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Introduction

The South China Sea dispute is a complex territorial and maritime disagreement involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan over claims to islands, reefs, and the surrounding waters. The area contains rich fishing grounds and significant potential oil and natural gas resources. Besides the rich fishing grounds and potential energy resources, it is also one of the busiest shipping routes in the world. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimates that over 21% of global trade, amounting to 3.37 trillion US dollars, transited through these waters in 2016.

China claims by far the largest portion of territory in the area. It created the so-called “nine-dash line.” The nine-dash line is a U-shaped line on Chinese maps that represents China’s extensive but ambiguous claims in the South China Sea. China says that everything inside the line belongs to it, including islands, reefs, and waters. After an attempt by an international court in The Hague, to stabilize tensions over the nine-dash line, China did not accept the ruling and continued to claim the area.

The South China Sea dispute is important because it involves crucial global trade routes. Many countries outside the region depend on the South China Sea for trade and energy transportation. If the conflict escalates, it could affect global transportation worldwide. Moreover, the dispute has serious consequences for both humans and the environment. Fishermen from different countries often face danger or arrest when entering disputed waters.

Definition of Key Terms

Territorial Dispute.

A disagreement between countries over the ownership of land or an island.



Maritime Security.

The protection of seas, shipping routes and coastal areas from threats such as piracy, illegal fishing and conflicts between countries.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

A specific area in the ocean, up to 370 kilometers from a country's coast, where the exploitation of natural resources, such as gas and oil is allowed. Other countries are allowed to pass through, if they adhere to the international rules.

The Nine-Dash line.

A U-shaped line created by China to indicate the areas it claims, including islands, reefs and surrounding waters.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

An international agreement that sets out the legal framework for the use of the world's oceans, including territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and the rights and responsibilities of countries.

Sovereign states.

A state with a defined territory that administers its own government and is not subject to or dependent on another power.

Sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

The principal maritime routes used for trade, military operations, and the transport of goods. They are the "highways" of the sea.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The intergovernmental organization created in 1967 by nations located in Southeast Asia to improve the economic, cultural, and political cooperation.



Shipping route.

A path used by ships to move goods across seas; they are important for trade.

Natural resources.

Materials produced by nature, such as fish, oil or gas.

Territorial waters.

Sea areas extending up to 12 nautical miles from a country's coast under its control.

General Overview

History behind the conflict.

This conflict has a long history. In 1734, the Spanish Colonial Government in the Philippines published the first edition of the Velarde map. The Chinese government did not concur and therefore produced their own maps in 1775, 1810, and 1817. These included the Spratly and Paracel Islands as Chinese territory. However, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam published its first map extending its territory to these islands.

In 1932, the French Republic occupied the Paracels. This led China to file a Note Verbale stating that the Paracels were “the southernmost” part of Chinese territory. Multiple areas in Southeast Asia, including the Paracel and Spratly Islands, were occupied by Japan in May 1939.

The Republic of China (ROC, also known as Taiwan) published the “nine-dash line” in 1947. The People's Republic of China (PRC, also known as China) claimed that the Paracel and Spratly Islands had always been Chinese territory. In 1941, during the San Francisco Peace Conference, the Soviet Union made a motion to grant the Paracels and the Spratlys to China, but the majority voted against it. However, Japan signed the Treaty of San Francisco on 9 September 1951 to relinquish control of the islands in the South China Sea, but the treaty did not specify the new status of the islands.

When the Vietnam War began, the PRC took advantage of the situation and used military force to occupy multiple reefs from South Vietnam. They wanted to prevent the Paracel Islands from falling



under the control of North Vietnam. Both the Philippines and Malaysia, in the latter half of the 1970s, began to claim the Spratly Islands as their own territory.

On 11 June 1978, the Philippines declared through Presidential Decree No. 1596 the western area of the Spratly Islands as its own. Not everyone concurred with this. For example, the ROC and Vietnam used military force against each other. The PRC has control over all the islands in the Paracels. Regarding the Spratlys, Vietnam controls 29 islands in total, the Philippines controls 8, Malaysia 5, the PRC 5, and the ROC 1. This distribution has not changed since the 1990s.

Geographical context.

The South China Sea is a large body of water in the western Pacific Ocean, located between Southeast Asia and southern China. It is surrounded by several coastal states, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. The region contains several island groups and maritime features, such as the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and numerous reefs and atolls. Many of these features are very small or even submerged at high tide, yet they are strategically important. The South China Sea also includes one of the world's busiest shipping routes, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In addition, the seabed is believed to contain significant reserves of oil and natural gas, while the waters themselves provide rich fishing grounds. Because many of these areas fall within overlapping territorial claims, the geographical layout of the region plays a central role in the ongoing dispute.

Economic impact.

