



THE GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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Abstract: The South China Sea is one of the world's most contested regions, with significant geopolitical implications for regional and global stability. This strategically critical maritime area is claimed by multiple countries, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, each asserting varying degrees of territorial and resource-based rights. As the site of vital shipping lanes, rich fishing grounds, and potential undersea energy reserves, the South China Sea plays a key role in international trade and economic security, making it an area of intense strategic interest. China's expansive claims, outlined by its "Nine-Dash Line," have led to ongoing conflicts and militarization, as Beijing has developed artificial islands, deployed military assets, and enforced its territorial claims more aggressively. This has intensified tensions with the United States, which advocates for freedom of navigation and frequently conducts naval patrols to counter Chinese expansion. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states face a delicate balance between leveraging China's economic power and safeguarding their territorial sovereignty, while external players like Japan, Australia, and India seek to limit China's influence in the region. Diplomatic efforts, such as the Code of Conduct negotiations between China and ASEAN, aim to manage conflicts, yet progress remains slow. This paper explores the geopolitical dynamics of the South China Sea, examining the historical roots of the disputes, current military and diplomatic developments, and the potential implications for regional security, economic stability, and the broader U.S.-China rivalry in Asia.

Introduction to the South China Sea Region

Situated between the western Pacific Ocean and the Asian continent, the South China Sea is an important and dynamic marine area. Stretching across a territory of more than 3.5 million square kilometers, it has borders with Vietnam, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. With around one-third of all maritime traffic passing through it, this water body serves as a major geographic expanse and a worldwide commerce hub. Its maritime lanes are vital for the movement of goods, from consumer items and technology to oil and gas, making it a vital conduit for global trade.

The natural resources of the South China Sea are plentiful. Countries anxious to access these energy sources are showing great interest in it since it is thought to hold enormous oil and natural gas reserves. The abundance of marine life in the waterways also supports substantial and commercially significant fishing businesses for the neighbouring countries. Millions of people whose lives depend on the sea for fishing and other associated industries benefit greatly from these resources, as does the area's economy.

Coastal towns that are dynamic and diversified may also be found in the South China Sea. These people rely on the water for both their daily needs and economic activity, and they have strong cultural links to it. Fishermen still navigate the waterways to bring in their daily harvest, sustaining local markets and providing food for families. Fishing is still an essential employment. The interaction between the water and the coastal populations gives the geopolitical dynamics of the area a human dimension.

Apart from its economic and human aspects, the South China Sea is exceptionally beautiful. The area is a hotspot for biodiversity since it is peppered with immaculate islands, coral reefs, and a wide variety of marine habitats. Visitors swarm to its scenic beaches and

crystal-clear seas to partake in sports like diving and snorkeling, which showcase the natural wonders under the surface. This inherent charm promotes tourism and emphasizes the necessity of environmentally sound management practices.

But there are also intricate and overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea. Tensions and disagreements persist as a result of many nations' claims of sovereignty over various regions of the area, notably China, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. A complex geopolitical environment is produced by these territorial claims, which are frequently supported by historical, legal, and strategic justifications. These conflicts have gotten a lot of worldwide attention as a result of the building of artificial islands and military installations.

International legal systems, regional cooperation frameworks, and diplomatic discussions are some of the strategies used to resolve these problems. Discussions about international law, maritime security, and regional stability frequently centre on the South China Sea, underscoring the potential and difficulties associated with negotiating the geopolitical complexities of this crucial area.

Historical Context and Claims in the South China Sea

Rich natural resources and strategic importance have always been main reasons for geopolitical tensions, particularly with the South China Sea. The claims over the SCS and their historical background are intricate and entwined with different state actions, international law, and historical histories.

For centuries, it was a significant sea route: between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, providing vital sea routes for ages and being used for trade purposes. Then came the old days when Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Ming (1368–1644) Chinese dynasties did some naval operations around that area but never consolidated into clear-cut, continued control over the territory of SCS.

China's modern claims have origins in the early 1900s. The PRC changed the map issued by the former ROC in 1947 to a nine-dash line, which defined the PRC's claim on most of the South China Sea. However, neither the map was legally defensible nor had coordinates to it under international law.

Other states in the region also base their rights on proximity and historical use, and among them are Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Vietnam's claims for example are historically supported through fishermen and naval patrols with their origins dating back as far as the 17th century when Vietnam was under the Nguyễn Dynasty. Just as a Filipino explorer discovered territories during the 1950s, thus forming the grounds for Philippine claims over parts of the Spratly Islands.

Legal and Territorial Claims

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS came into force in 1994; it forms the framework for the conflicting claims in the South China Sea. UNCLOS grants a legal platform for maritime rights, which stipulates that a country has the right to expand up to 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zone along its coast. China's nine-dash line entered within the EEZ of Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia, therefore, is much contested by UNCLOS.

