

A Tree Conflict Analysis Model of the South China Sea Dispute between China and Vietnam

Annie Pruthi

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, and Research Associate at Visvaniti Foundation, New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Among the most disputed maritime regions in the world, the South China Sea (SCS) is considered to be one of the most contentious zones. By utilising a tree conflict analysis model to understand the disputed region, this paper aims to decipher the central conflict in the South China Sea between China and Vietnam, competing over sovereignty, maritime regions and marine resources. Firstly, the aim is to provide a historical understanding of the conflict between the two countries in the South China Sea and discuss the factors that have contributed to its escalation. In this attempt, the paper would highlight the major events that led to the intensification of the dispute between China and Vietnam while also underscoring the economic and strategic significance of the South China Sea that contributes to shaping the behaviour of the two states.

By utilising a qualitative methodology that examines the secondary sources such as official documents, policy briefs, legal documents and significant scholarly work on the subject, the paper draws its analyses from various sources. Most importantly, due attention is paid to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to examine its ability to address maritime disputes. While the efficacy of legal frameworks such as UNCLOS is significant, the study points to its limitations in its ability to resolve conflicts that are embedded in inconsistent interpretations of sovereignty. Lastly, this paper applies the tree conflict analysis model to decode the conflict between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea, which clearly demarcates between root causes, core problems and visible manifestations of the dispute and its impact on the states concerned. Although legal and diplomatic means for conflict management are important, the study concludes in its findings that a sustainable solution to the dispute lies in addressing the political and strategic factors that perpetuate the conflict, without which only short-term solutions are possible.

Keywords: South China Sea, UNCLOS, Tree Conflict Analysis, China-Vietnam Relations, Maritime Disputes, Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, Maritime Security

INTRODUCTION

In 21st-century geopolitics, the maritime region has begun to receive the attention it was due. This is partly because of the claims of various sovereign states on maritime spaces and the untapped potential of marine resources. In this context, one of the most significant and contested maritime spaces is the South China Sea (SCS) with its various claimants. Among various reasons that provide this region with its significance, the strategic and economic importance deserves special attention. Arguably, this region is the 'fulcrum of world trade' (Chacko, 2016), connecting the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean and spanning over 3.5 million square kilometres. Beyond its economic viability, the region is said to have huge reserves of oil and gas, making it crucial for energy security. Additionally, this region is significant for fisheries, as it provides one of the world's richest fishing spaces. As a result, this region deals with contestations over territorial rights and historical claims from a number of bordering states, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

Among these overlapping claims, the dispute between China and Vietnam is considered to be one of the most complex ones. Largely, it owes this significance as a result of historical depth, frequent confrontations, and its impact on regional security. The contest between the two states, China and Vietnam, is most intense over the Paracel and Spratly islands. As a result of this conflict, diplomatic disputes, tensions over resource exploration, fishing vessels and even naval incidents have occurred. These tensions are further intensified with varying interpretations made by the state of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This mutually exclusive interpretation of what constitutes maritime territory has resulted in a complex situation while highlighting the shortcomings of prevalent legal frameworks in addressing disputes. Therefore, an analysis of standalone incidents or contemporary situations is insufficient to gain a holistic understanding of the China-Vietnam dispute.

A more nuanced understanding is required, which this paper proposes through a tree-conflict analysis model in order to appreciate the structural problems underlying the dispute. This is because the contest over the South China Sea region involves a complex interplay of historical rights, national identity, regional impacts and resource sharing. A sole analysis of visible manifestations is insufficient; it needs a complementary explanation of the underlying root causes. Through the tree conflict analysis model, this paper conceptualises the conflict as the tree, whereas the roots symbolise the structural issues of the dispute. The trunk is symbolic of the core issues that sustain the conflict in the present scenario, with the leaves as its visible manifestations that are often analysed as standalone incidents. The utility of the tree analysis model lies in addressing the present limitations of the analysis provided on the China-Vietnam dispute by providing a comprehensive understanding of the dispute and filling the gaps of the present frameworks. To acknowledge the multidimensional nature of the conflict, an analysis of the historical importance of the region and its economic and strategic significance is also provided. It also takes into account the legal framework provided by UNCLOS and the need to understand the limitations of international legal frameworks to address the territorial sovereignty claims. At the end, the paper discusses the dispute as a whole through the tree conflict model and identifies the potential outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the qualitative methodology as an approach to study the China-Vietnam dispute in detail. The rationale behind employing a qualitative approach lies in its relevance to study the fundamental causes of the dispute, the strategic interests of the claimants, and the wider consequences on regional security of the conflict. The findings of the paper rely on a vast number of secondary sources, including scholarly articles on the subject, academic books, website articles, commentaries published by various think-tanks, peer-reviewed journals, policy reports and official documents available in the public domain. Most importantly, it relies on the legal framework provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) along with its diverse interpretations. These sources helped provide important insights into the conflict in the region and the overlapping claims made by a host of states.

