

Forum: The Security Council

Topic: Addressing Territorial Disputes and Maritime Militarisation in the South China Sea

President

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) is one of the most important maritime regions in the world, with over one-third of global trade passing through it annually. It also holds vast crude oil reserves, granting it significant economic and political value. it. These advantages increase the desirability of this region for nations that have naval access to it. This competition for access to the SCS has created regional tensions between nations such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which have led to both direct altercations between the nations and economic repercussions for all those involved in the conflict.

In 1947, China made a claim for over 90% of the SCS, calling it the “eleven-dash” line. It was later amended in 1953, when the new government, the People’s Republic of China, shortened the reach of the line, removing two dashes to form the “nine-dash” line. This claim conflicted with the later United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, which established basic rules and frameworks for governing maritime regions. This treaty also established exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which directly overlapped with China’s “nine-dash” line claims. This prompted China to retaliate mainly against the Philippines, leading to a series of skirmishes and attacks on neighbouring nations' EEZs to establish a physical presence in the sea. These attacks prompted the Philippines to file a lawsuit with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2013, seeking a ruling on the legal basis of the “nine-dash” line. In 2016, the court ruled in favour of the Philippines, declaring that China’s “nine-dash” line has no legal basis. They also found that China’s actions violated the sovereignty of the Philippines by infringing on its territorial claims. China later declared this ruling “null and void.” (Bigl)

Since the ruling, tensions remain high, especially between China and the Philippines. These attacks have led to millions of dollars being spent on maritime warfare and on defending each country’s claim to the SCS. China has aggressively militarised its artificial islands, and now uses them as outposts to conduct attacks against Philippine coast guards, patrol, and supply vessels.

Definition of Key Terms

Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ)

An area in the sea, extending about 200 nautical miles from the coast of the country, where the state has exclusive rights over resource management and exploitation.

Sovereignty

The supreme, independent authority of a state to govern itself, manage its territory, and make laws without external interference

Null and void

To describe something as having no legal force, binding power, or validity.

Tribunal

An official body or person given the authority to judge, adjudicate, and settle legal disputes

Ratification

The official confirmation, approval, or validation of a previously agreed-upon action, agreement, or contract.

Grey Zone Weapon

Is any non-violent, non-lethal weapon used to attack an enemy without starting a real war.

General Overview

Establishing the “nine-dash” line

China established its “eleven-dash” line in 1947 during the era of the Republic of China. The Republic of China justified this line with historical claims, arguing that Chinese fishermen, explorers, and naval expeditions discovered, mapped, and named the Paracel and Spratly islands that the line encompassed. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took over and inherited the “eleven-dash” line claim. Afterwards, in 1953, the Chinese Communist Party removed two dashes from the line, receding territory in the Gulf of Tonkin to Vietnam, in order to strengthen diplomatic ties with North Vietnam. This then formed the “nine-dash” line that we know today.

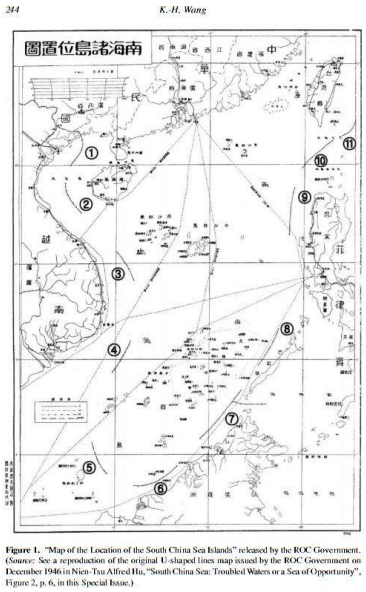
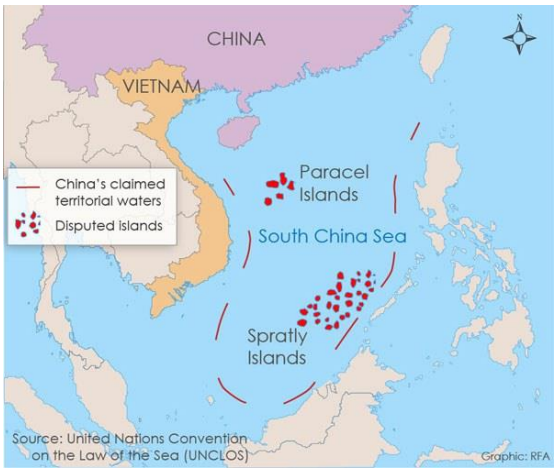


