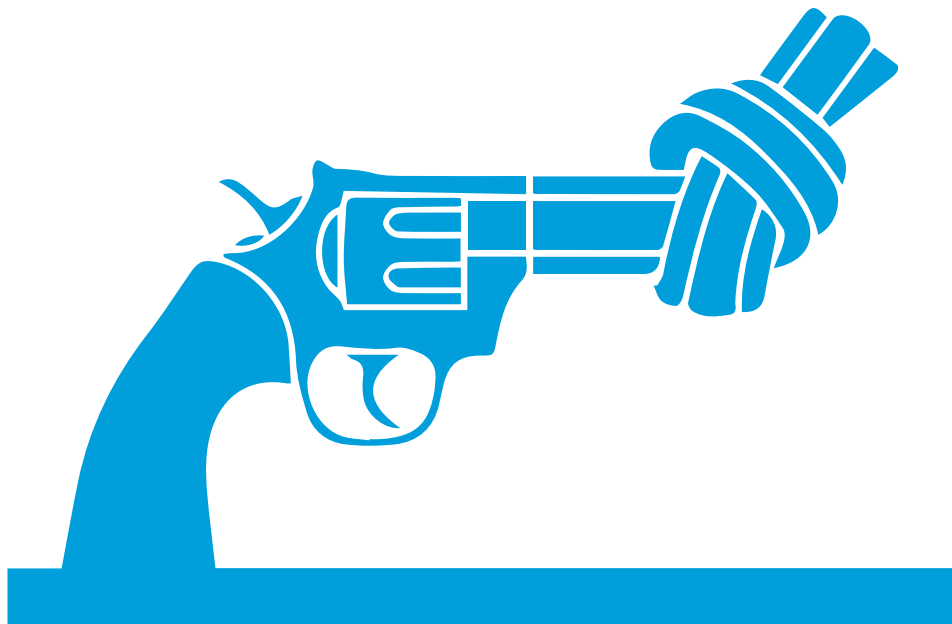




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SAINT JOSEPH SEMINARY AND HIGH SCHOOL
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RETORIKA FOR MULTICULTURALISM



DISEC *RESEARCH REPORT*

Sea Militarization: Addressing the Rise of Floating Military Islands
and the Transformation of Seas into Strategic Land.

Key terms and definitions:

Artificial military island (AMI): man-made islands that are made through a process called land reclamation. These islands are specifically made to serve army purposes, which includes airstrips, naval harbors, radar systems, and missile installations to improve a specific country's presence in vital sea territories.¹

Baseline:

The baseline is the official starting line a country uses to measure how far its ocean territory reaches. We can think of it as the point where the land ends and the ocean starts. The coastal line of a country, normally (like in Israel, for example), is the line that is drawn at the low water mark. In other cases, however, where the country is constructed of many small islands, like Canada for example, the coastal line is drawn to connect the outer points of the islands, making a much clearer line.²

Territorial waters:

This term means the ocean or sea near a country's coast, where it has full sovereignty. The limit of this zone is 12 nautical miles. In this zone, foreign ships are allowed the right of "innocent passage".³

International waters:

This represents all parts of the ocean beyond the 200 nautical miles of any country's EEZ; it is not controlled by any country or government, and it is governed by the freedom of the high seas under the UNCLOS, granting all countries the ability to fish or fly over it.⁴

Exclusive economic zones (EEZ):

It is an area at sea that extends up to 200 nautical miles; within this zone, the country has sovereignty over the natural resources, including living resources like fish and other marine life.⁵

Background Information

This committee will deal with the topic of the use of Artificial Islands as part of the military strategy of countries competing over areas both at sea and on land. This topic is very technical since it is quite recent (due to the innovative technology that allows this issue to arise) and due to a myriad of technical terms that relate to maritime international law and other important naval and sea-based concepts.

We therefore ask you to study said concepts and frameworks well to allow a good and fruitful debate on a topic that was not discussed too thoroughly in international bodies, and as such requires this committee to work together to reach some groundbreaking resolutions to regulate this phenomenon.

How is an Artificial Island made?

The process starts with finding the right place; usually, artificial islands are constructed on naturally occurring shallow features, like low tide elevations (LTEs) or already existing coral reef atolls, which secure a shallow and stable base to build upon. Seabed leveling is the initial

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/artificial-island>

² <https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1142>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/summary/territorial-waters>

⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/international-waters>

⁵ <https://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/ocean-fact/useez/>

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construction stage, ensuring stability. Machines clear and flatten the land, so it can be safe to build on. Then, the area is sealed to keep water out, and special walls are built around the site to make sure it stays dry during the work.

