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SOUTH CHINA SEA
A BLUE GOLD FOR THE WORLD ECONOMY AND A PERSISTENT GEOPOLITICAL FLASHPOINT

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ABSTRACT

South China Sea, a vast expanse of water, holds paramount economic significance for the world countries due to its abundant natural resources and reservoirs. It contains an estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oils and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. The amount of trade that passes through its waterways to the booming population centres is worth $3.37 trillion annually, making it the busiest maritime trade route in the world. The Sea also holds geo-strategic and military prominence for the surrounding countries.

Nevertheless, it is a longstanding hotspot of geopolitical tensions and economic interests. Numerous countries are involved in the conflict, and at the top of the list is China, which claims nearly the entire Sea. China bases its claim on the historical bedrock of the famous Nine-Dash Line. Similarly, Vietnam asserts its claim on historical and inheritance grounds. Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Philippines claim portions of the Sea based on the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The U.S. is also deliberately involving itself, under the umbrella of the United Nations. Its main stance is that all parties should abide by UNCLOS. China is strictly against the U.S involvement in the South China Sea affairs, arguing that Washington is inserting itself to keep a vigilant eye on China's economic and naval policies.

The matter is further complicated by overlapping claims, the portion claimed by the Philippines is also claimed by China, the portion claimed by Vietnam overlaps with China's claims, and same applies to other claimant states. No party appears to compromise.

Keywords

South China Sea, Maritime territorial disputes, Nine-dash line, UNCLOS, Geopolitical tensions, Strategic waterways, Natural resources, Exclusive Economic Zone

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea, as depicts its name, lies to the South of China. It encompasses a portion of the Pacific Ocean, stretching roughly from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait in the Northeast, covering an area of almost 3.5 million square meters. It is connected with the Indian Ocean

through the Strait of Malacca, one of the busiest trade routes of the world and to the East China Sea through Taiwan Strait (previously called the Formosa Strait, from the historical Portuguese name "Ilha Formosa" for Taiwan). The countries that claim parts of the Sea include the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei.

Disputes among these countries arise over land features in the South China Sea. There are two main groups of features:

- **The Paracel Islands**, composed of islands and reefs (reefs being chains of rocks or coral at or near the surface of the water).
- **The Spratly Islands**, which contain several small islands but are mostly reefs and rocks, some of which may not even appear above water at high tide.

The following nations actively claim parts of the South China Sea and its land features.

- Parcels: China, Vietnam, Taiwan
- pratly: China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei, Philippines
- Almost all the South China Sea, its features, and resources: China.

South China Sea and United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), also called the Law of the Sea Convention or Law of the Sea Treaty, was signed among 157 countries on the 10th of December 1982 in Montego Bay, Jamaica, and enter into force on 16th of November 1994. This Convention is an international agreement that provides a legal framework for all marine and maritime activities, aimed at preventing clashes between countries by awarding sovereign jurisdiction within coastal waters to coastal states.

According to Article 56 (Rights, Jurisdiction, and Duties of the coastal states in the Exclusive Economic Zone), and Article 57 (breadth of the Exclusive Economic Zone), a country can claim an Exclusive Economic Zone extending up to 200 nautical miles (370 km) beyond its territorial waters. Within this zone, the coastal state retains exclusive rights to explore and exploit both living and non-living resources. For instance, crude oil, natural gas or any other resources found within 200 nautical miles of Vietnam's coast will exclusively belong to Vietnam. However, any waters or land area outside the EEZ of all countries are considered an international water, to be shared under international law.

In the case of the South China Sea, all surrounding countries base their claims on the 200 nautical miles EEZ threshold set by UNCLOS, except China. While most governments are willing to follow UNCLOS provisions, Beijing argues that its Nine-Dash Line is an exception.

China remains unwilling to compromise on the Nine-Dash, refuses to clarify its exact boundaries, and dismiss the claims of neighbouring states. China has repeatedly warned the U.S. not to interfere in the South China Sea affairs.

