



South China Sea Dispute

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Why in News

Recently, **China warned off a USA warship** sailing near contested **Paracel islands in the South China Sea (SCS)**.

Key Points

About

- **China's Claim:**
 - **China lays claim to nearly all of the South China Sea**, including the Paracel Islands.
However, Taiwan, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam also claim parts of the region, **believed to hold valuable oil and gas deposits**.
 - It has alleged that the USA warship broke into China's *Xisha* (Paracel) island's territorial waters without the permission of the Chinese government and **accused USA for "seriously violating China's sovereignty" and "harming regional peace."**
- **USA's Stand:**
 - The USA has argued that such exercises are in line with international law and help **defend the right of passage** through the region amid competing claims by China and other governments.
 - It is in sync with the USA's continuous efforts to counter China's assertion in SCS. Recently the USA Navy sent an aircraft carrier group into the South China Sea.

- **South China Sea**

- **Location:** South China Sea is **an arm of western Pacific Ocean** in Southeast Asia. It is south of China, east & south of Vietnam, west of the Philippines and north of the island of Borneo.

It is **connected by Taiwan Strait** with the East China Sea and by **Luzon Strait with the Philippine Sea**.

- **Bordering states & territories (clockwise from north):** the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam.
- **Strategic Importance:** This sea holds tremendous strategic importance for its location as it is the **connecting link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean (Strait of Malacca)**.

According to the **United Nations Conference on Trade And Development (UNCTAD)** one-third of the global shipping passes through it, carrying trillions of trade which makes it a significant geopolitical water body.



Reasons For Dispute in the South China Sea:

- **Contesting Claims Over Islands:**
 - **The Paracel Islands** are claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam.
 - **The Spratly Islands** are claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei and Philippines.
 - **The Scarborough Shoal** is claimed by Philippines, China and Taiwan.
- **China's Assertion:**
 - Since 2010, **China has been converting uninhabited islets into artificial islets** to bring it under **UNCLOS** (examples would include Haven Reef, Johnson South Reef and Fiery Cross Reef).
 - **China has been changing the size and structure of the reefs** by modifying their physical land features. **It has also established airstrips on Parcel and Spratly.**
 - Chinese fishing fleets are engaged in paramilitary work on behalf of the state rather than the commercial enterprise of fishing.
 - The US is very critical of this building of artificial islands and terms these actions of China as building a '**great wall of sand**'.
- **Other Issues:**
 - **Undefined geographic scope** of the South China Sea.
 - **Disagreement over dispute settlement** mechanisms.
 - Undefined legal status of the **Code of Conduct (COC)** add to it.
 - The different histories of distant, largely uninhabited archipelagos of the sea make the matter more complicated and multifaceted.



India's Stand:

- India has maintained that it is not a party to the SCS dispute and its presence in the SCS is not to contain China but to **secure its own economic interests, especially that of its energy security needs.**
- However, China's increasing ability to decide and expand its role in the South China Sea has compelled India to reevaluate its approach on the issue.
- As a key element of the **Act East Policy**, India has started **internationalizing disputes** in the **Indo-Pacific region** to oppose China's threatening tactics in SCS.
- Further, India is using its Buddhist legacy to make a strong bond with the Southeast Asian region.
- India has also deployed its navy with Vietnam in the South China **Sea for protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOC)**, denying China any space for assertion.
- Also, India is part of **Quad initiative (India, US, Japan, Australia)** and lynchpin of Indo-Pacific narrative. These initiatives are viewed as a containment strategy by China.

Source:TH