The tree model of conflict analysis, as developed by scholars of peace and conflict studies, is utilised as the primary analytical framework to make sense of the conflict as a whole. This model is unique because it provides a lens to view the dispute as a whole as well as magnify the fragmented parts. The roots represent the structural problems underlying the dispute, the trunk symbolises the core issues; the branches are the visible manifestations, while the leaves are the wider impacts. As a result, this paradigm provides a methodical analysis which takes into consideration both the short-term and long-term impacts of the dispute. This model aids in moving beyond a mere description of events to a comprehensive analysis that takes into consideration the structural factors responsible for the persistence of such conflict.

The Historical Background of the China-Vietnam Conflict in the South China Sea

The South China Sea has been an area of contention and conflict between players worldwide. China is the aggressor against at least five claimants: Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The conflict in the region is, then obviously, extremely complex and prone to volatility. The six players share a bitter conflict,

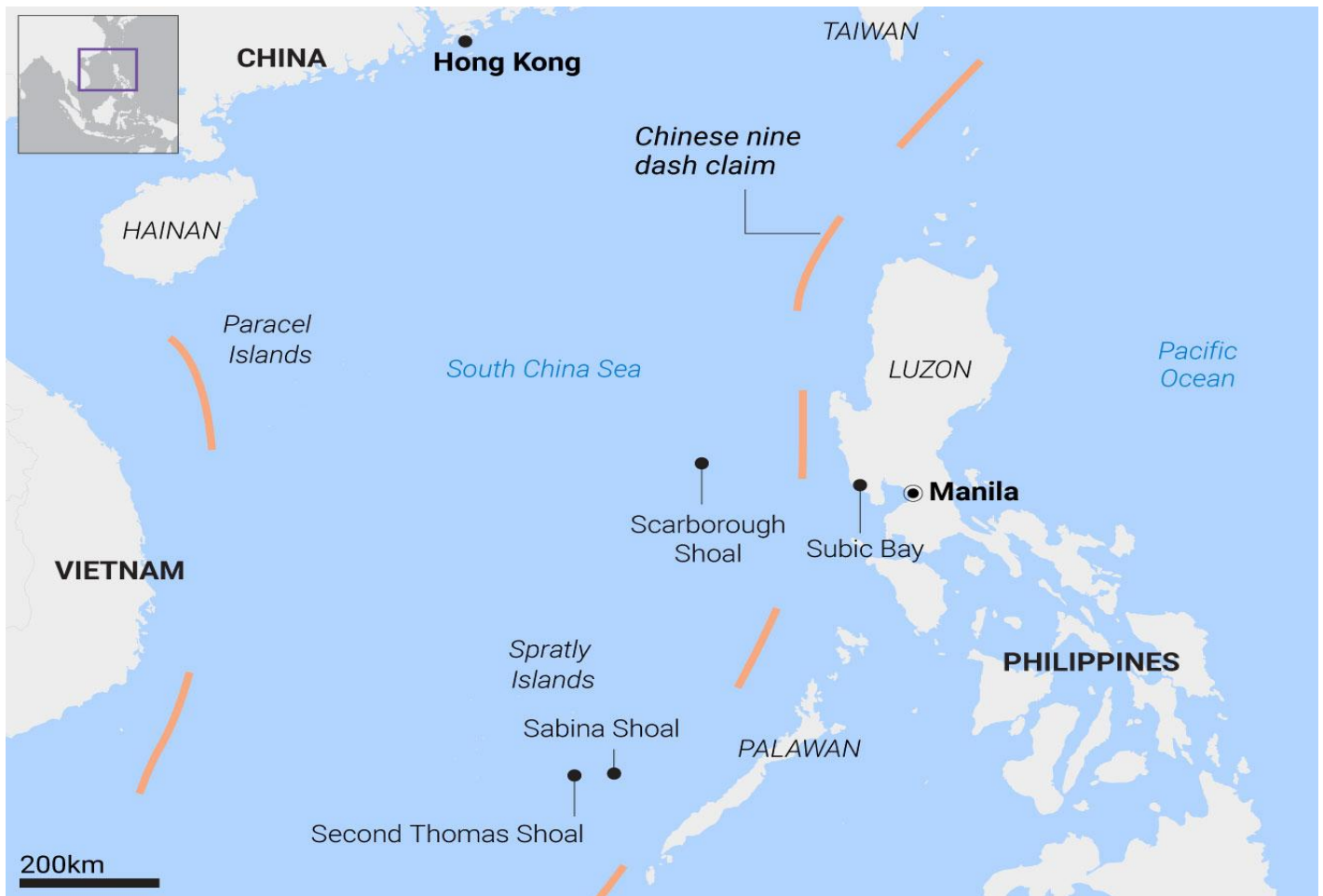
with repercussions visible in the maritime domain. The manifestations of this conflict are visible in the disputes over small islands between these nations.