Prevailing Claims of Beijing over the South China Sea

The People's Republic of China, using ancient Han dynasty records as evidence, asserts that China controlled these waterways for centuries. Moreover, Beijing also relies on the Nine-dash Line to justify its claims. The Nine-dash Line refers to a U-shaped demarcation line, a dotted visual representation used by Beijing to claim a large portion of the South China Sea, encompassing the parcel islands, Spratly islands and various reefs and features. The origin of this line can be traced to 1929, when the Chinese government used old British sailing charts and instructed cartographers to draw China's maritime borders. Over the last century, the line has taken a life of its own; and in China the meaning has steadily expanded. Today, China claims not only the islands within it, but also the waters, seabed and even the airspace above.

Nevertheless, the visual representation of 1929 was formalized in 1947 when the Republican government of China published an official map of the South China Sea Claims, featuring an eleven-dash line. After declaring independence in 1949, the People Republic of China under Mao Zedong endorsed these claims. In 1952, however, the number of dashes was reduced to nine following negotiations with Vietnam over the Gulf of Tonkin. Beijing has consistently maintained the Nine-Dash Line as the visual cornerstone of its claims in the South China Sea.

Over time, China has introduced several development projects in the Sea. Despite ongoing disputes, Beijing saw an opportunity to strengthen it control. In 2014, China engaged in extensive dredging and land reclamation activities to create artificial islands on the natural archipelago of Spratly and Parcel. Some of the artificial islands include Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Cuarteron Reef, and Johnson South Reef. China uses these islands as a "turf" to extract resources, expand fishing and trade operations, and establish naval military bases to showcase the US and other neighbouring countries that Beijing is the dominant power in the Sea.

According to BBC reports "the islands have grown from a bare pile of sand to radar domes, aircraft hangers, ports, harbours, and possibly missile launchers". The installation of military bases on these artificial islands escalated tensions, showing that Beijing is willing to defend its claim with force. This has raised serious concerns among neighbouring states and the international community about potential military escalation. China appears to be guided by the Latin maxim Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum" meaning "If you want peace, prepare for war". While China has no immediate interest in war, it seeks to ensure access and establish supreme influence over the sea.

According to the Maritime Affairs Programme, China Nine-Dash Line claim over the South China Sea remains a fundamental issue in the Law of the sea community, yet it is often difficult to understand in domestic debates due to sensational headlines and technical complexities.

Manila Claims over the South China Sea

The Philippines, located on the western bank of the South China Sea, bases its claims on historical and geographical grounds. Its demands are rational as they focus on part that fall within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). However, the waters within this EEZ are also claimed by China under Nine-Dash Line policy. One of the big issues concerning the Philippines is the problem of fishing rights. Millions of Filipinos depend heavily on fisheries for their livelihood. Food security lies at the heart of the South China Sea dispute. Raising tensions with Beijing have drastically affected these communities, depriving them of both food supplies and fishing income.

In 2013, the Philippines argued that China has no right to enter its territorial waters and protested repeated incursions by Chinese naval forces. With limited military capability, Manila resorted to international arbitration. filing a petition against China before the permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague. In 2016, the tribunal ruled in favour of the Philippines, declaring China's Nine-Dash Line claims legally invalid.

However, Beijing rejected the ruling outright, dismissing it as "null and void." The verdict demonstrated the international community's legal stance, yet China's refusal to comply underscored that it is neither willing to withdraw its claims nor compromise over the Nine-Dash Line.

Hanoi claims over the South China Sea

Vietnam, located to the east of the Sea, is also an active claimant. Its government raises its claim inheritance grounds, referring the 1954 Geneva Accord which gave South Vietnam control over the territories south of the 17th Parallel, including adjacent waters. The water body portion was given in the control of Vietnam. Vietnam asserted these claims after deterioration of relations with China.

Kuala Lumpur Claims over South China Sea

Malaysia, situated in the southern part of the South China Sea, bases its claims over some part of sea on geographical grounds. It asserts sovereignty over features in the Southern Spratly, which falls exclusively inside its continental shelf and EEZ, making its claims relatively strong under international law.