The South China Sea is one of the most important trade routes in the world. About one-third of global shipping passes through this region. If the conflict escalates, these trade routes could be disrupted, resulting in higher costs, delays in the transportation of goods, and broader global supply chain problems. The area also contains highly valuable fishing grounds and large reserves of oil and natural gas. This dispute therefore has serious consequences for fishermen as well as for the global market that depends on these energy resources. Fishing vessels are often harassed or blocked by coast guards of other nations claiming these waters. Moreover, increasing militarization in the region leads to higher financial costs for governments.

International involvement.



The South China Sea is not only a regional issue; major powers like the United States, Japan, and Australia are involved because the area is crucial for freedom of navigation, the protection of international trade routes, and regional security. These nations conduct naval patrols, military exercises, and diplomatic actions to ensure that shipping lanes remain open and that no single nation can dominate the region, which could threaten global trade and stability.

International law also plays an important role: the 2016 arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippines under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) challenged China's claims. However, China rejected the ruling, causing tensions in diplomatic and legal circles. ASEAN countries have attempted negotiations and codes of conduct, but the dispute remains difficult to resolve because it involves sovereignty, strategic control, and valuable resources, making the South China Sea a focal point for both regional and global security concerns.

Recent Developments.

In recent years, tensions in the South China Sea have remained high. In 2012, the Philippines and China had a standoff at Scarborough Shoal, which increased concerns in the region. The Philippines took China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and in 2016, the court ruled in favor of the Philippines. China rejected this ruling and continues to claim the area. Militarization has also increased, with countries building facilities and sending naval ships. In 2020, Indonesia used the 2016 ruling to protest China's activities near the Natuna Islands. These events show that the conflict still affects trade, energy transport, and security, and disputes overfishing and natural resources remain unresolved.

Major Parties Involved

The countries involved in the South China Sea dispute are the People's Republic of China (PRC, also known as China), the Republic of China (ROC, also known as Taiwan), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Federation of Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam. These countries each claim parts of the islands, reefs, and surrounding waters, creating overlapping territorial claims. The area is extremely valuable because it contains important natural resources and hosts critical global trade routes.

The Peoples Republic of China (PRC – China).



The PRC is the most influential nation in this conflict. It claims nearly the entire region through its “nine-dash line,” which overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of multiple Southeast Asian countries. China has invested in several military bases to maintain control over its claimed areas. Even though the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in 2016, in the case filed by the Philippines, China did not accept the ruling and continues to assert its claims.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Vietnam).

Vietnam claims both the Paracel and Spratly Islands, arguing that it governed these areas centuries ago and included them on official maps. The conflict escalated in 1974 when China took control of the Paracels after a brief battle, which Vietnam still considers illegal. Today, Vietnam maintains several posts in the Spratly Islands to protect its claims. The area is essential for Vietnam’s fishing industry, trade routes, and energy resources. Vietnam supports international law and often calls for peaceful dialogue and respect for national sovereignty.

The Republic of China (ROC – Taiwan).

The ROC, now Taiwan, is also a claimant in the South China Sea dispute. Its claims are based on historical records and post-World War II arrangements. Taiwan maintains administrative control over Taiping Island (Itu Aba), which it considers a full island capable of generating its own Exclusive Economic Zone. Although its role is less prominent than that of the PRC, the ROC continues to assert its sovereignty through patrols, a limited military presence, and infrastructure on the island. Taiwan has also engaged diplomatically by proposing the South China Sea Peace Initiative and cooperating with other countries on issues such as fisheries and resource management.

The Federation of Malaysia (Malaysia).

Malaysia claims mostly the southern part of the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands. It argues that some islands, reefs, and surrounding waters fall within its EEZ under international law. Malaysia maintains small outposts and conducts patrols to protect its claims but generally avoids direct military confrontations with other claimants. The South China Sea is important for Malaysia’s fishing industry, trade, and potential oil and gas resources. Malaysia also participates in diplomatic discussions through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), aiming to maintain a peaceful environment.

The Republic of Philippines (the Philippines).



The Philippines claim parts of the South China Sea, especially in the Spratly Islands and areas near the Palawan coast, based on their EEZ under international law. Tensions with China increased after incidents at Scarborough Shoal, leading the Philippines to file a case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013. In 2016, the court ruled in favor of the Philippines, stating that China's "nine-dash line" has no legal basis; however, China rejected the ruling. The Philippines continues to maintain military outposts, conduct patrols, and engage in diplomatic efforts to protect its sovereignty and resources.

Brunei Darussalam (Brunei).

Lastly Brunei is one of the smallest claimants in this dispute but claims a portion of the Spratly Islands and surrounding waters within its EEZ as defined under international law. Brunei does not have a strong military presence in its claimed areas but conducts occasional patrols to assert its claims. The country focuses on diplomatic solutions, working closely with ASEAN and other countries to promote peaceful negotiations and respect for international law. Despite its smaller presence, the South China Sea is important for Brunei's economy, providing access to fishing grounds, potential oil and gas reserves, and secure trade routes that support its energy and resource needs.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
1734	The Spanish Colonial Government in the Philippines published the first edition of the Velarde map.
1775, 1810, 1817	China produced a map, including the Spratly and Paracel Islands as Chinese territory.
1932	France occupied the Paracels and claimed the territory. China did not agree and therefore filed a Note Verbale stating the Paracels were the "southernmost" part of Chinese territory.



