Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea
Middle School General Assembly
2027 St. Mary's County Model UN Conference

Background

The South China Sea (SCS) is a body of water in of the Pacific Ocean, located in Southeast Asia's Indo-Pacific region. It is bordered by the countries of China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Cambodia. It is an international body of water, meaning it has no designated "owner" nor specific "ruler", but there are diplomatic agreements or regulations between states to make sure peace is held in the region, rather than the reign of contention and anarchy over the area. Some directives, such as the UN Convention of the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), have been put into place to regulate maritime activity in general, as a form of law and order in these otherwise uncontrolled bodies. The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, Netherlands, was also created in 1899 as a guiding intergovernmental organization whose purpose is to resolve regular disputes between governments. Therefore, it has jurisdiction over territorial disputes, such as the one occurring in the SCS. The SCS is surrounded by the aforementioned sovereign states, which are a cause of the dispute as they each lay claim to the sea. These sovereign states all use and desire the South China Sea for export and import trade routes, which is vital to most of the countries bordering the SCS due to its economic

benefits and geographic access. However, this is not the only reason that there is conflict in the SCS; there is an estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas stowed in the SCS, which could exponentially grow a country's economy because those are coveted energy resources. In this trading and financial regard of the SCS, the states bordering the SCS, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines have what are known as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) over the territory. These are assigned areas or sections of the water body in which only one country has special rights regarding exploration and the use of marine resources, and they are sanctioned by the UNCLOS as the solution to the states' demands for a portion of the SCS.

Current Issue

As aforementioned, there have been measures to keep the peaceful allocations of the SCS, but the conflict arises from the People's Republic of China (PRC), who have refused to listen to those peacekeeping measures, thus making tensions boil. China has "claimed" the area in the SCS by either artificially adding to existing islands in the sea or creating new, man-made islands entirely. They have begun to weaponize those areas as military bases with aircraft, radar systems, and missiles, expanding their war prowess beyond the predetermined EEZ bounds of the SCS. This threatens the other countries that border the SCS, such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines, who currently share animosity with the PRC, Taiwan especially, following Chinese threats of an invasion of Taiwan starting in 2020. Aside from these regional states, China has also forced the

PRC man-made island in SCS. ^

United States to increase its naval force in the area to prevent the escalation of territorial disputes.

Role of the United Nations

The UN has created ways for countries to unilaterally take another country to dispute the settlement of that area, such as UNCLOS, and has given countries an intergovernmental organization to resolve disputes. Due to China's hostility with its neighbors along the SCS, it is the United Nations' duty to mend conflicts to uphold peace, that not only protects fairness in regards to the SCS resources, but also works to mitigate threats from China. The United Nations needs to find a way to mitigate international confrontation while avoiding full-scale conflict.

Guided Questions

- What are your allegiances to countries in or near the SCS?
- How does the current situation affect your country?
- What is your country's relationship with China? Are they a big importer for your country?
- How do you manage a country in the SCS without coming to war in the future?
- What are your country's biggest investments in the SCS? Trade? Oil?

References

Center for Preventive Action. (2024, September 17). *Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea*. Global Conflict Tracker; Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea

Permanent Court of Arbitration. (2018). *Home | PCA-CPA*. Pca-Cpa.org. https://pca-cpa.org/en/home/

Pompeo, M. (2020, July 13). *U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*. United States Department of State. https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html

Wikipedia Contributors. (2019, September 10). *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Wikipedia; Wikimedia Foundation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Convention_on_the_Law_of_the_Sea