Bandar Seri Begawan Claims over the South China Sea:

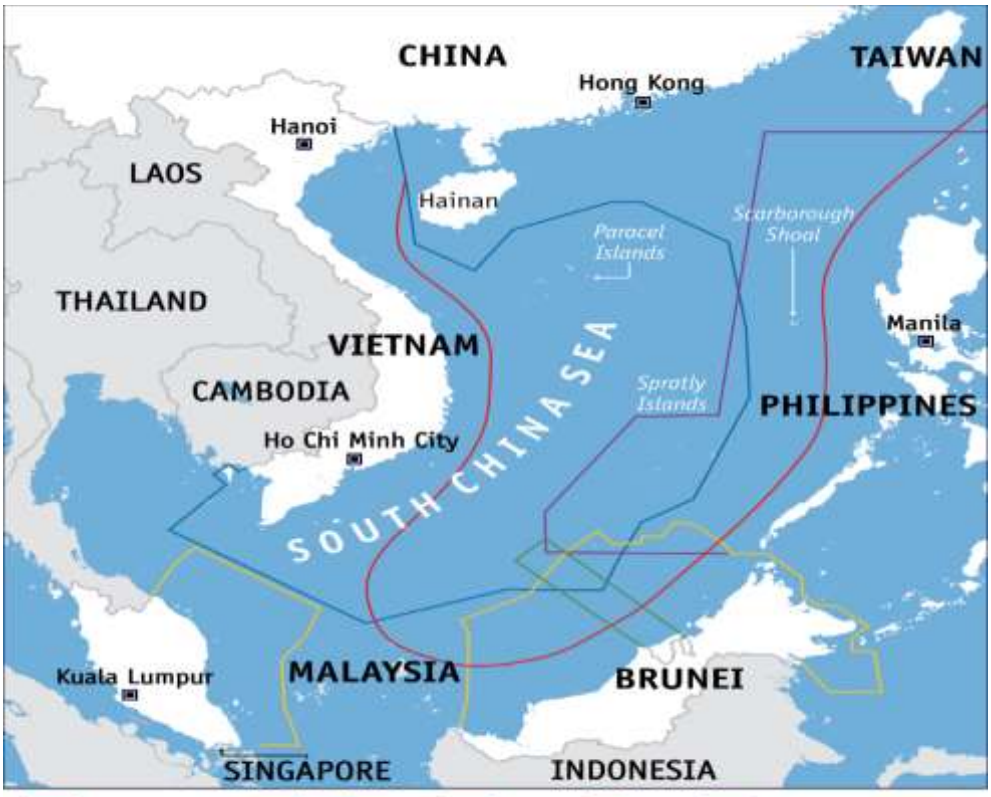
Brunei, located on the southern shore of the South China Sea, also claims areas within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as defined under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Nevertheless, unlike other claimants, Brunei government plays less active role in the dispute, maintaining a lower diplomatic and military profile.

Washington, D.C.'s Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea:

The United States is unique among the actors in this dispute, as it is not a claimant state. Interestingly, despite being thousands of miles away, the government of Washington, D.C. is deeply involved in the affairs of the conflict, both directly, through Freedom of Navigation Operations in sea and indirectly, by supporting allies such as the Philippines and Vietnam.

The U.S. consistently challenges China's claims of sovereignty, arguing that they violate international law and UNCLOS. Beyond legal arguments, however, Washington's involvement also reflects strategic concerns. Since, China's post-Ding Xiaoping reforms, China made rampant progress in technology and has been a new emerging superpower, challenging the global supremacy, the U.S. has enjoyed for decades. Involving itself in the South China Sea, Washington seeks to monitor Beijing's economic and military rise under the guise of defending international law.

Moreover, the U.S. economy depends heavily on South China Sea shipping routes, which are vital for oil imports and global trade with the Middle East and Asia. While the U.S. claims its actions are motivated by a commitment to "freedom of the seas," its strategic and economic interests are equally important.