May 1939	Japan occupied multiple areas in Southeast Asia, including the Paracel and Spratly Islands.
1947	China published its nine-dash line.
August 1947	The foreign minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) claimed that the Paracel and Spratly Islands had always been Chinese territory.
1955	The French explained through the international notes that the Spratlys belonged to the "French Union", since they claimed that they were not part of Vietnam when Cochinchina was ceded, and North Vietnam did not oppose China's claims.
1974	When the Vietnam War began to stabilize, the PRC used military force in the Paracel Islands, taking multiple reefs from South Vietnam.
In the later of half of 1970s	Both the Philippines and Malaysia began to claim the Spratly Islands as their own territory
11th June of 1978	The Philippines declared through Presidential Decree No. 1596, the western part of the Spratly Islands as Philippine territory.
14th March of 1988	The PRC and Vietnam used military force against each other.
1994	The PRC occupied the Mischief Reef.
February 2011	The tensions started to increase again. China fired three shots at Philippines fishing boats near the Jackson Atoll.



May 2011	600 km from the south of China's Hainan Island, the Vietnamese Binh Minh 02 oil and gas survey ship clashed with three Chinese maritime patrol vessels.
2012	Throughout the whole year, the islands became more increasingly militarized. Multiple nations, including Taiwan, began constructing military facilities.
2013	The Philippines filed a case against the PRC at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.
2016	The Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines, declaring China's Nine-Dash Line had no legal basis under international law.
2016 (also)	China did not accept the ruling and continued therefore to claim the area.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The United Nations (UN) plays an important role in providing a framework for managing the South China Sea dispute, although it does not directly resolve territorial claims. Through international law, diplomacy, and multilateral forums, the UN promotes the peaceful settlement of disputes and the rule of law at sea. The UN General Assembly and other UN bodies have discussed issues such as freedom of navigation, maritime security, and respect for Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). While the UN itself cannot enforce sovereignty decisions, it supports countries in using legal and diplomatic mechanisms to prevent escalation.

An important part of this framework is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which sets rules for territorial seas, EEZs, and continental shelves. It also specifies what maritime features can generate rights to resources. There are regional agreements as well, such as the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) between China and



ASEAN, which aims to promote cooperation and prevent conflicts. ASEAN countries are still working on a Code of Conduct to manage disputes peacefully.

A major event demonstrating the role of the UN and international law was the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) case initiated by the Philippines in 2013. The PCA issued its ruling in 2016, stating that China's claims under the nine-dash line have no legal basis under UNCLOS. China rejected the ruling, while the Philippines and other countries, including Indonesia, cited it in diplomatic protests and official communications, such as Indonesia's 2020 note verbale regarding the Natuna Islands. These events show that arbitration and legal frameworks can clarify maritime rights, even if enforcement depends on state compliance.

Although the dispute is far from over, the UN and international treaties are very important in the South China Sea. They guide countries on how to act, push for peaceful negotiations, and provide legal and diplomatic means to manage tensions instead of resorting to force.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Over the times, there have been several attempts to resolve the South China Sea disagreement, but none of them have made a significant change. UNCLOS has tried to set out rules for territorial swell, EEZs, and maritime rights. Still, numerous countries, similar as the PRC, have interpreted the rules else, which limits their effectiveness in this conflict.

For illustration, in 2002, ASEAN countries inked the protestation on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). This agreement was intended to help conflict, encourage cooperation, and promote peaceful resolution. However, the DOC is non-binding, and nations have frequently ignored it when their interests are at stake.

In 2013, the Philippines filed a case against the PRC at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. In 2016, the court ruled in favor of the Philippines, stating that China's "nine-dash line" has no legal base under transnational law. China still rejected the ruling and continued to assert control over multiple areas in the South China Sea. Moreover, when a nation takes legal action, cooperation depends on whether countries are willing to cooperate.

Possible Solutions



Chancing a continuing result to the South China Sea disagreement is delicate because it all depends on whether the nations are willing to cooperate. Still, there are several approaches that could reduce pressures and promote cooperation.

One result is politic concession. Through ASEAN or direct addresses, the descendant countries could continue to engage with each other. They could clarify boundaries, share coffers, and manage conflicts peacefully. This could maybe affect in a stronger list law of Conduct, helping ensure that all countries admire each other's claims and avoid military escalation.

Another result is if Nations could agree to a fair sharing of the natural resources in the area, which could reduce conflicts while allowing each nation to profit economically.

Eventually, nations could agree to use military force only when necessary and allow only transnational details to secure ocean lanes. This would help farther escalation and reduce the threat of an indeed larger disagreement.

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