, Chinese and French forces occupied Woody and Pattle Islands. Ultimately, under the Franco-Vietnamese [agreement](#) of 8 March 1949, Paris officially transferred control of Pattle Island to Saigon.

The situation in the Spratlys diverged. While the Geneva Accords in [1954](#) acknowledged Vietnam's independence and sovereignty, some in Paris [considered](#) that these islands had never been part of the Annamese empire and could therefore be legally distinguished from Vietnam. France could thus maintain a degree of regional influence by keeping troops and a base in Cam Ranh. This position, however, did not last. President Ngô Đình Diệm demanded the withdrawal of [the remaining 30,000](#) French soldiers. The final visits by French vessels to the Paracels and Spratlys took place in 1956.

## What Remains of the French Presence?

Traces of the French presence are still visible in toponyms, particularly in the Paracels islands, such as the Amphitrite Group – named after a [French ship](#) that navigated in the area in 1698. “Ile Boisée” (Woody Island) is another example of a French toponym still in use in some documents today.

Regarding current territorial claims, Vietnamese authorities [rely](#) extensively on French documentation, as well as on historical acts of possession and administrative and military occupation, to support their claims. On the Chinese side, these historical occupations are [described](#) as invasions or acts of aggression, although French archives are sometimes cited when they serve Beijing’s narrative.

During the various stages leading to Vietnam's independence in 1954, France initially recognised Saigon's sovereignty over the Paracels, and its navy visited the archipelago on behalf of the South Vietnamese government until 1956. After that date, Paris consistently and cautiously refrained from taking a firm position on sovereignty issues over the maritime features in the South China Sea, including the Paracels and Spratly islands.

Although no longer a sovereign actor in Southeast Asia, France continues to be a [resident](#) power in the Indo-Pacific. The French Navy, thus, [navigates](#) the South China Sea two to three times annually. Its posture is notably [less confrontational](#) than that of some other Western powers: It does not undertake FONOPs specifically to challenge contested maritime claims.

However, Paris frequently reminds, along with other [European countries](#), of the need to uphold freedom and rights of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Ultimately, the scattered islets of the Paracels and Spratly Islands, where France once claimed sovereignty, symbolise – on a miniature scale – the imperial ambitions, illusions of power, and inevitable retreat of the French colonial enterprise in Asia.

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