Figure 1. "Map of the Location of the South China Sea Islands" released by the ROC Government. (Source: See a reproduction of the original U-shaped lines map issued by the ROC Government on December 1946 in Nien-Tsu Alfred Hu, "South China Sea: Troubled Waters or a Sea of Opportunity", Figure 2, p. 6, in this Special Issue.)

Map of the eleven-dash line (Beeson)



Map of the nine-dash line (Risman)

Pre-UNCLOS era

Prior to the establishment of the UNCLOS, there was no modern, universally agreed-upon method of governing the oceans; this meant that the SCS was largely unregulated, and consequently, controlling islands became a key strategy for asserting control over the sea. From 1953 to 1965, countries in the region, such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, fought for control of islands in the SCS to establish naval bases on those islands. Countries with access to the South China Sea fought over the Paracel Islands in particular due to their location and their ability to sustain life.

However, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which pushed the US to enter the Vietnam War, and the introduction of the United States into the Vietnam War, priorities shifted, and access to the sea became limited, with the United States using the SCS as a highway for troop

deployment. Countries could no longer attack each other's naval bases for fear of running into the United States Navy, which would risk a direct war between the countries. Furthermore, American troops in Vietnam caused China to prepare for a land invasion from the Americans; they defunded the naval attacks on other countries' bases until the threat was removed from the region (Naughtington). This acted as a safety period in the SCS, with no major attacks for the duration of the Vietnam War. In 1973, the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords, withdrawing all troops from Vietnam.

This caused the nations of the region to go back to reclaiming and attacking small islands in the SCS. The battle of the Paracel Islands began on the 19th of January 1974 and concluded on the 20th. It was an effort by the South Vietnamese Navy to split control of the islands between China and Vietnam, since Vietnam controlled a very small portion of the islands. The battle ended in a victory for China, and they ended up occupying South Vietnamese holdings of the Paracel Islands. It was reported that 53 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed, and 16 were heavily injured, while 18 Chinese soldiers were killed and 67 were wounded (War History). China has held control over the Paracel Islands ever since, despite Vietnam's public claims over the islands. China established complete control over the Paracel Islands and uses them as a major military base today.

UNCLOS

In 1982, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea established a 200 nautical mile EEZ for every nation and a 12 nautical mile territorial sea for every nation's coast. These EEZs and territorial sea boundaries directly overlapped with the "nine-dash" line China had established decades prior, meaning that China did not legally hold claims over 90% of the sea. While the agreement did not enter into global effect until 1994, China ratified the agreement in 1996.



(The Economist)

China retaliated by claiming and occupying important locations across the SCS, such as Mischief Reef in 1995, a reef deep inside the Philippines' EEZ, and it also engaged in a standoff against the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal, successfully blocking the Philippines from entering its own waters. This pushed the Philippines to file an international lawsuit in 2013 under the UNCLOS. They argued against the legality of the "nine-dash" line but sought no financial or monetary compensation.

Prior to the verdict, China underwent large-scale island-building measures. Where they poured several tons of sand onto live coral reefs, which allowed them to raise 7 islands between the years of 2013 and 2015. These islands came complete with military runways and missile batteries, before a court verdict could stop the operation.

