

South China Sea: Why is it strategically important?

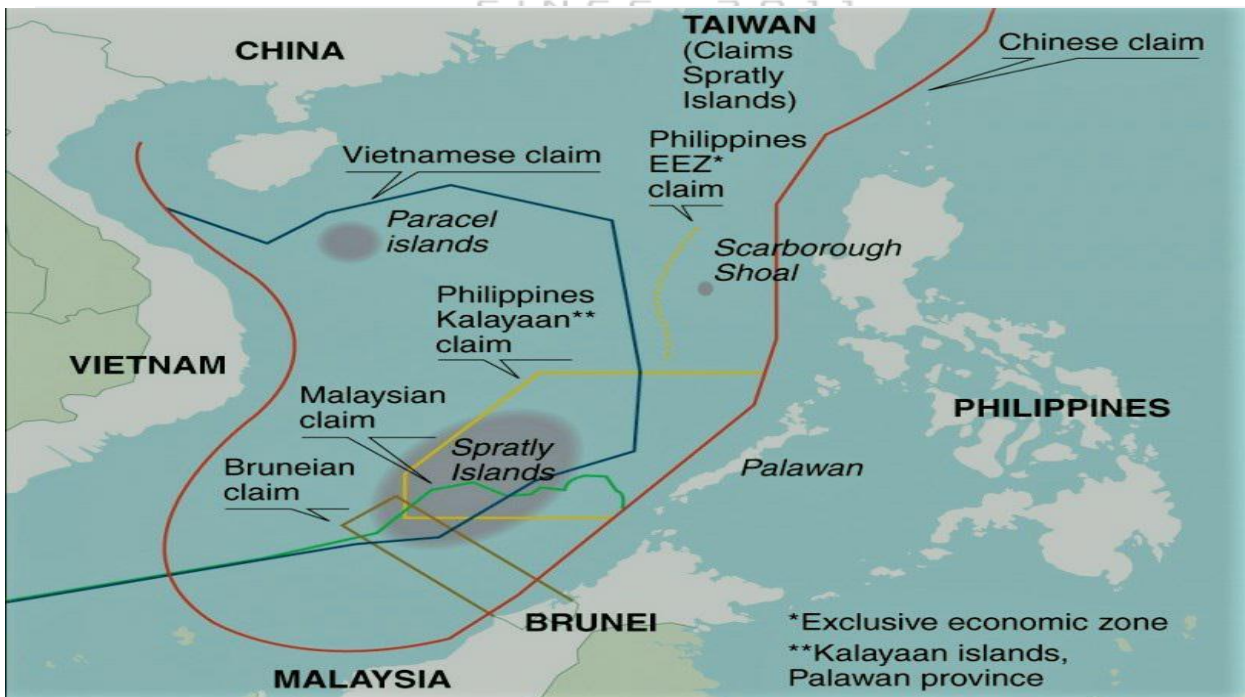
The South China Sea is a marginal sea that is part of the Pacific Ocean that extends from the Strait of Malacca in the southwest, to the Strait of Taiwan in the northeast. The littoral countries of the South China Sea are China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Importance of South China Sea



- The South China Sea is a busy international waterway, one of the main arteries of global trade worth more than \$5 trillion and is growing year on year. It is a rich source of hydrocarbons and natural resources.

