



SECURITY
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Security Council

TOPIC A:

Escalating Military Operations Within the South China Sea

Undersecretary:

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INTRODUCTION

Among some of the most important trade routes of the entire world lies the South China Sea, through which more than 3 trillion dollars worth of trade sail during a year. Small clusters of islands (like the Paracels and Spratlys) in this area had largely been unclaimed until the 1970's, but recent events have sparked growing interests and concerns over this region. In 2013, global outlets began reporting that China appeared to be building artificial islands and slowly militarizing them to validate their claims that the South China Sea belongs mostly to them. In the following years, many of the closeby neighbors, who also happen to be US allies, began complaining publicly about China's operations in this region. While the conflict remains under control, fears of a military conflict continue to rise alongside tensions between the countries involved.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

For millions of years, China had been a land based power and didn't count with (or need) a large military force. However, that has slowly started to change as their interest in the South China Sea has grown. The present situation in the area can be traced back to 1929, after Japan was defeated in World War II and China was in charge of setting important new borders, creating the "nine dash line" in the process. This line is a vague delimitation of how much the nation's property extends into the ocean; if an area resides inside those borders, both it and it's resources belong entirely to China. But this is where the other nations come into play.

The South China Sea counts with an incredible amount of precious resources, and some 30% of the world's trade goes through this trade route - including essential (and substantial) amounts of natural gas, oil, and fishing shipments for all of the countries that surround it. This is why, as China claims property of most of the region due to "historical reasons", other nations like Brunei, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines do not agree with that posture; they also claim parts of this territory, but they base their argument "off the UN Law of the Seas, which says a country's territorial waters extend 200 miles off their shore; an area called the Exclusive Economic Zone, or EEZ. Countries have exclusive rights to all the resources and trade in their EEZ - it's their sovereign territory" (Ellis, 2017).

Nevertheless, this law is often misinterpreted because many of those borders intersect with each other - a country's exclusive economic zone might be partially inside another, and this complicates the appropriate enforcement of the agreement. The Spratly Islands, for example, are a cluster of barely inhabited islands within the heart of the South China Sea, ones that China considers their entirely their own, even though Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam also claim them. These seem like relatively unimportant piles of sand at a first glance, but if a country owns them, their EEZ expands along with those areas, providing a larger economic zone for the country in those trade routes. In the past, as long as they had a couple of soldiers or residents within them, they could be claimed by the interested countries which is why, considering that the "nine dash line" covered many

empty areas of the South China Sea, the country had trouble justifying their claims, so they began taking a different approach.

In 2013, news broke out about islands being built within that same line; “In recent years, satellite imagery has shown China’s increased efforts to reclaim land in the South China Sea by physically increasing the size of islands or creating new islands altogether. In addition to piling sand onto existing reefs, China has constructed ports, military installations, and airstrips...” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Tensions began to rise as the country also began sending warships to surround other islands claimed by countries like the Philippines to cut them off from their property and further expand China’s EEZ, forcefully aiming to prove that they do own the rights to the entire South China Sea.

Now counting with 20 outposts in Paracel Islands and 7 in Spratly, the United States has become worried over China’s actions; Secretary of State Michael Pompeo released a press statement on July of 2020, in which he stated the following: “The United States champions a free and open Indo-Pacific. Today we are strengthening U.S. policy in a vital, contentious part of that region — the South China Sea. We are making clear: Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them”. As the relationship between both countries keep worsening, and considering that many of the nations challenging China’s claims are US allies, the fear of a military conflict to gain control over the South China Sea is growing.

UNITED NATIONS INTERVENTION

A critical point of intervention came in 2013 when, after China began cutting the Philippines off from its islands, the latter took the matter to an international tribunal, arguing that China’s actions were abusive. 3 years later, the court declared that the “nine dash line” was indeed invalid, so the Philippines won the case. China backed off for some time and supported the formation of a new “code of conduct” for member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to respect within the South China Sea, but this code has yet to be formed. No real sanction was imposed on China and global attention drifted from the matter, particularly because some countries in ASEAN are not willing to challenge China’s actions, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

The United States navy, acting on behalf of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is responsible for patrolling international waters (any area outside of the 5 countries’ EEZ is within international jurisdiction), and has been trying to keep the Chinese government in check by conducting 7 “Freedom of Navigation Operations” (FONOPs) since 2017. As tensions have risen, both the United States and China continue having “military drills” around those areas to warn each other; the US has argued that, according to UNCLOS, they don’t need to notify before doing so and China accuses the US of attempting to spark unwarranted conflict.



POINTS TO CONSIDER

- The formation of a code of conduct from ASEAN would only serve as a management rulebook, and would therefore not resolve any ownership issues.
- It's important to note that, while the US is acting on behalf of UNCLOS, the country has never ratified the agreement itself.
- The main countries that have directly challenged China about their actions are Vietnam and the Philippines, both supported and protected by the US in any potential conflict.
- While the Philippines won the case in 2016 and China seemed to cooperate, it has failed to recognize the jurisdiction of the court as of this day.
- Some of the US's naval exercises have been done along the navies of France, Japan, and Australia near the Bay of Bengal



QUESTIONNAIRE

- A. What is my country's position?
- B. What are my country's policies?
- C. What can my country do to solve this issue?
- D. Which countries can my delegation work with?
- E. What are three possible solutions?
- F. What has been done to solve the problem?

USEFUL LINKS

- “Why China is building islands in the South China Sea” - Vox
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luTPMHC7zHY&list=PLJ8cMiYb3G5e4MOMzf-piIWQb4iNRW18g>
- “South China Sea: What's China's plan for its 'Great Wall of Sand'?” - BBC
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53344449>
- “ASEAN Is Failing On The South China Sea Issue” - The Diplomat
<https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/asean-is-failing-on-the-south-china-sea-issue/>

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