Court ruling

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled in favour of the Philippines. They ruled that the “nine-dash” line was invalid and had no legal basis. They also ruled that the islands located in the SCS, such as the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, all of which are occupied, are incapable of generating a 200 nautical mile EEZ. The court also found that China violated the Philippines' sovereignty by interfering with Philippine petroleum distribution, fishing, and by constructing artificial islands. However, the court ruled that both Chinese and Philippine fishermen possessed fishing rights at Scarborough Shoal, and that China breached international law by restricting their access (Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling (PCA)).

Post Court Ruling

With the ruling coming out in favour of the Philippines, China officially rejected the tribunal’s decision and jurisdiction, declaring the ruling “null and void” (Bigl). This pushed China to militarise its artificial islands, going against its past promises against doing so (Ortagus). They installed radar systems, anti-ship missiles, and jet hangars, as well as physically militarising all islands within the “nine-dash” line. This made them capable of defending the line physically so that no other country has access to it, even when the PCA ruled against its legality. This operation of military expansion and security lasted from 2016 to 2022.

China understood that sending actual naval warships to kick out Philippine and Vietnamese fishermen would look like an act of war, which could invite unwanted external intervention. Instead, during early 2022, China would pay fishermen to travel in large, heavily reinforced, metal-hulled boats and to travel in swarms. They would move towards the areas where Vietnamese and Philippine fishermen fish and anchor there. This would happen across hundreds of disputed reefs, and instead of fishing, they would anchor their boats side by side, creating a blockade of large, metal boats that would restrict access by other countries’ fishermen to China’s “nine-dash” line. If any foreign boat attempted to pass, the boats would crowd and block it while the China Coast Guard (CCG) would back them up.

Present Day

Over the past year, China's aggression has increased significantly. Specifically targeting the Philippines' boats, CCG boats have begun attacking Philippine fishing boats, deliberately ramming into smaller wooden boats, as well as using pressurised water cannons at a close distance, capable of shattering boat windshields, ripping off metal railings, and severely injuring crew members. Chinese forces armed with axes and knives have begun boarding boats and stealing navigation equipment, as well as slashing their rubber hulls. They have also installed physical floating blockades across the entrances of contested reefs and zones to seal off these reefs and shoals from local fishermen completely.

Major Parties Involved

Chinese Communist Party (PRC)

After taking control in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party inherited the nine-dash line claim in the form of the eleven-dash line. It was then amended to strengthen political ties to Vietnam. They are the main disputant over territory. China defends its "nine-dash" claim over 90% of the SCS more aggressively each year, even with the PCA ruling against its legality and eligibility.

The Philippines

The Philippines is the main opposition to the PRC and its "nine-dash" claim. After filing an international lawsuit against the PCA in 2013 and winning, they remain focused on reclaiming territory, fishing rights, and access to their own EEZ's. They are also the main target of China's blockade tactics. They base their claims to parts of the South China Sea on geographic proximity and the UN-mandated 200 nautical mile EEZ rule.

Vietnam

Vietnam holds the highest number of military outposts on islands such as the Spratly Islands and the Paracels. They are also undergoing their own island-building operations. Their claims to the South China Sea are based on historical inheritance after being liberated from French rule and French troop withdrawals in 1954

Brunei

Brunei bases its claims in the South China Sea on the UN-mandated EEZ rules and does not aim to expand or take over any islands; however, they do aim to protect its UN-mandated Exclusive Economic Zone, being a more economically motivated claim.

Indonesia

Indonesia aims to keep its fishing areas safe from Chinese blockades, as many rich fishing areas in Indonesia fall under China's "nine-dash" line claim. This results in frequent standoffs between the CCG and the Indonesian Coast Guard over illegal fishing disputes.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN is a 10-nation political bloc including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. They have attempted to negotiate a binding "code of conduct", which aims to stop the conflict between the nations of Southeast Asia from being affected by China's attacks and those of the PRC. However, its internal division between pro-Chinese countries such as Laos and Cambodia has stalled the negotiations significantly, hindering its effectiveness and lowering the possibility of a resolution to the conflict.