This conflict cannot be understood without being aware of China's claim over this region through the "Nine-Dash Line" (NDL). This boundary is the source of conflict since it stretches and claims the area of other regional players. This boundary, which was initially established in the 1940s, represents what China claims to be its "historical rights". As Pooja Bhatt argued in her book 'Nine-Dash Line', maritime boundaries are the new water battlegrounds. Apart from the growing land boundary disputes between states, there has been a consistent rise in maritime boundary disputes around the world. One of the most controversial maritime boundaries in the contemporary geostrategic realm is the controversial and (in)famous NDL. (Bhatt, 2024)

In 1947, China, under the rule of the nationalist Kuomintang party, demarcated its territorial claims in the South China Sea with an eleven-dash line on a map. The claim covers the majority of the area, including the Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank, and the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which China regained from Japan after World War II. In 1949, Communist leader Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In 1953, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led government removed the portion encompassing the Gulf of Tonkin, simplifying the border to nine dashes. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023) To this day, China invokes the nine-dash line as the historical basis for its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Thus, most of the South China Sea is included in the nine-dash line territory claimed by the Republic of China (1912–1949), subsequently known as the People's Republic of China (PRC), which also crosses over into the exclusive economic zone claims of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. This nine-dash line is a U-shaped demarcation representing China's South China Sea claim, and this boundary continues to be a source of conflict between the nations involved.

As argued, the conventional wisdom is that Beijing "claims almost the entire South China Sea", but this oversimplifies its position and, while it might not be entirely inaccurate, risks being interpreted as a claim over the whole area within the line as its territorial waters. While understanding the conflicts in the South China Sea, one should be aware that the conflicts involve disputes not only over maritime boundaries but also on various islands. Beijing claims an 'indisputable' sovereignty over islands, reefs, shoals, and cays in the Pratas, Paracel, Spratly, and Zhongsha islands, which it says is based on history. China also makes such historical claims based on ancient fishing activities and reinforces its claims over the SCS maritime territory.

The main disputes over the Paracel and Spratly Islands are between China and Vietnam. China claims historical rights to the islands dating back 2000 years; Vietnam rejects these historical claims and says it has ruled over both island chains since the 17th century. The Philippines also claims the Spratlys because it's geographically close to its territory. These islands lie 100 miles from the Philippines and 500 miles from China. To complicate matters further, Malaysia also claims that some of the Spratlys fall within its exclusive zone. The most serious conflicts, however, have been between China and Vietnam. In 1974, China seized the Paracels from Vietnam, and in the late 1980s, clashes took place in the Spratlys with Vietnamese losses. Tensions have risen in recent days due to a belief that the region contains vast quantities of natural gas and oil.



