**Research Paper on the South China Sea (West Philippine Sea) Disputes**

**Introduction**

The South China Sea (SCS), also known in the Philippines as the West Philippine Sea, is one of the world’s most strategically and economically significant maritime regions. The area is characterized by competing territorial and maritime claims, particularly among China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. This paper examines the historical context, legal framework, key stakeholders, and the multifaceted impact of these disputes on the Philippines. Furthermore, it proposes recommendations aimed at achieving a peaceful and sustainable resolution. The analysis draws on a range of sources—from international news reports and legal texts to academic studies—to present a balanced overview of this complex dispute.

**Historical Context**

The roots of the South China Sea dispute date back to the colonial era, when various powers claimed the islands and surrounding waters. Over time, the competing claims evolved, with China asserting historical rights through the “nine-dash line,” while the Philippines, Vietnam, and other claimants base their positions on effective occupation and modern international law. Notably, the Philippines’ stance is reinforced by its longstanding practice of fishing in these waters and its strategic placement of maritime outposts.

**Major Claimants**

**China (PRC)**: Asserts expansive historical rights over the South China Sea, represented by the nine-dash line. China has undertaken significant land reclamation projects and constructed artificial islands to reinforce its claims.

**Philippines**: Maintains that its territorial and economic rights over features such as Scarborough Shoal and portions of the Spratly Islands are legally established through effective occupation and the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The recent Philippine Maritime Zones Act (Republic Act No. 12064, 2024) further solidifies its legal framework.

**Vietnam**: Claims parts of the Spratly and Paracel Islands based on historical usage and continuous administration.

**Other Claimants**: Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan also assert overlapping claims, adding to the regional complexity.

**Legal Framework**

UNCLOS provides the primary legal framework for resolving maritime disputes. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled that China’s expansive claims based on the nine-dash line had no legal basis under UNCLOS. Despite this, China has rejected the ruling. Meanwhile, the Philippine government relies on UNCLOS to define its EEZ and to assert its maritime rights.

**National Legislation**

The recent enactment of the Philippine Maritime Zones Act (Republic Act No. 12064, 2024) reflects Manila’s determination to codify its maritime entitlements and bolster its legal claims. This legislation aligns with international law and reinforces the Philippines’ stance amid ongoing disputes.

**Academic Perspectives**

Kivimäki (2002) argues that the dispute must be understood within the broader context of regional security dynamics and that effective resolution depends on multilateral engagement. Meanwhile, Dupuy and Dupuy’s legal analysis (2013) critically examines China’s historical claims, suggesting that modern international law offers limited support for these assertions.

**Impact on the Philippines**

Tensions in the SCS have led the Philippines to strengthen defense alliances with countries such as the United States, Australia, and Japan. Recent Reuters and The Australian reports indicate that bilateral defense pacts and joint military exercises have become crucial components of Manila’s strategy to counterbalance China’s aggressive posture.

**Economic and Environmental Implications**

The SCS is a vital conduit for global trade—with billions of dollars of commerce transiting the area annually—and a potential reservoir of natural resources. However, Chinese interference (e.g., blocking resource exploration as reported by Business Insider) disrupts the Philippines’ ability to exploit these resources. Moreover, environmental degradation from dredging and artificial island construction threatens marine biodiversity and the livelihoods of local fishing communities.

**Social and National Security Concerns**

Maritime confrontations, such as those at Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal, strain the Philippines’ limited coast guard resources and pose risks to fishermen. Incidents documented by Reuters and AP news have heightened national security concerns and underscored the need for robust maritime surveillance and defense modernization.

**Recommendations**

**Strengthen Multilateral Engagement**: The Philippines should continue to work through ASEAN and pursue a binding code of conduct for the South China Sea that upholds international law.

**Enhance Defense Partnerships**: Expanding defense cooperation with allies such as the United States, Australia, and Japan—illustrated by recent defense pact news from Reuters and The Australian—can help deter aggressive maneuvers.

**Promote Joint Resource Development**: Developing joint exploration agreements with claimant countries could provide a pragmatic pathway to resource sharing while defusing tensions.

**Invest in Surveillance and Infrastructure**: Upgrading maritime surveillance through advanced technologies, as highlighted by the Philippine Maritime Zones Act, will help monitor and protect the country's vast territorial waters.

**Conclusion**

The South China Sea disputes encapsulate a complex interplay of historical claims, international law, and geopolitical maneuvering. While UNCLOS and recent arbitration rulings support the Philippines’ claims, China's continued assertiveness necessitates a multifaceted strategy that blends diplomacy, legal action, and defense modernization. Strengthening regional alliances and establishing clear legal frameworks are critical for the Philippines to safeguard its sovereignty and promote regional stability.

**References**

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