

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: Who shall claim it?

Among the various issues occurring across the globe, the debate regarding 'The South China Sea' has gained the spotlight. It was merely a dispute between a few countries however it has now evolved into being global it will impact many countries and essentially global trade. The issue originates from China, as it opposes the United Nations Convention on the law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and claims it is entitled to more than the standard two-hundred nautical miles from its shores. China's representation of the map of the South China Sea and the portion the country asserts overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Which possess the question: *Who should claim the South China Sea?*

The South China Sea is considered to cover greater than three million square kilometres. Its features are claimed by the counties/states it borders China, Taiwan, Philippines, Borneo island, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The South China Sea is also home to some of the biggest islands commonly referred to as the Paracel and Spratly chains which was originally left uninhabited. However, news has spread that all countries have begun construction on the islands, whereas China is overpowering other countries and is carrying out operations which involve the process of turning coral reefs and submerged land masses into artificial islands and using them to their advantage as seen in *figure 1.1*. Since the year of 2013, Beijing began construction of airstrips and the helicopter bases and installed surface to air missiles on some their artificial islands and the already existing natural islands. Moreover, it is predicted that countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan are also having armed forces and military equipment resting on large islands.



Figure 1.1:
This image reveals the activities of China on reefs such as the Fiery Cross reef and transforming it into heavily armed bases.

South China Sea was under the governing body of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was formed in the year, 1964. It which stated that the bordering states are in complete control of area two hundred nautical miles from their shoreline. It also clearly explained that if the zones overlapped each other, then it is up to the neighbouring states/territories to decide the borders. Furthermore, UNCLOS specified that sectors that are outside the EEZ of other countries are to be classified as international waters, meaning that they are shared among everyone, which was established during the year of 1982. In addition, the UNCLOS banned any ownership or sovereignty over islands that are submerged or were once submerged but which have now undergone illegal construction. However, in 1947, which is before the formation of the UNCLOS legislation, China made its first statement about its claims over the South China Sea and also created a map outlining the area they wanted by drawing a U-shaped line, which overlapped the EEZ of many states. Even worse, China began forming artificial islands and arranging military setups. This increased the seriousness of the issue as merchant ships and fishing crews were not given permission to cross sections of South China Sea. Because of this, other countries also laid down military weapons and setup runways, helipads etc. Form this point onwards, countries opposed the UNCLOS laws in order to sustain their right on their portion of the South China Sea and to do so also brought in military support on nearby islands. As of 2018, South China Sea has turned into becoming disputed waters and therefore all imports and exports through this area are being stopped.

The South China Sea is represented as the centre of many global sea routes. \$5.3 trillion worth of the world shipping trades are run via these disputed waters. Approximately, triple the amount of oil transported through

the Suez Canal and fifteen times the amount that is transported via the Panama Canal is floated along the South China Sea. But due to the military check posts and other arrangements on the islands of South China Sea, it is dangerous for ships to use this route. Most importantly, South China Sea has the focus of many mining industries as it has been said that it contains roughly seven billion barrels of oil reserves and a bonus of nine-hundred trillion cubic feet of natural gas. If these calculations are right, the South China Sea will be placed second, below Saudi Arabia, in terms of the most oil content around the globe. This is also a potential reason for the 'greed' of the China to attain almost seventy per cent, as indicated on their map of the South China Sea. This can be supported by the investment of \$US20 Billion in the belief that such amounts of oil and gas truly exist in the South China Sea since they are in urgent need of energy. Countries are also interested in the small to large masses of land regardless of their position in the water, as even they may have the oil and natural gas within their intricate the, folded layers of the rock beneath the sea. Ultimately, the South China Sea is home to a fortune. Due to these benefits, many countries have already claimed islands belonging to the Spratlys: the Philippines, having the most, are entitled to EIGHT islands and significant portions of the South China Sea, Vietnam, Taiwan, and China each own portions of the South China Sea including the Spratly and Paracel island groups. Therefore, there are ample economic benefits to the countries sharing the South China Sea however not much in the near future since countries wouldn't be able to conduct mining operation until a solution has been found for the issue.

Suppose China was granted as per its proposed plans, the surrounding countries would be left devastated. In the first place, neighbouring countries would be barely able to conduct any transportation of goods through the South China Sea considering the fact that China would be owning seventy per cent of it, which simply makes it unfair as one country's greed puts so many others at stake! Moreover, China wants to preserve most of the natural resources for its own country leaving the other countries to rely purely on resources being mined with their own land. Through this China will be having a huge advantage, whereas the other countries will be limited to their supplies of oil and natural gas. This basically puts a seal on other countries' economic growth. On the other hand, China was initially short-handed in terms of resources due to its heavy population, but on approval of the section of the South China Sea, it will be able to be independent and serve its citizens' needs. But the main reason for this conflict is because on the path of China becoming self-supportive, many other countries are left unstable.



Figure 1.2

Figure 1.2:

This is the map highlighting the countries who should have a share in the highly beneficial South China Sea. The U – shaped dotted line represents the area China wants to claim which as evident is a HUGE share of the ocean itself.

Ultimately, we are led back to the question of “who should claim the South China Sea?” The conflict between the South China Sea has been unsolved for many years, it's time we bring an end to this now! If the construction to make artificial islands continue, the South China Sea will become a war zone and it is our responsibility to stop it.



Figure 1:

South China Sea, part of the western Pacific Ocean, which is to the south east of the Asian mainland. The South China Sea is surrounded by the east of Philippines and Taiwan; by the south east of Borneo; by the east of the Thailand; and by the east coast of Malaysia. The China Sea is mainly comprised of two parts, the East China Sea and the South China Sea. It

Appendix:

EEZ – Exclusive Economic Zone

UNCLOS – United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea

References:

Lowyinstitute.org. (2018). *South China Sea* | *Lowy Institute*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/issues/south-china-sea> [Accessed 22 Jul. 2018].

Tham, J. (2018). *Is the South China Sea Dispute a Foregone Conclusion?*. [online] The Diplomat. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/is-the-south-china-sea-dispute-a-foregone-conclusion/> [Accessed 22 Jul. 2018].

Cfr.org. (2018). *Global Conflict Tracker*. [online] Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea> [Accessed 18 Jul. 2018].

Pesek, W. (2018). *Making Sense of the South China Sea Dispute*. [online] Forbes.com. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/outofasia/2017/08/22/making-sense-of-the-south-china-sea-dispute/#16c8daef1c3b> [Accessed 16 Jul. 2018].

Short, J. (2016). *Troubled waters: conflict in the South China Sea explained*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: <http://theconversation.com/troubled-waters-conflict-in-the-south-china-sea-explained-59203> [Accessed 13 Jul. 2018].

Fisher, M. (2016). *The South China Sea: Explaining the Dispute*. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/15/world/asia/south-china-sea-dispute-arbitration-explained.html> [Accessed 12 Jul. 2018].

Mirski, S. (2015). *The South China Sea Dispute: A Brief History*. [online] Lawfare. Available at: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/south-china-sea-dispute-brief-history> [Accessed 11 Jul. 2018].

Figure 1:

Legacy.lib.utexas.edu. (2018). *China Maps - Perry-Castañeda Map Collection - UT Library Online*. [online] Available at: <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/china.html> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2018].