The case was filed before the PCA by the Philippines against China in 2016 based on UNCLOS. The PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, stating that China has no legal basis for its claims to historical rights, and those are represented by the nine-dash line. The court also found that several of the features China claimed did not qualify to generate an EEZ. It simply shrugged off the ruling and continued to mark its territories, enlarged its military and island-building presences in the region.

Strategic Value

Large oil and gas reserves are supposed to be buried somewhere in the South China Sea. As a result, it is perhaps the most hotly contested region globally. At the same time, it also is one of the most hectic maritime corridors in the world, where goods valued more than \$3 trillion cross annually. Because of the tremendous political and economic benefits of asserting dominance over this area, the respective nations have been unwilling to budge from their claims.

The recent Freedom of Navigation Operations by the United States to counter what it deems are China's excessive maritime claims have complicated and internationalized the conflict. The United States insists that it is committed to unrestricted passage across the international waterways and will not take sides in a dispute over territorial claims.

The South China Sea remains an area of much geopolitical interest, legal and historical narratives in international relations. Conflicting claims abound, as the region takes on strategic importance to world trade. Several countries increasingly build up their military apparatuses here, most strongly China and the United States. These make the problem of solving the issues contentious. Legal

frameworks such as UNCLOS and the historic background persist in influencing current contestations in this very strategically significant region.

Key Stakeholders and Players

The South China Sea, with its strategic location, constitutes an important platform of geo-politics from where different regional and world forces operate. Rich in natural oil and gas reservoirs, the South China Sea forms one of the most crucial maritime regions for global shipping routes and hence a prime hub for trans-regional commerce. [1]. South China Sea geopolitical dynamics are influenced by relationships between major players like China and the US and countries in Southeast Asia-Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.

With its so-called "nine-dash line" strategy, China claims almost the whole South China Sea, making it the most powerful and forceful actor in the region. Although this claim is supported by historical maps and documentation, it crosses over into the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of multiple countries in Southeast Asia. This included building artificial islands and arming these outposts as part of China's diplomatic and military posturing. Its claims were declared to be without any legal basis under international law based on the UNCLOS in a ruling issued by The Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. While China has not accepted the resolution and is still laying claims over the South China Sea Arbitration area. [2].

The United States has no claim in the South China Sea but is still engaged because it has strategic interests in preserving the openness of international seas and allowing freedom of navigation. The United States performs FONOPs to express its commitment to international law and to challenge what it believes are China's excessive maritime claims. These acts also prove a declaration of support to Southeast Asia nations that oppose China's open claims. [3]. Through military alliances and partnerships—most notably with the Philippines and Vietnam—the United States has strengthened its position in the region. This is in line with its South China Sea strategy.

Among the most outspoken critics of China's claims is Vietnam. It bases its claim to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands on customary international law as well as historical usage. In order to offset China's actions, Vietnam has taken diplomatic as well as military steps. These have included strengthening defence links with the United States and other regional powers as well as increasing its own military presence on the islands it controls. Given its close proximity and strategic stakes in the South China Sea, Vietnam's position is critical. The Position of Vietnam in the South China Sea [4].

Another important player in the dynamics of the South China Sea is the Philippines. China's rights were contested in a lawsuit filed by the Philippines, which led to the 2016 arbitration decision. Despite the favourable verdict, the Philippines' strategy has changed, particularly under President Rodrigo Duterte's direction, who has pushed for stronger ties with China in spite of the ongoing maritime issues. Recent events, however, point to a renewed emphasis on fortifying the alliance with the United States and restating its claims in the South China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Philippines [5].

Although they have typically adopted a less confrontational stance in comparison to Vietnam and the Philippines, other regional players like Malaysia and Brunei also have claims in the South China Sea. These nations occasionally adopt a more diplomatic posture as a result of their frequent attempts to strike a balance between their territorial claims and economic ties with China [6].

Maritime Disputes and Legal Framework

The South China Sea is one of the most contested and strategically important regions of the world's waters. This body of water with natural resources and with its bordering important sea lanes has become the focal point of fierce geopolitical conflicts that are especially due to a multitude of overlapping territorial claims, as well as complex legal systems governing disputes in maritime rights.

There has been great rivalry in these claims to the South China Sea waters between China and Vietnam in the south as well as the Philippines in the western part, to Malaysia on the southwest tip, then Brunei which lies off the coast at the eastern end, followed by Taiwan. China currently claims the majority of approximately 90% of these waters delineated by a line of nine dashes running farther out to sea than anything internationally legally recognized as a China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Although this argument has been supported by historical maps, several countries and international organizations have strongly contested China's Nine-Dash Line. [7].

