

LLMUN 2024 - UNEP Topic Guide



Table of Contents:

Letters from the Chairs - 3

Intro to UNEP - 4

Key Terms - 4

General Overview

Background - 5

Major Parties Involved - 8

Current Situation - 11

Timeline - 13

Case Studies - 14

Questions to Consider - 14

Works Cited / Resources - 16

Letters from the Chairs:

Head Chair - Arman Dhillon

Hello everyone! I am Arman Dhillon and I am a Junior at Amador Valley High School. I've been doing Model UN for 6 years and have chaired 2 conferences prior to this. Outside of MUN, some of my hobbies include playing basketball, reading mystery novels, and binge-watching shows on TV. I think that the topic of environmental complications vis-à-vis the conflicts amidst the South China Sea is especially unique and multi-faceted and I look forward to seeing the different and complex perspectives from you all as we debate it in committee!

Vice Chair - Sophia Sotangkur

Hello. My name is Sophia Sotangkur, and I am one of the vice chairs for UNEP. I am currently a senior at Amador Valley High School and enjoy classical literature, gaming, and fridges, among other things, in my spare time. This is my first time chairing, so if this is your first conference, don't worry—I'm just as nervous as you! My advice is not to be afraid to ask for help and speak your mind. Aside from that, I hope to see you delegates soon!

Intro to UNEP:

As delegates to the UNEP, the United Nations Environment Programme, you are tasked with analyzing and reducing the ecological impacts of China's artificial islands in the South China Sea(SCS). The South China Sea is a region relied upon by many as a source of food, jobs, ecological stability, and a trade route, so any resolution can greatly impact the political and economic situation along with the sea itself.

Key Terms:

- ASEAN: Association of South East Asian Nations, a bloc dedicated to developing the South East Asian region through cooperation.
- Artificial Islands: Manmade islands typically composed of sand and gravel. Causes ecological damage to the surrounding regions.
- Claimant: A country that claims ownership of the island(s) in the South China Sea.
- Exclusive Economic Zone(EEZ): A 200-nautical mile area of the ocean where a coastal nation has jurisdiction over the resources in the water and seabed.
- Freedom of Navigation: Ships and other foreign crafts have the right to pass through international waters freely.
- Nine-Dash Line: The Area of the SCS that China claims, intersects many EEZ lines of other countries. Formerly the eleven-dash line, with a new controversial ten-dash line being published in 2023.
- Paracel Islands: Islands contested by China and many ASEAN nations.
- Sea Lines of Communication(SLOC): Sea routes between ports used for trade, logistics, and naval forces.
- Spratly Islands: One of the most contested archipelagos of the South China Sea. Has lots of natural and ecological resources from oil to coral reefs.
- UNCLOS III (Third United Nations Law Of the Sea): A country owns an EEZ 200 nautical miles from its shores.

General Overview

Background:

According to the Third United Nations Law Of the Sea (UNCLOS III), a country owns an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) 200 miles from its shores. The nation that possesses this EEZ has the right to the natural resources in the region and the right to build artificial islands, preserve the environment, and/or perform research.¹

China, along with the Philippines and Vietnam has built a series of artificial islands to increase its territory in the South China Sea. These islands, along with dredging, creating access channels for ships, oil extractions, and other environmental damage caused by nations involved with the South China Sea have greatly damaged the coral reefs that lie under the sea. The creation of artificial islands and mass clam harvesting have led to at least 20,000 acres of coral reefs being destroyed.² The Spratly Islands, one of the most disputed regions, include both natural and artificial islands, with many having military structures owned by China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.³ The area is very valuable not only as a source of fishing, oil, and other natural resources, but also as a strategic location, trading route, and territory growth.

Currently, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam claim the Spratly Islands as their own. China and Taiwan both consider themselves the true successors of the Republic of China and its preceding dynasties, who ruled over the Spratly archipelago. However, Vietnam occupied Spratly Island from the 17th century until the Chinese takeover in 1974. Many other Southeast Asian countries have also laid claims to certain regions or islands. As of now, the majority of islands in the South China Sea are held by Vietnam, the Philippines, and China.

