

Introduction

The South China Sea, referred to by many names, has been a territory in dispute for many years. In the area, there have been continuous infringements on states' borders, rights, and legitimacy. China is the biggest agitator in the conflict. China has spent many years pinning for the plentiful resources rumored to be hidden within the sea. China has spent recent years patrolling, surveilling, claiming, and building islands to expand its boundaries and rights within the sea. In addition, there are many claimants also defending their rights to the materials and territory the sea can provide them. As a result, many international organizations, state actors, and domestic actors have been brought into the never-ending threat of war. In this paper, I will more in-depth discuss the issues that are continuing to arise in the South China Sea. I will analyze the major components of the issue, how it may be approached and is, and discuss its importance to international relations.

Situation Review

Conflict in the South China Sea has been an issue for a long time, the tension and conflict growing over decades. The South China Sea has many supposed valuable resources like natural gas and oil reserves. The countries surrounding these areas compete for these resources, but China has taken the most drastic steps to secure the area. Not everyone agrees with what China is doing. As China pushes itself farther out of its boundaries and begins to infringe on surrounding ASEAN nations, other states are beginning to push back at China's overstep. In addition, outside actors are beginning to step into the matter to secure their interests.

Deep and Proximate Causes:

- Proximate

The biggest, stare in the face, issue in the South China Sea conflict is who will claim the rights to take and use the supposed reserves of oil and other resources that possibly lie at the bottom of the sea. The area is also a valuable trading route. China is creating artificial islands, building up a navy on these islands, and sending out ships to survey and intimidate other sailors in the sea. By creating and claiming artificial lands China expands its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), quite unjustifiably. These facts create tensions as the looming threat China concerns the ASEAN states that also claim this territory. Other outside actors like the U.S. find China’s actions as distasteful and perceive it as a major threat to its alliances with other states involved.

- Deep

There could be many deep causes for the conflicts and tensions that surround the competing countries in the South China Sea. One of these causes is the release of the sea from the hold of Japan. As a result, no details or actions were taken to designate certain areas of the sea to the other states touched by it. Another cause could be the failure of previous international agreements. In the past, China has made agreements with international organizations (ASEAN) to manage guidelines on what rights China and other nations have in the area. The Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was the agreement made to promote cooperation in the area. But as of late China has done its best to curb these agreements. Another factor to take into account in this conflict is the long-standing wariness the involved nations have had towards China. The past of China reaching for more economic and political power may contribute to the uneasiness of the ASEAN states, Japan, and the U.S as they may continue to question China’s motives for militarily expanding and reaching for these natural resources so intently. The wariness the involved states have, is not only

geared towards China, but each other, as everyone is competing for the sea. One other deep cause that greatly brings the U.S. into the conflict is that China still constitutionally claims rights to Taiwan. This fact is disputed. There is already a history of discord between Taiwan and China, as a result, the stakes rise if the states go to battle over the dispute, bringing more actors into the conflict.

Major International Actors:

The major international actors/institutions involved in this conflict are China, the United States, the UN, ASEAN itself as an organization, and the ASEAN states, including but not limited to Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, and Brunei. Japan, international corporations/companies, and Australia may also be considered actors in this issue.

The ASEAN states are involved in a dispute with each other over various islets, reefs, etc. Each has also started to create ways to start farming the natural resources from the sea. With China pushing out and posing a threat to these farms and states, they lie uneasy. With the threat of China raising arms against one of the United States Allies, there is the threat of a clash between China and the U.S. as it is accountable for defending and upholding its alliances. In addition, as China has pushed forward with its surveillance missions and brought more military to their artificial islands, the U.S. has retaliated. The U.S. blacklisted several Chinese companies, corporations, and individuals that supplied the islands with the military, or were involved in the creation of them. These companies perform trade with several other companies overseas. If any product has U.S.-made/produced material, it cannot go to the Chinese. As a result, trade becomes more difficult for these corporations. It will have negative effects on China's economy and the companies involved.

The UN also has played a role in the conflict. In 2016, there was a tribunal in the Hague in the Netherlands voting for the Philippines. The case questioned China’s rights to illegally fish and construct within the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The case did not call to give lands or territory to either state, but rather it forced the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) to look into China’s historical claims to certain territories within the borders of the South China Sea. The court ruling in favor of the Philippines pushes for China to take a step back within the sea. In addition, the court ruled that the commonly disputed Spratly Islands were not truly islands and were not entitled to as big of a zone as islands usually are. This not only negatively affected China, but also Taiwan, and even the Philippines to some extent. Unfortunately, in the years following, China did not truly accept the ruling. The UN is not a major supporter of China, but it cannot do much if China refuses to cooperate.

