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Background paper

Committee: Security Council

Topic: The South China Sea Conflict

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is a marginal Sea in the Pacific Ocean which encompasses 3,500,000 square kilometres that extend between the Malacca Strait and the Taiwan Strait. This area of the sea is rich in oil and gas fields and also carries tremendous strategic importance.

Since the 19th century the area has been under dispute as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei have all claimed sovereignty over the territory.

China has backed its territorial claim by building on these islands and running naval patrols near them. While the US says it is not taking any side in the argument, it has sent military ships and planes to the area, which has irked China.

Experts on the issue say that the tensions between these nations tend to escalate and will possibly converge into an armed conflict if their overlapping claims over several uninhabited islands rich of natural resources are not unraveled.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/south-china-sea>

WHY IS THE SOUTH CHINA SEA SO IMPORTANT?

The United States Energy Information Agency estimates there are 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in deposits under the sea — more than exists in the reserves of some of the world's biggest energy exporters.

The waters also contain lucrative fisheries that account for, according to some estimates, 10 percent of the global total. But this means that a lot of fishing boats are cruising around in waters contested by several different navies, increasing the risk of conflict.

The area's greatest value is as a trade route. According to a 2015 Department of Defense report, \$5.3 trillion worth of goods moves through the sea every year, which is about 30 percent of global maritime trade.

KEY TERMS:

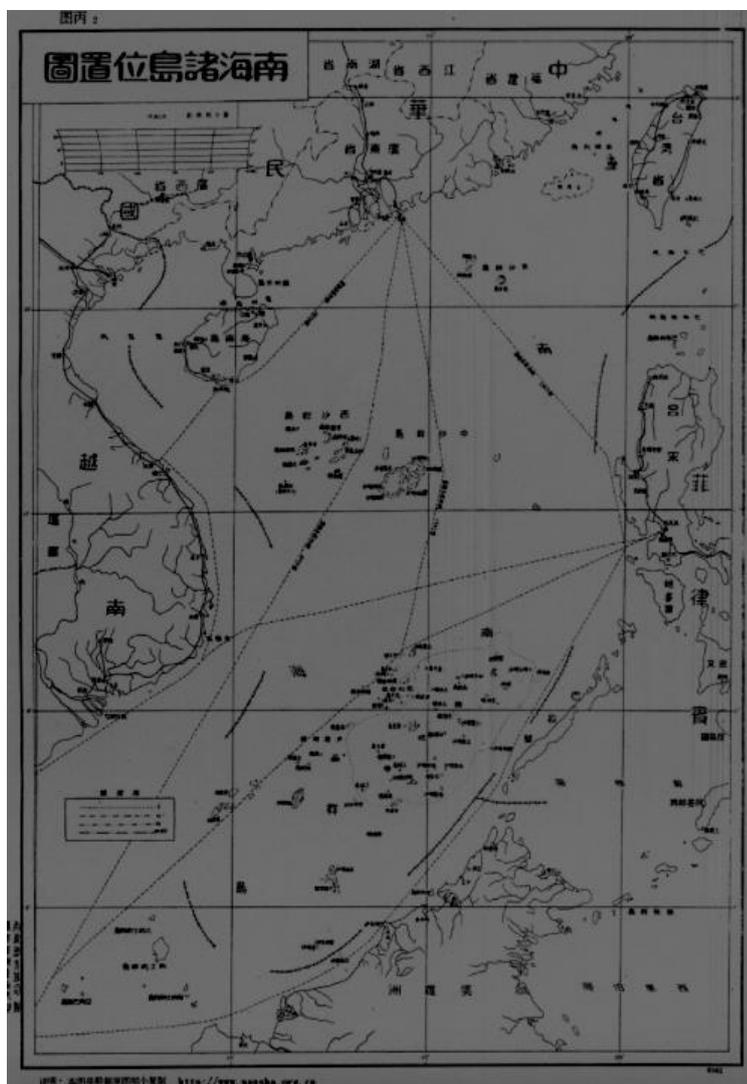
– **NINE DASH LINE**

In 1947, China outlined its claim to the disputed waterway by drawing a map with a U-shaped line covering almost 70 percent of the South China Sea.

Referred to as the nine-dash line, it covered the Paracel and Spratly islands, a cluster of more than 30 others.

China has yet to specify the the exact meaning and coordinates of the nine dashes which approximately comprise around 2,000,000 square kilometres of seas, rocks and atolls. The ambiguity regarding the nature and definition of the nine-dash line has led to tensions in the area.

In July 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague held that China's nine-dashed line claims had no legal basis in a case brought by the Philippines.



– EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONES (EEZ)

The United Nations convention on the law of the sea established that states can only control territories within a 370 km reach off their shores. These are called Exclusive Economic Zones. Where the zones overlap, neighbouring countries must mutually decide on maritime borders.