The United States

Though claiming no territory within the SCS, the US frequently runs “freedom of navigation” operations to counter Chinese blockades. They have also signed a Mutual Defense treaty with the Philippines, declaring that if Philippine vessels are attacked, the US has the legal obligation to intervene.

Japan

While Japan holds no claims in the SCS directly, they consider the East China Sea (ECS), a sea in which they operate and hold valuable trading routes, and the SCS as interconnected and important for its trade. This means that they aim to protect peace in the SCS by partnering militarily and legally with Southeast Asian nations to protect their own trading lines.

Timeline

Date	Event
1949 / December	The PRC inherits the “eleven-dash” line claim over more than 90% of the SCS.
1951 / August	The US and the Philippines sign a mutual defence treaty, meaning that if the Philippines gets attacked, the US is legally obligated to intervene.
1953	The PRC removes two dashes from the map, conceding the Gulf of Tonkin to North Vietnam to strengthen political ties, creating the “nine-dash” line.
1965 / March	President Lyndon B. Johnson declares American military deployment to Vietnam, halting naval military activities in the SCS for parties not transporting troops through it.
1973 / March	

	President Richard Nixon withdraws all American soldiers from the region, bringing back the naval military activities of nations bordering the SCS.
1974 / January	The battle for the Paracel Islands ends in a victory for China, giving the Chinese complete control over the Paracel Islands.
1982/ December	UNCLOS is signed, and the framework is adopted, establishing a 12 nautical mile (NM) territorial sea and a 200 NM EEZ for countries globally.
1994 /November	After more than a decade since its introduction, UNCLOS enters into force as binding international law. It establishes a global legal baseline for maritime activity.
1995 / February	China occupies Mischief Reef, a small reef within the Philippines' 200 NM EEZ, directly defying the newly active UNCLOS.
1996 / May	China ratifies UNCLOS and accepts it as binding international law.
2002 / November	China and the 10 ASEAN member states sign the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), promising not to occupy any currently uninhabited islands or reefs.
2009 / May	Malaysia and Vietnam filed a claim with the UN to extend their continental shelves. China then retaliates and sends its "nine-dash" line claim to the UN for the first time.
2012 / April	Chinese vessels engage in a multi-week standoff against the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal. China manages to block Philippine fishermen and law enforcement from entering their own historical fishing waters. This gives China de facto control of the reef.

2013 / January	The Philippines files an international lawsuit against China under the UNCLOS framework. Challenging the legality of the “nine-dash” claim.
2013 / December	China begins its development of artificial islands by pouring several tons of sand on existing reefs.
2014 / April	With rising Chinese aggression in the SCS, the US and the Philippines sign the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Allowing the US to build facilities and deploy troops, planes, and ships to Philippine hangars and bases.
2015 / August	China officially declares it will be halting its development of artificial islands after having raised seven of them.
2015 / September	China publicly promises against the militarisation of the new artificial islands.
2016 / July / 12	The PCA rules in favour of the Philippines, ruling unanimously that China’s “nine-dash” claim has no legal basis. China then officially denies the ruling by the PCA, claiming it to be “null and void” (Bigl). Defending its “nine-dash” claim.
2016 / July / 13	China breaks its promises against militarisation of the new artificial islands and begins installing Jet hangars, radar networks, and anti-ship missiles.
2016 / August	China begins its swarming operation. Paying Chinese fishermen to sail with armoured boats in order to scare away and stop local fishermen from entering fishing spots native to them.
2021 / October	Vietnam launches a dredging campaign, managing to reclaim 1,120 hectares of land as of June 2026.