Other regions are also disputed because of their use as traditional fishing grounds, and maps from colonial eras show ownership by different countries. Occupation by the Spanish, Japanese, and French, along with treaties, and public figures over the decades gave different

¹ https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf (Part V, Article 56 & 57)

² <https://www.context.news/nature/less-politics-more-marine-diplomacy-a-fix-for-south-china-sea>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-johnson-china-idUSKBN00Q03620150610/>

claims over ownership of the islands and seas. Overfishing and fishermen entering other EEZs without permission have also led to conflicts and the use of coast patrols to protect naval borders.

The topic of the South China Sea is highly contentious amongst the international community. Looking at the scope of UNEP, the environmental aspect and implications of this conflict are highly complex and involve a wide variety of different factors at play.

First, and most apparent, are the conflicting countries. China's aggressive advances and territorial claims onto the South China Sea under its "Nine-Dash Line" map. The map to the right highlights China's claims within the South China Sea which conflict or overlap with the claims of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Indonesia. China's efforts to assert its sovereignty and dominance over these territories have come at great cost to the environment and marine ecosystem, namely causing severe damage to the coral reefs in the area. Referring to the map above, it can be seen that within the conflicted territory are potential oil reserves, posing further harm to the environment. Several nations such as Indonesia, for example, have additionally exacerbated the environmental degradation through oil extractions within the Natuna Islands, which is a disputed territorial claim. This extraction, frustrating Indonesia's neighboring and warring countries, has only added to the tensions revolving around the South China Sea and is further reinforcing the environmental degradation in the area.



Besides the nations in the immediate area, there are several other key factors that play a role in the environmental implications related to the South China Sea. Firstly, there is a large demand for products from South China and Western countries. 12% of the total world's fish catch comes from the South China Sea⁴, demonstrating the large demand for goods, and hence a large economic motive for incorporating the area into one's respective country. This large demand for fish and seafood from Western nations further drives environmental degradation in the form of overfishing which depletes the ecosystem.

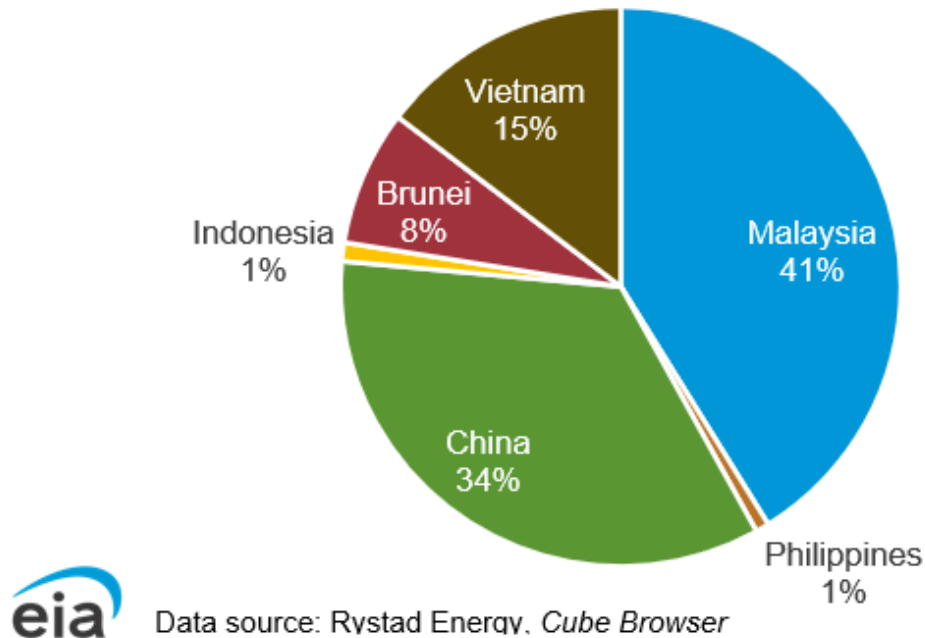
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<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/south-china-sea-china-environmental-ecological-damage-coral-reefs-overfishing-international-law-2469871#:~:text=Though%20it%20accounts%20for%20only.of%20the%20world's%20fish%20catch.>

Secondly, the estimated amount of oil and natural gases under the South China Sea could rival the oil reserves in Kuwait and the natural gas reserves in Qatar respectively.⁵ Although the exact estimates vary based on the source, many countries have already started their oil drilling operations.⁶ This has reduced dependency on oil imports in the region but also increased the risk of environmental damage through oil spills and other accidents, along with pollution caused by the extracted oil and gases.

