



AS IT IS

US, Vietnam, Taiwan Oppose China's Buildup in Disputed Area

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Recent satellite images suggest China is building a military site on disputed land in the South China Sea. The pictures show an airfield structure on Triton Island, a part of the Paracels island group. China, Taiwan and Vietnam all claim ownership of Triton.

The airfield structure appears to be a long runway toward the east. The company Planet Labs PBC recorded the images in August. The structure is not in pictures gathered in March of this year.

The *Associated Press* news agency studied the satellite photos and reported last week about the runway. The *AP* said the images showed two large fields marked with Chinese national and political **symbols**. The island is about 4,000 feet long by 2,000 feet wide, and was unpopulated until recently.

Bill Conroy is with URSA Space, which provides intelligence analysis. He has a different theory about the structure in the pictures. He says it might be a levee, a structure to protect low land from tide waters.

"We're estimating that there's about 70,000 square meters of land that would be reclaimed from the sea" by the levee, he said.

Experts at the U.S.-based non-profit Center for Strategic and International Studies said they believe the structure could be a runway. But, they suggested it could also be a raised roadway.

Levee, roadway or runway?

Ray Powell is director of Stanford University's SeaLight program. It studies Chinese naval **strategy**. He said the new structure on Triton Island could be both a levee and roadway once completed.

Hoang Viet is an expert on South China Sea disputes at the National University of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. He said that if it is an airstrip, Chinese military planes could use the island as a refueling station for actions in the area.

The island is of equal distance from Vietnam and China. China has built on other disputed territory in the South China Sea. The structures include seawalls, airfields and buildings across several islands. China has said such building projects are for scientific research.

Relations with neighbors

China has claimed ownership of 90 percent of the South China Sea. It is one of the busiest waters in the world, with one-third of all shipping traffic. Almost all the countries that border the waters claim territory in the sea, including, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said, "All activities in the Paracel Islands **conducted** without Vietnamese permission are violations of Vietnam's **sovereignty**."

China has finished building military centers on three islands in the Spratly group to support its territorial claims. China says its actions in the South China Sea are aimed at "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan, which it considers a rebel province.

A Taiwanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said Monday that Taiwan's "rights over land and related waters in the area cannot be questioned."

I'm Dan Novak.

Jiha Ham and Christy Lee wrote this story for Voice of America. Dan Novak adapted it story for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

symbol — *n.* an action, object, event, etc., that expresses or represents a particular idea or quality

strategy — *n.* a careful plan or method for achieving a particular goal usually over a long period of time

conduct — *v.* to plan and do

sovereignty — *n.* a country's independent authority and the right to govern itself