Islands in the South China Sea



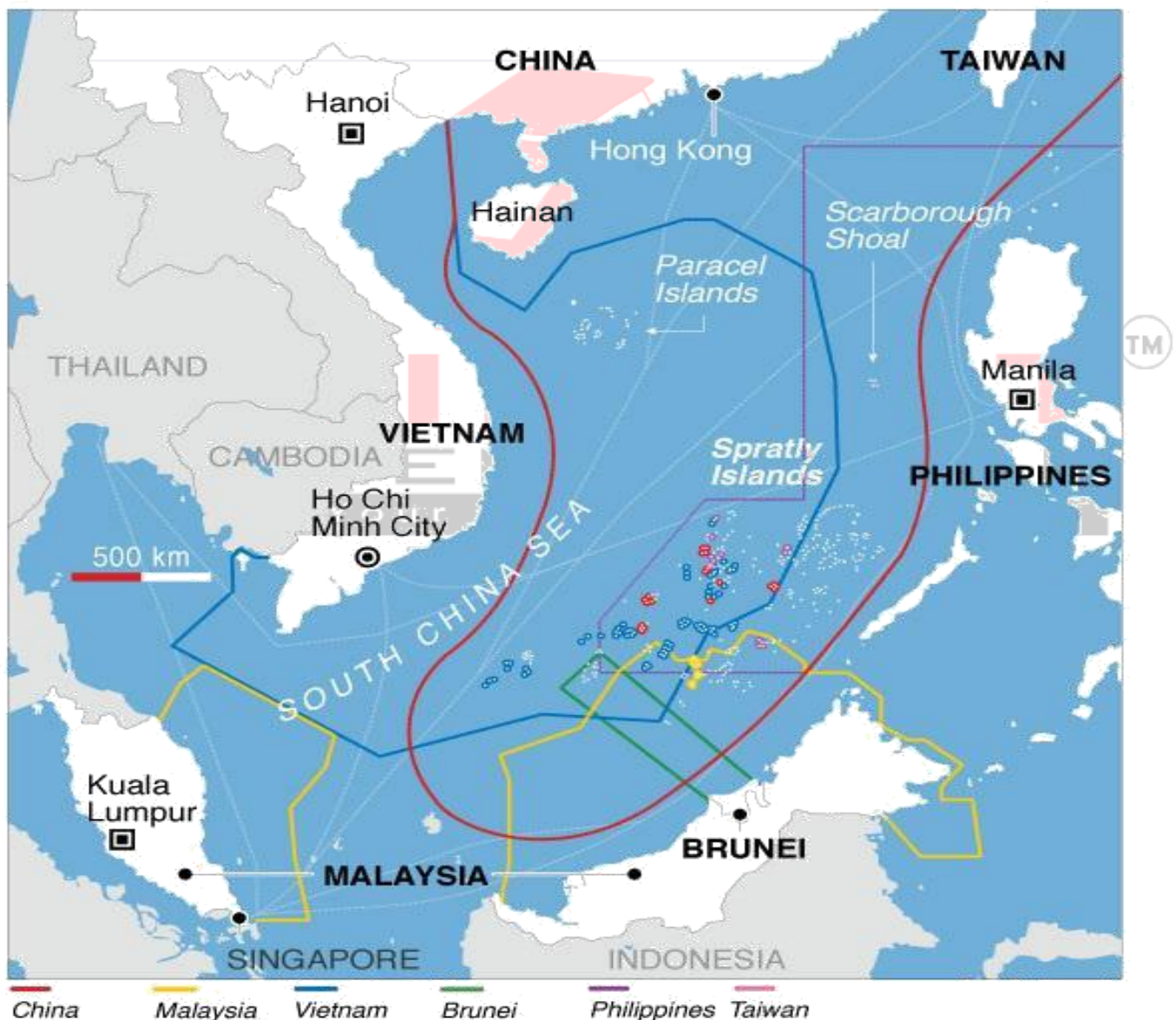
The islands of the South China Sea can be grouped into two island chains.

- **The Paracels Islands:** These are clustered in the northwest corner of the Sea.
- **The Spratly Islands:** These are located in the southeast corner.

South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea is an area of growing conflicts due to territorial claims by different countries. With respect to the Spratly Islands, different geographic features are reportedly occupied by claimants such as Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, and Malaysia. The Paracels Islands are claimed by China, Vietnam, and Taiwan.