Thirdly, nations outside the immediate region are actively and directly involved in the tensions of the Sea. Most prominently among these nations are the United States and Russia. The United States's Freedom of Navigation Operations challenge restrictions held and the unlawfulness of holding international waters as one's specific territory. On the other hand, Russia is a known arms supplier to China, additionally aiding in the offshore development of energy resources. Russia's aid in offshore development furthers China's deep environmental degradation through advancing and increasing oil extraction and harming the environment.

Figure 1. South China Sea petroleum and other liquids



⁵

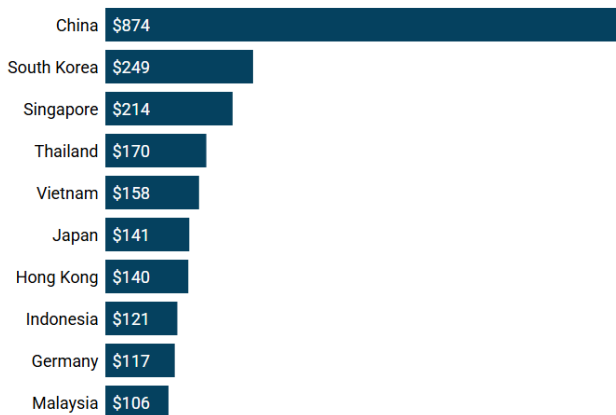
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/india-vs-china-the-south-china-sea-oil-rush/articleshow/10480439.cms?from=mdr>

⁶ https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea

Finally, the South China Sea is incredibly valuable as a trade route, with trillions of dollars worth of goods passing through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca.⁷ 76 million barrels of petroleum or petroleum-related products are shipped through the SCS daily or 43% of global oil maritime shipments.⁸

Exports Through the SCS (billions)

Top ten exporters



Major Parties Involved:⁹

Algeria: Supports China, and believes they have sovereignty over most contested regions. Member of OPEC.

Australia: Disputes disputed features and artificial structures being constructed and believes in using international law to resolve the issue.

Bangladesh: A strong ally of China; developing its navy and buying arms from China.

Brunei: EEZ overlaps with China's Nine-Dash Line leading to conflict, claims a small number of SCS islands. Extracting oil from the SCS.

⁷ <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

⁸

https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/regions_of_interest/South_China_Sea/south_china_sea.pdf

⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/who-supports-china-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why/>

Cambodia: Member of ASEAN. Allied with China due to historical tensions with Vietnam leading to conflicts with other ASEAN nations.

China: Claims to have ruled many of the SCS islands since its imperial era. Built a large quantity of artificial islands in recent years along with oil rigs and deploying coastal guards and navy ships to intimidate other nations. Extracting oil from the SCS.

Egypt: Positive economic relationship with China because of the large amount of Chinese exports that go through the Suez Canal.

India: Neutral, supports freedom of navigation. Recently, a contract was signed with Vietnam to start oil exploration and harvesting on the Spratly Islands which China objected to.

Indonesia: Non-claimant ASEAN member. Wants to be neutral but China's nine-dash line overlaps with Indonesia's EEZ and Natuna islands, which China claims as a traditional fishing ground. Often in dispute with China due to Chinese fishermen trespassing onto the islands.

Iran: Economic ally of China which depends on oil sales and trade with China for their economic wellbeing, Member of OPEC.

Iraq: China is the biggest buyer of Iraqi oil and China invests heavily in Iraq. Member of OPEC.