Areas which are not EEZ should be international waters, shared by everyone and free for navigation, as ratified in the 1982 UNCLOS convention.

Countries cannot claim sovereignty over land masses that are submerged or were submerged but that have now surfaced above high tide level because of illegal construction.

– UNCLOS

Unclos is the acronym for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, also known as Law of the Sea convention. The convention came into operation and became effective from 16th November 1982.

Unclos has 160 member parties.

Territory Dispute and history

In 1947 China outlined the so-called nine dash line, claiming sovereignty over most of the territories covered by the South China Sea. As is visible in the accompanying maps, China's claims abutted closely to her maritime neighbors, swallowing islands and rock features claimed by these nations.

Beijing argues that history backs China's claims as no one disputed its sovereignty over the territory before the 1930s. China also claims that several islands in the stretch were discovered and mapped by Chinese sailors thousands of years ago during various naval expeditions and are integral parts of the country.

For decades, all countries except for Brunei have carried out some sort of construction on the existing islands but China has outpaced other players.

China, Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan have also their sovereignty claims by militarising some of these islands and establishing naval patrols.

For decades, all countries except for Brunei have carried out some sort of construction on the existing islands but China has outpaced other players. Malaysia and Brunei also assert their sovereignty on the islands as they say they are part of their EZZ. While Malaysia's claims a small number of islands in the Spratlys, Brunei doesn't claim any of the disputed islands.

The islands that are disputed are the Parcel Islands, the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal.

PARACEL ISLANDS

The Parcel islands are claimed by both China and Vietnam. Vietnam claims that they have been ruling the islands since the 17th century.

In 2013 China moved an oil rig and fortified its military in the area. This was seen as a direct threat by Vietnamese authorities and put a strain on China Vietnam Relations.

SPRATLY ISLANDS

The Philippines invoke their geographical proximity to the Spratly Islands as the main basis of its claim for part of the grouping.

However Since 2013, Beijing started extensive construction on the floating and submerged reefs of the Fiery Cross in the Spratly islands, installing airstrips and missile defense systems. It also

conducts regular patrols, driving away non Chinese vessels. This has taken a toll on political relations between the two countries.

Malaysia and Brunei also assert their sovereignty on the islands as they say they are part of their EEZ.

SCARBOROUGH SHOAL

Similarly, the Scarborough Shoal, a 97 km chain of rocks and reefs is claimed by both China and the Philippines. China's reconstruction of several submerged islands for military purpose led the Philippines to bring the nine-dash line to court in 2013 where the line was judged as invalid.



HOW IS THE US INVOLVED?

The Philippines and USA have a mutual defense treaty that stands since the end of WW2. For this reason, the states have actively been supplying the Philippines with hi tech- hardware and military technologies to monitor and counter China.

Moreover, the USA claim that they have been flying air force jets and sailing warships near the Chinese controlled islands in a effort to counter China's aggressive military approach and ensure and respect freedom of navigation.

China has accused the USA of increasing tensions in the region.

<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/three-questions-on-the-south-china-sea>

THE PHILIPPINES CASE

The Philippines filed a case against China regarding the illegal reconstruction of 7 submerged islands in Scarborough shoal and the validity of the China's nine line dash claims.

On July 12, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled China had [no legal basis for their "nine-dash line"](#) of ownership, adding the country had violated the Philippine's sovereign rights under the United Nations Convention on Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS)

Beijing has rejected the verdict claiming that the court had no authority to rule on the matter.

TIMELINE and FLASHPOINTS:

1947= China claims its sovereignty over territories that are encompassed by the nine-dash line

1974= China invades and asserts its sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, killing more than 70 Vietnamese troops.

1982=The UNCLOS becomes effective. Over a nine year period 160 countries ratify the convention.

1988= China and Vietnam clash again in the Spratly Islands. This conflict causes the death of 60 Vietnamese sailors.

2012= China and the Philippines engage in a maritime standoff, accusing each other of illegal intrusions in the Scarborough shoal.

2012= Claims reporting that China sabotaged two Vietnamese operations lead to large Anti-China protests in Vietnam.

2013= the Philippines sue China over the reconstruction of 7 islands and challenge its claims, under the UNCLOS.

2014= Introduction of a Chinese oil rig in the Paracel Island caused collisions between Vietnam and China.

2016= The Un tribunal of the Hague rules in favor of the Philippines, saying China has illegally seized part of its territories.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The stakes of this geostrategic standoff are rising with the number of naval ships, fighter jets and drones facing off in the South China Sea. Many claim that China's giant land reclamation projects are placing its military hardware throughout the region. Many of China's neighbours argue that China's relative size and clout give it an unfair advantage in bilateral negotiations. For this reason it is important that all the countries involved open a dialogue in order to avoid the conflict to escalate.