2022 / July	China disbands its swarming fleet, moving towards coast guard blockades and attacks instead.
2023 / February	The first incident of non-lethal violence occurs near Second Thomas Shoal, with a CCG boat using laser cannons to temporarily blind a Philippine patrol vessel crew.
2023 / March	The Philippines begins its upgrades on Thitu Island, unveiling a new runway, advanced domain awareness, a runway extension in June 2025, aircraft hangars, and troop quarters, completing the operation in April 2026.
2024 / May	China issues a new law allowing CCG vessels to detain foreign nationals and vessels for up to 60 days without charge if they cross into Chinese waters without a formal charge.
2025 / June	Japan begins naval exercises alongside the Philippine Navy in the West Philippine Sea, a disputed zone between China and the Philippines.
2026 / January	Japan and the Philippines sign a defence pact allowing tax-free transfer of ammunition, fuel, and supplies.

Attempts to Solve the Issue

1. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) – 1982

The United Nations held a convention in 1982 that aimed to restrict military presence in the waters, creating EEZs that prevent any military ships from entering other

nations' sovereign waters. Yet, it has caused some issues due to not being clear enough about overlapping territorial claims.

2. Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) – 2002

ASEAN member states, alongside China, signed a political agreement that promised to lower tensions in the SCS by providing a truce between the nations due to rising regional tensions and fear of a regional war or the outbreak of an international war with US intervention. This solution failed due to its being entirely non-binding, allowing artificial island building over the next two decades.

3. South China Sea PCA Ruling – 2016

The Philippines submitted a lawsuit challenging the legality of the “nine-dash” line in 2013. In 2016, the PCA ruled in favour of the Philippines, giving the verdict that the “nine-dash” line has no legal basis whatsoever. China countered this ruling by officially calling it “null and void” (Bigl). Even though the ruling is legally binding, there was no enforcement, and the Philippines did not seek any monetary compensation, which caused the ruling to have no binding effect, causing China to declare it null and void instead of taking it more seriously

4. Code of Conduct (COC) Negotiations – 2026

A stalled negotiation between ASEAN members to formalise the 2002 DOC into an enforceable, legally binding agreement. Negotiations have been heavily stalled due to internal conflict between pro-China nations and the rest of the ASEAN members.

Possible solutions

1. Introducing a targeted zoning framework in the SCS

Most seas in the world have zoning frameworks, such as the Seychelles and the Red Sea, splitting up the areas in the sea into colour zones. Creating green and yellow zones in the SCS would help protect fishing activities but restrict large industrial or military operations, helping to reduce tensions and conflict.

2. Push for a Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) information hub

An information hub operated with the help of ASEAN members would include 24/7 satellite imagery as well as push for transparency. This would force China to take accountability for the operations, rather than deny any association to begin with, as well as reduce the risk of a surprise attack on a nation's islands, helping reduce military activities by nations in the SCS.

3. Capping the Coast Guard vessel size and capacity

China currently deploys coast guard ships weighing 3,000-10,000, fitted with laser cannons and pressurised water cannons. Capping the tonnage of ships entering disputed areas such as the Spratly Islands at 1,500 tons would limit the firepower of boats and decrease the risk of an attack on all the nations in the region.

Guiding Questions

1. Which communities and claimant nations are most affected by grey-zone aggression, and how are their rights violated?
2. How can green and yellow marine zones de-escalate standoffs in features like Scarborough or Second Thomas Shoal?
3. What are the challenges of enforcing a strict tonnage cap on coast guard vessels in disputed waters?
4. How can international bodies restrict gray-zone weapons like water cannons and military lasers?
5. How should the operational involvement of non-claimants like Japan and the U.S. be regulated?
6. Which international bodies or neutral arbiters are best positioned to enforce solutions?
7. What are the primary structural deadlocks preventing the finalisation of the 2026 ASEAN-China Code of Conduct?
8. How could a proposed Autonomous MDA Data Hub be funded and managed to ensure its political neutrality?
9. What mechanisms or penalties should be applied if a nation violates the proposed 1,500-ton coast guard cap?

10. How could international maritime law distinguish between legitimate civilian fishers and covert maritime militias?

Appendix

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