South China Sea: A Treasure for the World Economy

The South China Sea, which may look ordinary from the surface like other water bodies, actually holds a treasure of "blue gold" beneath its depth. Below the surface, there are vast varieties of porcelain, gems, rubies and precious metals. It contains around 10 percent of the world's fish stocks. Every day, hundreds and thousands of fishermen sail there and return with tons of fishes' stocks to their land homes. Thus, marine life in the Sea provides sustenance and livelihoods for millions of people in surrounding countries. Furthermore, there are vast reservoirs of crude oil and natural gas, that are vital for meeting the energy needs of both regional and global energy needs.

According to the U.S. marine survey conducted in the 1980s, South China Sea holds 11 billion

barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. However, China's government-owned oil estimates the figure to be closer to 125 billion barrels of crude oil and 500 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in undiscovered waters. China is currently the largest energy consumer of the world, using about 4.5 billion barrels of oil annually. The reservoirs of the South China Sea, therefore, represent a tremendous source of oil that could meets its energy needs for decades.

Another precious material discovered in the bottom of the South China Sea, in enormous quantity, is white and shiny porcelain. About 1,500 meters beneath sea level, a team of Chinese Scientists was flabbergasted by what they saw while conducting deep-sea exploration in the northwestern slope of the sea. A three-meter-high hill of porcelain wares appeared before their eyes, once often a time a popular Chinese commodity in international trade. Located east of the Xisha Archipelago, part of China's southernmost city of Sansha, this unspoiled and uninhibited island is protected by a massive reef that only allows the smallest boats to pass at high tide. Fragments of ancient Porcelain are dispersed along the beach; snorkelers can easily discover further among the coral in the crystal-clear waters. It was during the Ming dynasty that the blue-and-white porcelain, that characterized China's culture for innumerable years, was fully developed and became one of China's first mass exports. Such fragments of Sea-washed China can be found on almost every island in the Xisha archipelago, mostly washed ashore from sunken ships that once heaped the ancient maritime Silk Road from China across the Indian Ocean to the Arab world and beyond.

Recently, two new sites of Porcelain were discovered by a special group of scientists that belonged to the Institute of Deep-Sea Science and Engineering (IDSSC) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) on October 23, 2022. In another remarkable discovery, a cache of Chinese porcelain and gold, more than 200 years old, was recovered from a European shipwreck in the Sea dating back to around 1750. One might assume the cargo contained metals, gems and other precious goods, but instead, it was dominated by over a million pieces of Chinese porcelain. This discovery was made possible by Captain Michael Hatcher, a British-born salvage expert. Nevertheless, this was not Hatcher first triumph in the South China Sea. In 1983, while salvaging World War II merchant ships, he accidentally found the remains of an Asian junk ship carrying thousands of fragments of Ming and 17th century Porcelain. Inspired, Hatcher dedicated his carrier to searching for more ancient vessels in the region. Moreover, the South China Sea is also known for deposits of rubies, gems, and metal stocks, while the white sands of Nansha Zhou, a tiny islet, are littered with fragments of ceramics.

As a matter of fact, the South China Sea is globally the centre of attention as it is also one of the most important shipping passages of the world. Currently, the amount of trade that sails through South China Sea waterways to the blooming population centres is worth $3.37 trillion in a year, nearly one-third of global maritime trade. The rise of maritime trade in this region dates back the Qin and Han dynasties over 2,000 years ago, expanding significantly during the Tang and Song dynasties. trade enhanced across the Sea in the Tang and Song dynasties around a thousand years later. During this both-sided trade silk, tea, porcelain, brass, bronze and iron were shipped out of China, while spices, exotic plants and animals, and other rare materials were carried back via this trade track.

According to Professor Zhang Yipping of Hainan Normal University, in earlier centuries, ships crossing the South China Sea sailed along the east coast of the Indonesian peninsula. But as shipbuilding advanced, new seaways were unlocked through the islands of Xisha and Nansha Archipelagos. Since 1996, Chinese archaeologists have located more than 120 shipwrecks in the South China Sea, with hundreds, maybe thousands, more lying at greater depths. This data of Shipwrecks demonstrates how the South China served as one of the busiest maritime routes in ancient times.