Source: South China Morning Post

Major Events Escalating the China-Vietnam Dispute in the South China Sea

In 1974, tensions between China and Vietnam emerged over the Paracel Islands. The skirmishes occurred when Chinese soldiers captured the western part of the Paracel Islands by raising flags on many islands in an attempt to take control of the South Vietnamese garrison. This event occurred a year after the Paris Peace Accords, which put an end to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In response, Vietnamese troops fled south and established the first permanent Vietnamese occupation of the Spratly Islands. China, on the other hand, built a military installation, which included an airfield as well as a man-made harbor. However, the newly established Socialist Republic of Vietnam maintains South Vietnam's prior claims to the Spratlys and Paracels following the fall of Saigon and the reunification of Vietnam. China still has about 1,000 soldiers in the Paracels. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023)

Although brief, the Sino-Vietnamese War took place from February 1979 to March 1979. The damage of this conflict left almost 30,000 people dead and a long-standing distrust of Hanoi against Beijing. Finally, in December 1982, the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) appeared in a resolution that defined the rights and responsibilities of nations in their use of surrounding waters based on exclusive economic zones and continental shelves, which complicates the matter. Although it came into force only in 1994, it does not address the issues related to sovereignty in the South and East China Seas.

The clash over the Johnson Reef between China and Vietnam ended the calm of a decade in the South China region. This was the first armed conflict that occurred over the Spratlys archipelago. As a result of this clash, seventy-four sailors have died since the Chinese navy sank 3 Vietnamese vessels. The incident occurred after Beijing, pursuing a more assertive stance in the area, established a physical presence on Fiery Cross Reef in the

Spratlys in January 1987. In response, Vietnam occupies several reefs to monitor China's moves. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023) The episode takes place during the 1980s economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, when China's economy started to move to the coastal provinces and maritime resources gained value as hydrocarbons were required to support expansion.

Unverified claims suggest that the Chinese navy sabotaged two Vietnamese exploration operations in late 2012, which led to large anti-China protests on Vietnam's streets. (BBC, 2023) Fast forward to May 2014, when the Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig standoff occurred between China and Vietnam. This was a month-long standoff that began between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels when China installed the Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig close to the Paracel Islands. Vietnam saw this move as a violation of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Coast Guard ships engaged in water cannon and ramming exchanges as a result of the event, which raised international tensions and caused damage. Vietnam's anti-China demonstrations were also sparked by the stalemate, demonstrating the fervour of nationalist feelings against the alleged Chinese invasion. According to the executive summary of the essay in NBR report 108, authored by Nguyen The Phuong, the HD-981 incident in 2014 was one of the most severe and consequential maritime standoffs between Vietnam and China since the renormalization of relations in 1991. The incident fundamentally changed the Vietnamese perception of China's policies regarding territorial disputes and led to Vietnam's adoption of a more robust, proactive, and comprehensive strategy to protect its interests. ("The South China Sea Disputes and the Evolution of the Vietnam-China Relationship | the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)," 2024).

The Economic and Strategic Significance of the South China Sea

A pertinent question to ask is to know what the reasons are why the region of SCS is important in terms of economy and strategy, and how it contributes to the conflict. The reasons are various to satisfy it. The waters of the South China Sea are crucial for several reasons: as part of history, ecology, maritime diversity, and, most importantly, the economic potential that they provide. Resources such as fisheries have become a crucial part of trade and economics. (Bhatt, 2019). Natural resources are a distinctive feature of the South China Sea. The region is extremely rich because of its vast continental shelf, relatively shallow waters, the contribution of numerous swift-moving rivers, and high biodiversity. (Roche, 2013). There are substantial oil and gas reserves beneath the South China Sea's seafloor, among other natural resources. The area provides crucial fishing grounds that are significant to the economies of both China and Vietnam. In addition to sustaining local lives, the sea is home to a huge biodiversity. Vietnam's economic zones closely intersect with China's vast claims over these resources, especially in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, which exacerbates competition for these resources.

