



South China Sea

For Prelims: [South China Sea](#), Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Pratas, the Natuna Islands and Scarborough Shoal, [ASEAN](#), [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea](#)

For Mains: Significance of the South China Sea and Related Issues

Source: [TH](#)

Why in News?

Recently, the [Philippines Coast Guard](#) removed barriers placed by **Chinese vessels** at the entrance to a lagoon off the **Scarborough Shoal**.

- This incident came after Chinese Coast Guard ships placed a 300-meter-long barrier to **prevent boats from the Philippines from entering**, adding to the **long-running tensions in the [South China Sea](#)**.

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Philippines removes China sea barrier

The Philippines has removed a floating barrier recently installed by Chinese Coast Guard boats to block access to a prime fishing patch within a disputed area of the South China Sea



What is the Significance of the South China Sea?

- **Strategic Location:** The South China Sea is **bordered by China and Taiwan to the north, the Indo-Chinese peninsula** (including **Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore**) to the west, **Indonesia and Brunei** to the south, and the **Philippines to the east** (referred to as the West Philippine Sea).
 - It is connected by the [Taiwan Strait](#) with the **East China Sea** and by the **Luzon Strait** with the **Philippine Sea** (both marginal seas of the Pacific Ocean).
- **Trade Importance:** Approximately **USD 3.37 trillion worth of trade** passed through the **South China Sea in 2016**, making it a crucial global trade route.

- According to the **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, **80% of global trade by volume** and 70% by value is transported by sea, with **60% of it passing through Asia and one-third of global shipping moving through the South China Sea**.
- **China, the world's second-largest economy**, relies heavily on the South China Sea, with an estimated **64% of its trade passing through the region**. In contrast, only **14% of U.S. trade traverses these waters**.
- India relies on the region for approximately **55% of its trade**.
- **Fishing Ground:** The South China Sea is also a **rich fishing ground**, providing a vital source of livelihood and **food security** for millions of people in the region.

What are the Major Disputes in the South China Sea?

- **Dispute:**
 - The heart of the South China Sea dispute revolves around **territorial claims to land features (islands and reefs)** and their associated territorial waters.
 - The major island and reef formations in the South China Sea are the **Spratly Islands, Parcel Islands, Pratas, the Natuna Islands and Scarborough Shoal**.
 - As many as **70 disputed reefs and islets are under contention**, with **China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan** all building more than 90 outposts on these disputed features.
 - China claims up to **90% of the sea with its "nine-dash line" map** and has physically expanded islands and constructed military installations to assert control.
 - China has been particularly active in the **Parcel and Spratly Islands**, engaging in extensive dredging and artificial island-building, creating 3,200 acres of new land since 2013.
 - China also controls the **Scarborough Shoal through a constant Coast Guard presence**.
- **Efforts to Resolve the Dispute:**
 - **Code of Conduct (CoC):** Talks between **China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** have aimed at establishing a CoC to manage the situation, but progress has been slow due to internal ASEAN disputes and the magnitude of China's claims.
 - **Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DoC):** In 2002, ASEAN and China adopted the DoC, affirming their commitment to peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with international law.
 - The DoC was meant to pave the way for a CoC, which remains elusive.
 - **Arbitral Proceedings:** In 2013, the **Philippines initiated arbitral proceedings against China under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**.
 - In 2016, the **Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled against China's "nine-dash line" claim**, stating it was inconsistent with UNCLOS.
 - China rejected the arbitration ruling and asserted its sovereignty and historical rights, challenging the PCA's authority.

Note

Under the **UNCLOS**, each state can establish a **territorial sea** of up to **12 nautical miles** and an **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending up to 200 nautical miles** from the territorial sea baseline.

Way Forward

- **Multilateral Engagement:** Encourage active involvement from the **international community, including countries outside the region**, to facilitate diplomatic efforts and ensure that **any resolution is fair, impartial, and in line with international norms** particularly the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea**.

- **Environmental Protection:** There is need for collaboration on efforts to **protect the marine environment in the South China Sea**, including measures to combat [illegal fishing](#), **reduce pollution, and preserve biodiversity** because the total fish stocks in this region have been depleted by 70 to 95% since the 1950s and **coral reefs, have been declining by 16% per decade**, according to a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- **Maritime Peace Parks:** Explore the **concept of creating maritime peace parks** or protected areas within the South China Sea. Similar to terrestrial national parks, these areas could be designated for peaceful purposes, such as **conservation, research, and ecotourism, transcending political disputes.**

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q. Evaluate the economic and strategic dimensions of India's Look East Policy in the context of the post-Cold War international scenario. **(2016)**

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