There are competing claims by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei with other areas of the South China Sea, particularly the Spratly and Paracel Islands. The latter bases its claim on the principle of proximity and, by analogy, the provisions of UNCLOS on EEZ. Vietnam bases its claims on historical use and occupation. UNCLOS and South China Sea: Brunei and Malaysia also claim a part of the South China Sea based on their EEZs. [8].

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague presided over a case that was brought before it by the Philippines against China. The PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, wherein it held that there was no legal basis in UNCLOS for China's claims based on the nine-dash line. The tribunal decided that China violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines because it constructed artificial

islands and interfered with its fishing and oil exploration operations within the latter's Exclusive Economic Zone. But China never accepted the decision and refused to participate in arbitration proceedings and reserved its rights in the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling zone. [9].

The primary source of legal frameworks governing the South China Sea is UNCLOS. UNCLOS outlines the rights and obligations of nations concerning the use of the world's oceans, including territorial seas, EEZs, and the continental shelf. Still, UNCLOS has proved to be challenging yet a useful tool in the South China Sea for settling conflicts. Although it offers countries such as the Philippines a legal basis from which to contest China's expansive claims, lack of enforcement mechanisms and China's outright rejection of the ruling by the tribunal explain why the use of international law in resolving such complex disputes as those regarding UNCLOS and marine boundary claims is futile. [10].

In addition, strategic interests of other powers-the particular case of the United States-are another complicating element within the geopolitical processes concerned. The United States repeatedly made it clear that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is an indispensable element which is protected by UNCLOS, but the US itself does not have any positions over sovereignty claims. By executing FONOPs, the United States reiterates its interest in preserving open sea lanes while denying the excessive maritime claims from the side of China as declared by the latter. [11].

In response to these disagreements, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, has made an effort to arbitrate the matter diplomatically and is working to create a Code of Conduct (CoC) with China in order to handle the disagreements and avert violence. However, because of China's increasing assertiveness and the member nations' divergent interests complicating the negotiation process for ASEAN and the South China Sea, progress has been slow [12].

Military Build-Up and Security Concerns

The South China Sea, one of the world's important maritime regions, has come to be at the heart of geopolitical conflicts because of its strategic importance and several conflicting territorial claims of a number of nations. Increased military build-up in the region by China and security concerns triggered by it have made South China Sea a possible hotbed of conflict.

The most remarkable developments in recent times were related to the military activities of China in the South China Sea. Beijing has been reportedly conducting large-scale land reclamation projects and turning numerous reefs and atolls into man-made islands with airstrips, radars, and missile defence systems. In this regard, China attempts to claim the major share of the South China Sea through militarization of the area and its dominance by forcing the "Nine-Dash Line." Such actions have become an alarm among the countries within the South China Sea, including the world's other significant powers-the United States. It felt that such actions of China were challenging international standards as well as freedom of navigation. [13].

In response to China's militarisation, the US has stepped up its military presence in the area and begun conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to refute China's claims to the region. In order to assert the right to free passage under international law, U.S. Navy ships are passing near the disputed islands as part of these activities. Military tensions between the two powers have increased as a result of the U.S. Navy's FONOPs, despite China's perception of the U.S. perspective that these operations are provocative [14].

The security concerns over the South China Sea go beyond the tension between China and the United States. Countries in Southeast Asia that have overlapping claims with China, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, have also expressed outrage over the aggressive nature of Beijing. For example, in 2013, the Philippines filed a case against China before the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and in 2016, the court issued a decision annulling China's sweeping claim. But China has ignored the verdict and continued its military buildup, thereby putting vulnerable Southeast Asian countries in dangerous situations. [15].

Other external powers like Japan, Australia, and India have stepped up their engagement in the region as part of larger attempts to counteract China's influence, which has further complicated the security situation. These states have demonstrated their commitment to preserving an open and free Indo-Pacific by holding joint military drills with the US and other Southeast Asian countries. The United States, Japan, Australia, and India form the Quad, a strategic alliance that serves as a forum for coordinating policy on regional security. This is seen in the South China Sea Council on Foreign Relations on the Quad [16].

Given the concentration of military resources and the intricacy of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, there is a great chance of error or unintentional conflict. The absence of an all-encompassing global structure to handle these disputes increases the risk. Although ASEAN and China have been discussing a South China Sea agreement of Conduct for years, the negotiations have moved slowly, and it is still unclear how effective the agreement will be [17].

Economic Interests and Resource Extraction

The South China Sea (SCS) is a very politicized place in the world politics, due to its geographical convenience and richness in resources, such as fish, oil, and natural gas. These countries came to this area because of overlapping claims, mainly economic benefits with extracting resources. The involved countries are China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Pursuing those economic interests would further the already complex geopolitical dynamics that characterize the SCS; hence, debates over sovereignty and marine rights become quite significant.