A newer actor in the conflict is Australia. Australia has been involved with China for many years, however, it is only recently Australia has openly been speaking on the issue of China pining for more territory. China has been continuously sending out surveillance missions that go out farther and more frequently. A Chinese ship was spotted surveilling Australian military bases while within their Exclusive Economic Zone. Although Australia claims China does have the right to do so, under maritime law, they continuously become wearier of China thus creating another foe.

Major Domestic Actors:

A major domestic actor in the conflict is the President of China, Xi Jinping, as he promised to bring the South China Sea under the jurisdiction and grasp of China. In addition, Beijing, China’s capital, plays a role in China’s expansion into the sea. With support from Beijing China has been able to expand its navy. As a result, following the creation of the artificial islands, China has equipped them with navy personnel, ships, and equipment. The equipment going to the islands comes from the manufacturing, construction, technology, and communication companies stated before in the Major International Actors section. Although previously listed there, they are also domestic actors. They play a role in the actual creation and expansion of China’s reach. These companies include Guangzhou Haige Communications Group, China Communications Construction Co., Beijing JUANJIA Telecommunication, China Electronics Technology Group Corp., and China Shipbuilding Group.

Not necessarily major domestic actors, but domestic actors nonetheless, are the everyday fishermen/sailors at sea. As China sends out its boats into international and foreign waters, they bump into such people. Should something unacceptable happen to these citizens, a fight is a likely occurrence. Skirmishes at sea could inevitably lead to a bigger fight.

International Steps:

There have been continuous international steps to settle the conflict and decrease tensions. One of these steps was the Declarations of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea made in 2002 between ASEAN and China. The agreement was made to promote cooperation and guidelines for the states to abide by. However, the agreement was largely unsuccessful as China has continued to disregard and curb the accord. On the other hand, there is the direct presence of the United States in the area. The U.S. has become involved in

the issue not only to protect its alliances but also its interests. The U.S. believes if China successfully claims the sea it could serve as a hindrance for its influence in the area. China poses an overarching threat in the long run to the U.S. and other countries should China get its hands on all the resources the sea could provide. As a result, the United States has taken multiple measures to survey and keep an eye on China. To do this the U.S. has increased its military operations in the area, conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). China claims this is illegal trespassing, but its complaints go unheard. Evidence suggests that as China continues to become more aggressive, should it clash with the U.S. or one of its alliances a battle is imminent.

Why the World Should Care

It is easy to overlook a situation that, to some, maybe miles and miles away. The conflict that is continuing to swell in the South China Sea may seem minuscule and insignificant, but it may have greater effects on the world than most anticipate. One must consider the fact that China, as well as the U.S., are two of the major actors within the conflict. Although there are many more, these two states going to war, or battle could cause political and economic instability internationally. Should the conflict remain unresolved, and China continues to push its limits, a battle may be inevitable. If a showdown occurs between China and the U.S. what would happen to the surrounding countries? What effects would it have if China won? What could be the possible outcomes if the U.S. won?

One of the biggest issues that arise from the conflict is that of international trade. In the modern world of globalization, everyone relies on each other to give what the other does not have access to. Rising tensions may result in the closing of borders or products to and from certain states. An action like this, which is already beginning to occur (U.S. blacklisting Chinese companies), would affect almost every person in the world. East and Southeast

Asian countries are some of the biggest exporters of refined products around the world. In addition, the South China Sea has a lucrative and bustling trade route. Should tensions rise and borders close, it may be harder to find favorite snacks, clothes, technology, and knick-knacks.

On the political scale, one may question, what happens when one side wins? The U.S. and China both being hegemonic powers makes for a dangerous war. Should China win, it has the right to impose itself on the territories it claims as its own. China could take Taiwan. China could use the trade route and resources that flow within the sea for whatever they please. If there was a win on the U.S. side, would China finally back down on its claims? Once again, the U.S. would have asserted its dominance over China. However, China and the U.S. are not the only actors involved. Should a battle happen, what happens to the countless people that live in that region? Which countries will support which? A war would be detrimental on many levels. There would be a loss of international balance, as well as the lives of thousands.

The world must pay more attention to the rising tensions in the South China Sea. It would not be beneficial to individuals or the international community for two of the biggest global powers to go to war. There must be cooperation, from all sides. Cooperation is the key to preventing a battle, but it will be hard to attain. International institutions must create agreements, treaties, codes of conduct that hold authority and punishment if not followed. Otherwise, China will continue to deny the legitimacy of international organizations, delegitimizing it in the eyes of the people, and building China’s confidence to infringe further on other states.