Another issue, just as vital, is the geostrategic situation of the disputed area. The gateway to the Strait of Malacca and the port of Singapore, on one of the world's most important merchant shipping routes, a stranglehold on the Paracel and Spratly Islands also ensures control over the supply of the economies of Northeast Asia (Roche, 2013). With more than one-third of the world's maritime trade going through it, the South China Sea is an essential maritime route for international trade. This makes it strategically significant for the region as a whole, not just for China and Vietnam. While preserving access to these waterways is essential for Vietnam's economic stability and security, China views control over the sea lanes as a means of strengthening its influence over regional trade routes. Both nations' reliance on the resources of the South China Sea has a significant impact on their economic policy. Energy imports and the ability to secure marine trade routes are key factors in China's economic growth. In the disputed waters, Vietnam also depends on offshore oil prospecting and fishing. Because regional conflicts can impede trade and resource exploitation activities, the protracted issue makes both countries' economic strategies more difficult.

Moreover, for the countries around it, the South China Sea is the primary source of food, accounting for 8% of the world's total commercial fishery production, and is responsible for feeding many of today's most populous nations, from Pakistan's 226 million people to China's 1.4 billion citizens (Khoury, 2017). As a result, the South China Sea, being one of the most important economic and strategic regions in the world, is undeniably essential to Southeast Asia's way of life (Khoury, 2017). A region having such importance is not limited to the state's

interest around it; it goes beyond the claimant states in the region and also brings the region to the attention of the other actors.

The South China Sea is also particularly attractive to littoral states that claim sovereignty over islands and islets in the hope of being able to control part of them. These states do not always share a common position. The sea is at the heart of a rapidly changing Asia Pacific, which accounts for a larger share of global trade and economic activity each year. Thus, regional and even international actors such as the United States are taking a close interest in the region (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

UNCLOS and Its Role in the Vietnam-China South China Sea Dispute

Analysing UNCLOS becomes crucial since the central question in the multi-dimensional and multiple-layered conflict in the South China Sea is based on the question of the sovereignty of the islands and the continental shelves measured from these islands, as well as the adjacent waters. The Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), opened for signature in 1982, has no provisions on how to determine sovereignty over offshore islands. However, the provisions of UNCLOS on baselines, the regime of islands, low-tide elevations, the exclusive economic zone, the continental shelf, maritime boundary delimitation, and dispute settlement are all applicable to the South China Sea.

The states have made an attempt to bring their claims in consonance with the UNCLOS, especially in the case of the ASEAN claimants. While China has made an attempt to clarify the basis on which it makes its claim, many states still find it uncertain whether China is making these claims based on the sovereignty over the land features and the resources on that land or if China is claiming all the resources in the space of the nine-dash line.

Following UNCLOS, a country's sovereignty over territorial waters extends up to 12 nautical miles from its coastlines and grants control over navigation, resource extraction, and related activities within this zone. But in the South China Sea, this becomes problematic since there exist overlapping territorial claims that have led to ongoing tensions and complications in asserting sovereignty, which is visible in the case of China and Vietnam. It also mentions the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which extends up to 200 nautical miles from a country's baseline and from where nations have exclusive rights to explore and use marine resources. While Vietnam relies heavily on EEZs around the Paracel and Spratly Islands for fishing and energy resources, China's claims under the Nine-Dash Line significantly overlap with these areas, often leading to confrontations. Beyond this, the convention also states that nations may extend claims to the continental shelf beyond the EEZ if they meet certain geological criteria, potentially up to 350 nautical miles. Again, this rule impacts both China and Vietnam, as it affects their rights to resources in the seabed across disputed areas of the South China Sea. These islands are not only of strategic significance because they are located near routes that are being used for navigation internationally, but also are useful resources for wealth creation. This is because of two reasons, the first being a useful breeding ground for fishing and the second being that these islands have the potential to be tapped for hydrocarbon resources, which may be available in and under the waters of these disputed waters.

International law principles governing territorial sovereignty over land and islands are shaped by the decisions of international courts and arbitral bodies. For a legitimate resolution on sovereignty claims in disputed areas, such as the South China Sea, all involved parties must consent to bring the matter before an international tribunal. This was exemplified by the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which rejected China's extensive claims based on the "Nine-Dash Line," stating that they had no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Despite this, China did not recognise the tribunal's authority and dismissed the ruling, continuing to assert its territorial claims. The situation highlights the difficulty of settling complex territorial disputes through international legal mechanisms, as consensus among all parties is often unlikely given the political sensibilities involved.