Today, sea traffic in the South China is immeasurably greater. According to recent data, the amount of trade that cruises through its waterways is worth 3.37 trillion dollars a year, making it one-third of global maritime traffic. Around 40 percent of the world's liquefied natural gas and half of Gulf oil exports pass

through the South China Sea enroute major energy-consuming countries like China, Japan, the U.S. and European nations.

Beyond trade and resources, the Sea is also hotspot for international tourism. Its beautiful beaches, effervescent marine life and picturesque islands attract hundreds and thousands of tourists each year. Tourism contributes to local economies by generating revenue and employment opportunities. However, geopolitical tensions and territorial disputes have limited the region's true tourism potential.

China, in particular, has pursued a "technology of state territorialisation," using tourism and leisure development as tools to consolidate control over disputed islands. By encouraging outbound tourism and building infrastructure in the Spratly Islands and other contested areas, Beijing aims to project sovereignty and strengthen its territorial claims. Any country that can claim these land bodies can extend its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and gain exclusive rights to surrounding waters.

For centuries, the archipelagos and harbours of the South China Sea have served as hubs of cultural and scientific exchange, a vast marketplace where religions, philosophies, technologies, and ideas converged. The strategic importance of the South China Sea continues to grow. Control over these waters means influence over global maritime traffic, with the ability to facilitate or disrupt trade in times of peace or conflict. This geostrategic significance has led to the establishment of military bases and the permanent presence of multiple powers, including China, the world's emerging superpower, and the United States, which has dominated global security for over half a century.

South China Sea: The Bone of Contention (Historical Underpinning)

The roots of the contentions in the South China Sea can be traced back to the 20th century. However, the actual story of claims over the waters of the Sea stretches much further into ancient ages. Chinese argue that their control over the South China Sea dates to the ancient Han dynasty (206 B.C.E-220 C.E), whey they used its routes for trade and fishing. They further assert that by 11th century C.E., China had drawn a territorial map of its influence that included the entire the South China Sea.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, European imperial powers: France, Germany and British were engaged in maritime competition to build their naval supremacy over global waters. In that race of supremacy, they also established control over portions of the South China Sea for a period of time. However, the 20th century witnessed shift in world order because of the emergence of a new power in the global market. That new power was the most technologically advanced country of that time, imperial Japan. Japanese forces also sought naval supremacy, and the South China Sea was not very far off from them. Their forces laid occupied the Parcel and Spratly and established their dominancy over it. Using advanced equipments, they benefited their country from the resources of the Sea. Their traders used its passageways for maritime trade to export products to the entire world countries. Their military forces used its secret routes and resources during both World War, (World War I (1914 to 1919) and World War II (1939 to 1945).

Japan's defeat in World War II, particularly after the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atomic bombs "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," crippled its capacity to control the South China Sea. Under the Treaty of San Francisco (1951), Japan formally gave up its claims to the islands. The Treaty of San Francisco created ambiguity over the archipelagos as it did not specify the new status of these islands.

The People's Republic of China, which had already crystalized its Nine-dash line map, now emerged as a dominant player in the Sea. The government of Beijing started large-scale projects, pretended the world that it is the de facto master of 90 percent of the South China Sea. The United States and other surrounding countries of South China Sea were perturbed by those forwarding policies of Beijing. They insisted that China should respect international maritime rules and confine its policies to its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), limited to 200 nautical miles. Nevertheless, China pressed forward, building artificial islands and tightening control over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, reefs, seabeds and shores.

The global community has long urged China to obey the UN convention on the law of the sea,

which establishes an Exclusive Economic Zone, extending 200 nautical miles from a country's coastline. China signed UNCLOS, however, its claims do not fit within that framework. That's why, once again all global countries came together in 1970s, including China and the U.S., and negotiated over the maritime laws of the UN, which stated that "every country gets the same set of maritime claims and rights." Notwithstanding, China is not prepared to compromise over South China Sea and continues to treat its water and archipelagos as their "inherited asset".