Major contributors to the increased interests are the significant hydrocarbon reserves found in the South China Sea. Though exaggerated at 130 billion barrels of oil, it has been more realistically estimated by the US Energy Information Administration to be around 11 billion barrels and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. These are energy resources necessary to secure the supply for all countries bordering the sea, especially China, the globe's biggest energy consumer. [18].

Tensions between the claimant nations have increased as a result of the desire to control these resources. China's assertive approach, demonstrated by its 'nine-dash line' assertion, spans almost the whole South China Sea and intersects with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of multiple Southeast Asian nations. Chinese dominance in resource extraction operations has resulted from this claim, despite it being dismissed in 2016 by an international tribunal. China has made significant investments in offshore gas and oil exploration, building man-made islands and putting oil rigs in territorial disputes [19].

Natural resources in the South China Sea are vital for the development of smaller countries like Vietnam and the Philippines as well as for their energy independence. Vietnam's economy is largely dependent on the offshore oil and gas production capabilities it has developed. However, conflicts with China over its attempts to explore and extract hydrocarbons in disputed areas have frequently resulted in naval force standoffs and delays in exploration projects. Similarly, even though the region is within China's EEZ, Chinese meddling has hampered the Philippines' attempts to harvest natural gas from the Reed Bank [20].

In addition to hydrocarbons, the South China Sea is an essential fishing ground that provides millions of people in the area with a living. The sea is an economic lifeline for many Southeast Asian countries, providing around 12% of the world's seafood harvest. Fish stocks have been reduced by overfishing, which has been made worse by aggressive Chinese fishing methods, escalating tensions. China has clashed with neighbouring countries' fishing fleets on a regular basis by deploying coast guard ships and maritime militias to enforce its rights over fishing grounds [21].

The South China Sea is actually a treasure trove of natural resources and one of the most important marine trading routes in the world. Trillions of dollars worth of commodities pass through the region each year, accounting for almost one-third of all worldwide shipping. Significant geopolitical and economic benefits result from controlling these water lanes, especially for China, which aims to expand strength throughout the area and defend its important trade routes [22].

The geopolitical dynamics of the South China Sea are heavily influenced by the economic interests associated with resource exploitation, particularly those related to fisheries, hydrocarbons, and maritime trade. Territorial disputes have become more intense due to struggle for control over these resources, which has increased regional instability, militarisation, and diplomatic issues. South China Sea geopolitics is expected to stay volatile as long as these economic stakes are substantial.

Regional Responses and Diplomatic Efforts

Due to its abundant natural resources, strategic maritime importance, and overlapping territorial claims, the geopolitical dynamics of the South China Sea (SCS) have long been a sensitive topic. The participation of important parties including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the larger international community has affected regional responses and diplomatic efforts. In one of the world's most militarised regions, efforts have been directed at resolving conflicts while controlling tensions.

It was the "Nine-Dash Line" that China marked to symbolize sweeping claims over the South China Sea, against stiff opposition from several of its neighboring states. It covered almost 90% of the sea area and triggered conflict with territorial claims from neighboring countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. In particular, the Philippines spearheaded legal challenges to China's claims. It took the case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2013. Under UNCLOS, a PCA decision in 2016 ruled that China's claims did not have legal basis in support of it. China, however, rejected the decision and continued with the activities. [23].

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other regional organizations continued at the center of the play in diplomatic attention aimed toward those conflicts. Through ASEAN engagement mechanisms with China, specially about the much-debated "Code of Conduct" of the South China Sea, ASEAN had centrally initiated conversation and lessened the tone of tension. But ASEAN would be more eager at this slow pace of negotiation to see a legally binding COC that could curb claimants' misbehaviour and therefore lower the level of violence. Despite its stated support for the COC, China has frequently postponed the process, raising doubts about its dedication to a peaceful resolution [24].

The United States has been a major player in the diplomacy of the area, promoting both international law and freedom of navigation. In order to refute disproportionate maritime claims and show that the South China Sea is accessible to foreign shipping, Washington regularly carries out Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the region. Since the United States does not acknowledge China's sovereignty over the disputed features in the SCS, these actions are perceived as a direct challenge to China's territorial assertions. Through mutual defence treaties, the United States and numerous ASEAN countries—especially the Philippines—maintain significant defence relations [25].

The measures taken by nations like Malaysia and Vietnam are examples of additional regional reactions. In an attempt to offset China's expanding influence, Vietnam has strengthened its military prowess and strengthened its relations with the US and India. Although making its claims known, Malaysia has chosen a more subdued diplomatic approach, frequently holding bilateral talks with China [26].

Despite not being direct claimants, Japan and Australia have also voiced worry over China's moves in the SCS. Both states have supported Southeast Asian countries diplomatically and economically while promoting the rule of law and amicable dispute settlement. Particularly, Japan has provided assistance to the Philippines and Vietnam in developing their maritime capacities [27].

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