As Bhatt argues in her book, July 12, 2016, became one of the significant dates for geopolitics due to the reverberations it caused. That day, the judgment by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) unanimously declared in its award that there was “no legal basis for China to claim historic rights” over the Nine-Dash Line (NDL), as there was no evidence that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the water and resources of the South China Sea (SCS). China, which had not become a party to the case since its inception in 2014, disregarded the judgment, ultimately favouring the Philippines, the other party in the dispute. Besides the technical aspects of maritime sovereignty claims by China in the NDL region, the judgment has other geo-strategic, economic, and security implications for decades to come. (Bhatt, 2024)

Despite major challenges, ASEAN and other international players are crucial to attempts to settle the South China Sea dispute. With the proposed Code of Conduct (COC), which establishes rules to avoid escalation, ASEAN has sought to promote communication and preserve regional stability. Different priorities among its members, some of which have strong economic ties to China, limit ASEAN's power. Because of this, it has been difficult to take a united stand on the South China Sea issue.



Source: Reprinted from *The UNCLOS and the US-China Hegemonic Competition over the South China Sea*, by K. Hossain, 2013, *Journal of East Asia and International Law*, 6(1), pp. 107–134.

Japan and the United States have also been influential on the international scene, promoting freedom of navigation and a rules-based system. While Japan has strengthened security cooperation with nations like Vietnam, the United States carries out freedom of navigation operations to counter China's sweeping claims. Nonetheless, Washington sees the war as a component of the larger struggle for dominance in the Indo-Pacific, and the U.S. frequently sees it as a reflection of its larger geopolitical rivalry with China. This viewpoint

complicates multilateral efforts by tying the South China Sea conflict into larger strategic concerns between the United States and China. As Swaine argues, the United States and China must get beyond the heated rhetoric and signals of resolve and build the basis for demilitarising and defusing the escalating tensions in the South China Sea. If this is not done, the current course of action threatens to produce a far more dangerous situation that will prove extremely difficult to reverse. (Swaine, 2015)

Understanding the Conflict through the Tree Conflict Model: Result and Analysis

For this paper, the tree conflict model to analyse the conflict between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea is utilised.

Roots/Underlying Causes

If one begins to analyse the conflict between China and Vietnam in the SCS region, the roots can be traced to the various historical claims made by China and Vietnam along with various economic interests. Both nations trace their sovereignty claims to these islands by dating to historical records and through maps and the presence of ancient maritime activities. Along with history, which is complex considering the legacy of colonialism in both countries and varied interpretations of available laws, the economic factors, in particular the economic dependence on the South China Sea natural resources of both China and Vietnam, are a root cause of the conflict. Furthermore, Beijing utilises the recognition made by North Vietnam in 1958 regarding China's territorial waters. Hanoi, on the other hand, disregards this recognition and argues that such claims do not amount to a concession of sovereign land. Divergent readings of history and the claims made as a result influence the official statements and provide a distorted understanding of the sovereignty claims on the South China Sea. Last but not least, one can look at rising nationalism as an underlying cause of China's assertive stance and Vietnam's defence against it.

Trunk/Core Issues

The trunk, or the core issues, of this dispute are multiple, including the issue of sovereignty, ownership of resources, and lack of communication. Particularly, the sovereignty claims made on the Paracel and Spratly Islands are contested by China, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian nations. The battle of 1974 over the Paracel Islands between China and Vietnam and the subsequent Chinese control over the archipelago by pushing away the South Vietnamese force further intensified this conflict. Since then, the dispute has intensified, as seen in the 1988 Johnson South Reef clash when the two states faced each other in the Spratly Islands. When coupled with disputes over ownership of natural resources, like oil and gas, it becomes clear that the core issue includes territorial sovereignty, ownership disputes, maritime rights, and access to resources such as hydrocarbons and even fishing rights. Presently, a core issue is also the militarisation of the region. While China attempts to construct various artificial islands and increase military installations in the region, Vietnam is diversifying and responding with its military preparations.