Japan: Provides aid to claimants disputing with China. Supports the US and freedom of navigation. Working with Vietnam on oil field projects.

Laos: Ally of China who supports decreasing disputes between China and ASEAN in relation to the South China Sea.

Malaysia: Claimant ASEAN member, wants to prevent armed conflict. Has had issues with Vietnamese vessels entering their waters.

Mexico: Acted/supported anti-China trading policies but at same time is one of the hotspots for Chinese investment and trade.

Myanmar: China has a large investment and economic stake in Myanmar giving it leverage over the country, however, Myanmar has stayed relatively neutral in the matter.

New Zealand: Trade partner with China but has discouraged Chinese aggression in the area.

North Korea: Allied with China. Developing missile systems and other military tech which attracts the US military to the Korean Peninsula.

Pakistan: Heavily supports Chinese territorial claims over all disputed territories.

Philippines: ASEAN member that contested many SCS islands. Built artificial islands and is extracting oil and natural gases from the SCS.

Qatar: Strong ally of China with close economic between the two nations. Member of OPEC.

Russia: Allied with China, a major oil producer but not a member of OPEC. Conducted various energy deals in the SCS but sanctions from the Ukraine-Russia War has limited it's influence.

Singapore: Non-claimant ASEAN member. States that they are neutral and that international law should be followed.

South Korea: A military vessel once entered territory the Chinese considered as their own, but was forgiven due to a typhoon. Committed to helping ASEAN countries protect their sovereign territory.

Sri Lanka: The country's largest debtor is China and subsequently China has strong economic leverage and investments over Sri Lanka.

Taiwan: Claims islands based on historical ownership of islands by imperial China but currently only owns 2 islands in the Spratly Islands. Proposed the South China Sea initiative.

Thailand: Neutral and non-claimant ASEAN member. Does not have any disputes with China or any other claimant nation and hosted an ASEAN-China meeting where a Code of Conduct that all parties agreed upon was written.

Timor-Leste: Underwent a similar situation to the conflict in Australia and stresses the importance of international law in cases like these

United Arab Emirates: Economic allies and partners with China. Member of OPEC.

United States: Neutral, but supports freedom of navigation and has a military presence in the South China Sea. Conducts military exercises with the Philippines and Japan.

Vietnam: The claimant ASEAN member and owns a large number of disputed islands. Built artificial islands and worked with many foreign companies to develop oil fields.

Current Situation:

China and the Philippines have sent Coast Guards to protect their fishing boats while fishing on contested waters, attack foreign fishers¹⁰, or enforce their territorial claims. Instances of Indian¹¹ and South Korean Navys¹² entering have led to tensions with disagreements on

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<https://apnews.com/article/vietnam-south-china-sea-boat-attack-paracel-4178b8a4c5f430834b77dbf4ca1ab5dc>

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20210514003108/https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-Korean-warship-sails-by-disputed-South-China-Sea-islands>

¹²

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210514003108/https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-Korean-warship-sails-by-disputed-South-China-Sea-islands>

whether these ships have freedom of navigation in the area. This has led to the US expressing support for a code of conduct that ensures nations will have freedom of navigation and securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs), to facilitate trade and travel of naval forces. However, China argues that international law forbids foreign military activity in EEZs and that freedom of navigation should be restricted.

Fishing, mainly dredging and bottom trawling, has severely impacted marine ecosystems by damaging sea floors, overfishing, and bycatching. Cyanide fishing has also polluted the sea, killing off many sea creatures and coral reefs. The construction of artificial islands has also destroyed many spawning grounds.¹³ These have all contributed to a decrease in fish populations in the area and forced fishermen to cross maritime borders to catch enough fish to sustain themselves, further increasing tensions in the region. SCS fisheries have provided 3.7 million people with jobs, but the decrease in fish and coral reefs can greatly impact the livelihoods of millions living in the SCS.

Treaties such as the Memorandum of Understanding¹⁴ between China and the Philippines and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS¹⁵ have led to cooperation in projects such as oil and natural gas extraction and marine protection acts despite conflicts of interest.

