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Vietnam Protests Against Special Economic Zones (SEZ)

Vietnam's Protests Will Complicate The Clinching Of Any Pragmatic Deal With China

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Scores of people gathered in several cities all across Vietnam in order to draw attention to what they fear is China's imminent exploitation of a proposed bill on Special Economic Zones (SEZ) that will give investors 99-year leases on land in three coastal regions. Their concerns are just speculation at this point since there's no evidence that this would be the case, but anti-Chinese sentiment is a strong galvanizing force in Vietnamese society given that its people are still very sensitive about their country's nearly 1,000 year-long occupation by their northern neighbor over a millennium ago, which persists in their psyche to this day and is periodically brought up whenever discussing Vietnam's dispute with China over the South China Sea.

The protesters fear that their government will use the new legislation to cut a quid pro quo deal with China by granting it nearly century-long leases in parts of these three strategic economic regions in exchange for what might be Beijing turning a blind eye to Hanoi's offshore drilling operations in contested waters, though it must be emphasized that this is all just conjecture for the time being no matter the patriotic intent of the demonstrators. Some of the challenges that have arisen since last week's protests is that the government is now aware that civil society representatives are capable of organizing spontaneous rallies all across the country, something that could be taken advantage of by third parties eager to exploit Vietnamese nationalism for destabilizing ends.

Relatedly, the government's arrest of some of the protesters has spawned accusations from fringe members of this movement that the police overstepped their constitutional authority, thus threatening to turn what had originally been economic demonstrations into political ones that are just as anti-communist as they are anti-Chinese, though provided that the coordinators are skillful enough to manipulate the masses to this Hybrid War end. As the final point, regardless of the current protest movement's staying power – which isn't expected to be much – the latest outbreak of demonstrations makes it all the more difficult for Vietnam to reach any pragmatic deal with China in the future no matter what the terms might be now that Hanoi sees just how controversial any agreement – whether real or imagined – with Beijing is to its citizens.

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