Branches/Present Manifestations

Military buildups, economic policies, and shifting alliances are some of the ways through which the present conflict manifests itself. A suitable instance of such manifestation is visible through the Hai Yang Shi You 981 oil rig controversy of 2014. The controversy began when China National Offshore Oil Corporation, a state-owned Chinese company, placed a deep drilling platform in the claimed water of Vietnam. A spillover effect was witnessed when anti-China protests began in Vietnam and continued with diplomatic condemnation on regional platforms. Coast guard vessels of the two countries have often clashed, and tensions continue to surface when Vietnamese fishermen face detention in the Paracel Islands. These periodically occurring tensions showcase that even in the absence of direct standoffs, the underlying disputes continue to persist. Furthermore, by constructing man-made islands with military facilities, China has dramatically expanded its military presence in the South China Sea. Other countries, including Vietnam, have strengthened their defences in response to this military surge. Economic measures are often employed as methods of assertion, such as restrictions on resource

extraction and fishing. Recently, China has started to disrupt local businesses in Vietnam and other neighbouring nations by banning fishing in regions it claims. Strategic alliances have also resulted from the conflict, as Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries have turned to outside powers like the US and Japan for assistance.

Leaves/Impacts

The conflict in the South China Sea has far-reaching effects on trade, the environment, and regional security. The likelihood of unintentional confrontations or possibly armed conflict increases with increased military tension. Since a sizable amount of international traffic passes through disputed waters, the disagreement has caused disruptions in marine trade. There may be delays and higher expenses charged by shipping companies due to the volatility of the region. Another major effect is environmental harm, especially as a result of China's building of man-made islands on reefs, which has destroyed important marine habitats. Fishing communities also suffer as a result of limiting the fishing groups. As access to traditional fishing locations becomes more restricted or tense, local people who depend on fishing suffer greatly. Their food security and financial stability are at risk due to these disturbances. In the face of a hostile China, Vietnam focuses on increasing its maritime capabilities and fostering its partnerships with various states, including the United States, India, Japan and Australia. For ASEAN, the task to produce a cohesive, unified stance against China is becoming more difficult and raises concerns over freedom of navigation and maritime security. The road to stability in the South China Sea is, therefore, paved with obstacles, as both domestic and global interests are involved. The ramifications of such conflicts extend beyond the relationship between China and Vietnam and may have wider consequences for states in the Indo-Pacific.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through the tree conflict model of analysis, it can be clearly observed that the dispute involving the South China Sea region between China and Vietnam is multidimensional in nature and should not be considered solely a territorial dispute over maritime boundaries. The multifaceted nature of this model exposes the structural issues about the conflict, moving beyond an oversimplified explanation of the dispute. It provides due importance to all aspects, including the structural root causes, the core issues, and the present impacts, as well as the historical, legal, economic and strategic factors involved in the issue concerned. When an incident about coast guard vessels, fishermen, or resource exploration occurs in the South China Sea, it quickly draws global attention, showcasing the present manifestation, or the tree model would analyse it as 'branches and leaves' of the conflict. The other part of the story is either lost or paid less attention to. Historical claims and narratives on overlapping sovereign claims, both on the part of China and Vietnam, showcase the complexity of the conflict, especially over the Paracel and Spratly islands. More so, these claims are linked to national identity and debates over legitimacy, which further complicate any negotiations between the states. Another key finding of the study is linked to the economic and strategic significance of the region, which provides reason to the states to reinforce their claims. Maritime resources, untapped hydrocarbons, and the massive significance of the region for global trade contribute to the persistence of the issue concerned. The paper also notes the limitations of legal frameworks, here, the UNCLOS, and the need to address the gaps to resolve the disputes that involve complex claims and high stakes. The findings suggest that the China-Vietnam dispute over the South China Sea is a result of a combination of factors, including historical claims, resource scarcity, perceived identity, economic interests, and strategic objectives. Any attempt to manage tensions in the region, therefore, requires a holistic understanding and analysis of the dispute, without which an attempt to find a mutually acceptable resolution is unlikely.

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