Oil drilling in SCS has supplied 15% of annual oil consumption in the Philippines, and various oil fields were made through an agreement between Vietnam and various foreign companies. Right now Indonesia, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines have extracted oil and gas from their territories.¹⁶

Timeline:

1700-1800s: Most disputed islands were colonized by Spain

¹³

https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Island%20Building%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea_0.pdf

¹⁴

<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/NTS-Insight-March2019-The-South-China-Sea-as-a-Shared-Asset.pdf>

¹⁵

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X23002440#:~:text=In%20this%20context%2C%20the%20SCS,stocks%20have%20been%20extremely%20limited.>

¹⁶

https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/regions_of_interest/South_China_Sea/south_china_sea.pdf

1898: After losing the Spanish-American War, Spain gave up the Philippines and kept the other islands.

1909: Japan showed interest in the SCS islands, and China set up navy personnel and flags to show sovereignty.

1930: UK and US sign a treaty recognizing the Philippines as owners of some disputed islands.

1932: France occupies Paracel islands.

1939: Japan occupies Spratly and Paracel islands

1947: The Republic of China publishes eleven-dash line.

1949: The ROC falls from the Communist Revolution. Both China and Taiwan claim to inherit the eleven-dash line.

1951: China claims ownership of Paracel and Spratly Islands during the San Francisco Peace Conference. Japan gives up ownership with the Treaty of San Francisco but the new owner of the islands is not decided.

1958: North Vietnam recognizes China's ownership of the Paracel and Spratly Islands, but retracts this after they won the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

1970s: Oil and natural gases found in SCS led to more occupations, mainly by the Philippines, South Vietnam, and China. Both the Philippines and Malaysia claim the Spratly Islands as part of their territory. The Philippines starts building artificial islands.

1994: Many occupants of SCS islands start their oil exploration businesses. In response, China occupies Mischief Reef, 250 miles off the Philippines coast, leading to a military confrontation with the Philippines.

2012: Islands become more militarized, especially by China and Vietnam. Navy ships intimidate fishermen more frequently to protect their territories.

2013-2016: China builds artificial islands in the Spratly Islands.

2017: Vietnam starts building artificial islands.

Case Studies:

When looking at historical examples of territorial disputes sparking environmental degradation, the Persian Gulf War is a prime example. Fought in the 1990s between Iraq and a

large union of nations headed by the United States, this war was based on the disputes between Kuwait. Specifically, Iran's aggressive position and advances on Kuwait. As a result, Kuwait and a coalition of other nations, rose to defend Iran from their advances and ultimately succeeded in their goal of keeping Iraq out of Kuwait and discouraging it from future aggressive expansion. However, in the process of defending Kuwait, there were severe environmental degradations made in the effort. For a specific example, as the Iraqis were retreating, they blew up more than 800 oil wells, resulting in soot emissions of approximately 20,000 tons. These severe implications led to large scale environmental implications including the death of numerous animals valuable to the Middle Eastern ecosystem including the dugongs, dolphins, and a 22-50% wipeout of the entire cormorants and grebes in the area. Further consequences include a severely lower hatching rate in hawksbills, and birds found to be contaminated with oil¹⁷

Drawing parallels between this and the current situation in the South China Sea, it is made apparent that, despite the era or specific circumstances of both conflicts, there is more environmental degradation that will take place, and we as a committee must take action to mitigate any environmental implications. There will be additional environmental damage be made to the ecosystem, marine life, and overall environment of the South China Sea, and action must be taken to quickly end this conflict and prevent future retaliation that can result from this conflict.

Questions To Consider:

1. How can technology be integrated in an innovative way to prevent future damage to the marine ecosystem and environment?
2. Within the scope and power of this committee, how can UNEP discourage future environmental degradation?
3. What can UNEP do to improve upon or build upon the framework of existing organizations such as ASEAN?
4. How can UNEP create a solution while ensuring the economic interests and national sovereignty of involved countries in the conflict?
5. How do we incentivize the protection of marine ecosystems?
6. Will your solution negatively affect the livelihoods of people living by the SCS?

¹⁷ <https://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/7427/>

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