History of South China Sea Dispute



- In the first half of the 20th century, the Sea remained almost quiet. In fact, at the end of World War II, no claimant occupied a single island in the entire South China Sea.
- China laid claim to the South China Sea in 1947. It demarcated its claims with a U-shaped line made up of **eleven dashes** on a map, covering most of the area.
- But two “dashes” were removed in the early 1950s to bypass the Gulf of Tonkin as a gesture to communist comrades in North Vietnam.
- The remaining ‘**nine-dash line**’ stretches hundreds of kilometers south and east of its southerly Hainan Island, covering almost 90% of South China Sea.
After 1960’s when the huge reserve of oil and natural gas were discovered in the region, the territorial claims started growing in an unprecedented manner.
- **The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**, which came into force in 1994, established a legal framework intended to balance the economic and security interests of coastal states with those of seafaring nations.
- While UNCLOS has been signed and ratified by nearly all the coastal countries in the South China Sea, based on their own interpretation of the UNCLOS, claimant countries started to legitimize their claims.
- In 2002, ASEAN and China came together to sign the Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea to keep disputes away. However, it didn’t achieve the desired outcomes.
- In 2009, Malaysia and Vietnam sent a joint submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) for setting out some of their claims. In response to this China submitted a map containing the infamous “nine-dash” line and due to which, there was no headway in the dispute resolution.

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PCA-Ruling and implications

- Both the Philippines and China laid their claims the Scarborough Shoal which is a little more than 100 miles from the Philippines and 500 miles from China.
- The Philippines and China are both dependent upon fishing in the South China Sea, specifically in the Scarborough Shoal, for the economic development and livelihood of their people. A tense but bloodless stand-off between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal in 2012, led to China gaining de facto control over the region. But in 2013, the Philippines raised the dispute with China to the PCA(Permanent Court Of Arbitration), saying China’s claims violated Philippines’ sovereignty under the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea(UNCLOS).
- The Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that Chinese claims over 90 percent of the South China Sea area are illegitimate and under UNCLOS, China is intruding into the Philippines’ sovereign waters as the 9-dash line which includes the Scarborough shoal and crosses into the Philippines EEZ.
- China outrightly rejected the ruling. China prefers bilateral negotiations with the other parties. But many of its neighbors argue that China’s relative size and clout give it an unfair advantage.

ASEAN and South China Sea

One of the fundamental principles of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been to resolve regional disputes by peaceful means. But over the years, the position of ASEAN on the South China Sea disputes has weakened its image internationally and failing to resolve this issue would lead to questions being raised about its credibility as an effective regional organization.

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The US and the South China Sea

- The U.S. has no claim in the South China Sea, but has been highly critical of China's assertiveness and insisted on free navigation of commercial vessels in the South China Sea is vital for regional and international trade.
- It conducted joint military patrols with the Philippines and Japan, Australia, and Indonesia.
- US also increased the financial support for enhancing the military capabilities of ASEAN and East Asian countries as well strengthened bilateral defense collaboration with these countries.

India and the South China Sea



- India remained acutely conscious of its official position of neither being party to the disputes nor taking sides for many years. But with increasing ties with East Asian countries (Act East Policy), India indirectly started raising concerns about Chinese illegitimate claims in the South China Sea. India believes that the disputes in the Southeast Asian littorals are a litmus test for the international maritime law.
- In the aftermath of the Hague Tribunal's verdict on the South China Sea, India obligated to take a principled stand on the issue of freedom of navigation and commercial access enshrined in the UNCLOS.
- Despite China's protests, India continues its oil exploration in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea from where ONGC Videsh Limited supplies oil to Vietnam.

- India also supports a negotiated settlement of Brunei’s maritime dispute with China and has inked defense cooperation agreement that would provide an institutional foundation for more collaborative work on maritime security and secure India’s energy lanes to Brunei.

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Summary

The South China Sea have been witnessing a lot of unfortunate conflicts in terms of economic interests, civilian security, and the environment in the recent past. The illegal construction of artificial islands and nuclear power plants on these fragile islands in the region raises severe environmental threats to the South China Sea.

The South China Sea situation will only be settled when the bordering countries change their mindsets from one of sovereignty and sole ownership of resources to one of functional cooperation and cooperative management. India’s rising clout in the region due to enhanced economic cooperation would go a long way in resolving the dispute