In the 1990s, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) tried to draft a code of conduct for the South China Sea to restrain China's ambitions. However, noy all members were willing to confront Beijing. Cambodia, Laos and Thailand avoided taking strong stance, fearing the costs of offending a powerful neighbour.

By contrast, Vietnam repeatedly clashed with China, particularly over oil and gas exploration. On one occasion, angered by Chinese harassment of its oil activities, Vietnam's delegation disrupted ASEAN negotiations. Similarly, the Philippines has contested China's actions, especially regarding fishing rights. Millions of Filipinos depend on the Sea for food security, yet Chinese naval forces frequently prevent their fishermen from operating in disputed waters.

In May 2013, China sent several ships to a shoal just 105 nautical miles off the Philippine coast, well within its EEZ. The eight Filipino soldiers stationed there were soon surrounded, as the Chinese effectively blockaded the area. Militarily outmatched, the Philippines filed a petition at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, arguing that China's claims over Scarborough Shoal violated UNCLOS. After three years, in 2016, the Court sided with the Philippines, ruling that China's claims had no legal basis and ordering Beijing to respect the 200-nautical-mile EEZ limit.

Although China rejected the ruling, it briefly softened its stance to avoid diplomatic fallout. Yet in the last decade, Beijing has resumed rapid militarization of the South China Sea, constructing airstrips, fortifying reefs, and deploying coastguards and militias.

The United States is unique among the players: it has no territorial claims but insists on defending international waters under UNCLOS. Washington has repeatedly warned Beijing, stressing the principle of "freedom of the seas." U.S. warships regularly conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS), which China condemns as provocations designed to "curtail its rise as a great power.

The U.S. is interfering in the dispute of the South China Sea for its benefit and interest challenging China's claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea by using "Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS)". China has been the new emerging Superpower and the hegemony of the U.S. over world politics, and the economy is under threat. By using the conflict of the South China Sea along with some other international issues, Washington, D.C. is striving to produce every hurdle in the progress and rampantly developing economy of Beijing. Another reason behind the U.S. involvement is because of the South China Sea's paramount role in global maritime trade, including trade to and from the U.S. Approximately, 3.37 trillion dollars' worth of trade passes via this Sea annually, accounting for round about one-third of world waterway trade.

On October 27, 2015, tensions flared when a U.S. destroyer sailed within 12 nautical miles of China's man-made Subi Reef. China responded by sending its own destroyer, accusing the U.S. of trespassing. In 2015, Beijing further alarmed the world by proposing an Air Défense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea, requiring all aircraft to seek Chinese clearance. This move faced severe global backlash.

Recently, tensions with the Philippines have escalated again over Second Thomas Shoal (Renai Reef), where Manila seeks to establish permanent structures. Beijing regards this as a violation of international law and has warned that it will "resolutely respond." Clashes between Chinese and Philippine vessels, including ramming incidents and water cannon attacks, have intensified. In October 2023, a collision between a Filipino supply vessel and a Chinese coast guard ship was confirmed, injuring four crew members.

Mao Ming, the spoke person of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stated that "the building of

permanent basement by Manila will be a major move to once again renege on its commitments, change its policy and jeopardize the uninhibited and facility-free status of Second Thomas Shoal. This will seriously infringe on China's sovereignty and declaration on the conduct of parties in the Sea. China will resolutely respond to any provocation and infringement on its rights and firmly safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests".

China and the Philippines accused each other of ramming ships. Wu Qi An, the spokesperson of the Chinese defence ministry, asserted that "this action is extremely dangerous and not professional. Chinese coastguard took necessary enforcement measures which were justified and legitimate". Beijing's government also blame the U.S. for stripping up tensions in the South China Sea and considered it one of the factors that are helping the Philippines covertly. Wu Qi further elaborated in his speech that "we urge the U.S to immediately stop interfering in the conflict of South China Sea, stop embodying and supporting Philippine infringement and provocation, and safeguard regional peace and stability with tangible actions".

Manila government responded that Beijing has galvanized the skirmishes and exacerbated the environment of the South China Sea. Manila accused Beijing of repeatedly firing water cannons at the three resupply boards and also ramming another vessel. Manila alleged that Beijing was responsible for the clash between both naval forces when 135 Chinese vessels gathered near the Whitsun Reef coast in the disputed region. On the 23rd of October 2023, releasing images, China also confirmed collision between a Filipino supply board and a Chinese coast guard vessel in the disputed territory. The Philippines President, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. urged in response to Chinese intervening that "the recent involving no less than our AFP chief of staff is worrisome, but it is a proud determination of Filipino courage against coercion, and our firm belief to protect, preserve, and uphold our territorial integrity".

Amidst, this war of accusations between them, China started two-day patrol drills in the sea. China's military has begun routine patrols in the South China Sea as tensions emerge in the region. The drill will take place over two days, involving air forces. The Chinese military Southern Theatre Commanders said that the sheer purpose of the patrol is to deter activity that disrupts the Sea. While on the other side, the Philippines and the U.S. also began two-day joint patrolling in the South China Sea. However, news from the centre, in recent years, is that the relations are improving between China and the Philippines. The authorities of both countries have shown some positive signs to take situations back to normal. China says that the two sides have agreed to hold a meeting as soon as possible, under their bilateral consultation mechanism in a further bid to avoid escalation.

Wang Wenbin, the spokesperson of Chinese Foreign Ministry, said "We hope that the Philippines will make rational decisions, follows the effective way of getting along with our neighbours, and work with China to properly handle and manage the current maritime situations". The Chinese Coast Guard revealed that it had permitted the delivery of necessary supplies while expressing a resolute commitment to defend China's sovereignty and maritime rights in the Second Thomas Shore. He further stated that it had monitored the situation to laws and regulations and implemented temporary special arrangements for the Philippines to replenish essential delay supplies.

Conclusion

All in all, the South China Sea embodies one of the complex and consequential geopolitical challenges. Full of natural resources, significant for global trade, and strategically located, it is both an economic treasure and a focal point of constant political tension. The overlapping territorial claims, carved by historical narratives, nationalism and legal interpretations, have prepared a stage where regional powers and global actors project influence. The dispute demonstrates not only the rivalry between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours but also the broader strategic clash between China and the United States.

At the heart of woes lies the competition between international law and power politics. While the United Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a legal framework for maritime boundaries and the rights of coastal states, its enforcement remains weak in the face of military assertiveness and cherry-picking

interpretation. The permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 verdict invalidating China's "Nine-Dash Line" elucidates the authority of international law, yet China's rejection showcases the limits of legal instruments without collective enforcement.

For regional states, the South China Sea presents both an opportunity and vulnerability. Its natural resources of oil, gas, and fishing reservoirs could fuel economic progress, but unchecked militarization menaces stability and undermines cooperation. The freedom of navigation is not only a matter of regional interest but a global necessity, as one-third of global shipping passes through these waterways. Any escalation of skirmishes would have profound consequences for international trade, energy security, and the balance of power in Asian continent.

The way forward needs a multi-pronged approach. First and foremost, claimant states must strengthen dialogue under the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) frameworks while avoiding actions that escalate problems. Second, confident-building measures such as joint exploration, fisheries management and environmental protection could create shared benefits while diminishing suspension. Finally, external powers, the U.S., should encourage peaceful dispute resolution without transforming the South China Sea into a battleground for great-power confrontation.

In conclusion, the South China Sea is not only a regional maritime conflict, it is a testing ground for the resilience of international law, the future of multilateral cooperation, and the prospects of a peaceful world order. Whether it becomes a sea of disputes or a sea of shared prosperity will depend on the decisions made by regional states and the broader global community in the upcoming years.

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