Then, the blown filling technique is used, which is the phase where the land mass is created, and large vessels called Cutter Suction Dredgers (CSDs) start pumping up large amounts of sand, rocks, and gravel from surrounding lagoons and seabeds. They then transport it to the construction area, dumping all the material into the construction site until the sea bed is higher than the high water line. That's how the new landmass is created.⁶

How did they start?

China's artificial military island creation really sped up with their land reclamation projects in the South China Sea. It began in the late 1980s with small garrisons, but around 2013-2014, they started big construction, often called the Great Wall of Sand.

These efforts quickly changed reefs, such as those in the Spratly Islands, into military zones with runways, ports, and missile and radar systems. This island-building push was mainly about territorial claims, showing air and naval power, setting up surveillance bases, and controlling trade routes and resources. These actions drastically changed the region's security.⁷

International laws that concern artificial islands:

Artificial Islands cannot endow a country with a maritime zone because an artificial island doesn't possess the status of an island, which means the area around it cannot be considered as the country's territorial sea. This is a very important concept to the law of the sea that dictates how far a nation's sovereignty extends into the sea. This rule makes countries unable to extend their coastal line using artificial islands.

It also cannot affect Exclusive Economic Zones between states. In other words, countries cannot create artificial islands to change the boundaries of their territorial waters or to affect their fishing or resources rights, like extending their EEZ by simply creating an artificial island and declaring it part of the country's territory.

However, jurisdiction in the Exclusive Economic Zone (Article 60 of the UN Law of the Sea) gives states partial authority over artificial islands in their EEZ areas, for example:

- a. The state has the right to build and allow the construction of artificial islands in its EEZs.
- b. The states have exclusive jurisdiction over these artificial islands, which includes laws and regulations over customs, fiscal, health, and immigration.⁸

⁶<https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Beckman-LTE-submerged-features-Taipei-20-21-Sep1.pdf>

⁷<https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>

⁸https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm

Treaties and Organizations

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):

This convention is the main guide when it comes to the rules of the seas. It started in 1982 and became legitimate internationally in 1994. This system of rules was made to set clear rules for countries in the sea to ensure each country's sovereignty is respected in the vast sea.⁹

International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS):

This is a court that enforces rules and sanctions at sea; it was set up in the Law of the Sea Convention in 1982. It handles big disagreements between countries when it comes to misusing the laws of the sea.¹⁰

Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC):

This represents a helping hand to countries when it comes to determining where their underwater land ends if they wish to extend beyond the 200 nautical miles from the country's coast. According to the international law set forth by UNCLOS, the extra-territoriality is determined by the COC.¹¹

International Maritime Organization (IMO):

This is a body made by the UN to ensure everything works smoothly and safely at sea. Its main purpose is to develop and create laws that ensure ships' safety from terrorism or piracy.¹²

Current Situation:

Parts of the artificial military islands are outfitted with long airstrips, sophisticated missile systems, and modern intelligence operations that considerably increase the military aerial, naval, and electronic reach of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

China's aggressive and provocative militarization of these features directly contravenes the legal framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹³ The latter stipulates that atoll or reef structures that are always underwater (or low-tide elevations) may not be designated as sovereign territories, nor are they entitled to generate an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).¹⁴ To secure them, China is defying those international laws by physically modifying the environment and thereby creating new facts in the water, which in turn negate the rules-based order and the respective rights of the other states that are claimants in the same area.

The establishment of effective control is most commonly facilitated through the employment of "gray zone tactics" that represent coercive undertakings at a level lower than that of open warfare and beyond the threshold of diplomatic interaction. In other words, find grey areas to exploit that would not lead to full eruption of hostilities, but would give you a threshold in the region.

One substantial example is the case of the Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal), which is situated in the EEZ of the Philippines. Repeatedly, the Chinese Coast Guard and the maritime militia resorted to harassing and obstructing the Philippine supply runs to the grounded BRP

⁹ <https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/legal/pages/unitednationsconventiononthelawofthesea.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www.itlos.org/en/>

¹¹ <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/situation-in-the-south-china-sea/priority-areas-of-cooperation/>

¹² <https://www.imo.org/>

¹³ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea>

¹⁴ https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm

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Sierra Madre. It is said that they employ water cannons and perform hazardous operations to establish their control, making it almost impossible for the Philippines to keep its presence. What is more, this practice of continual harassment without direct confrontation is intended to bring about the condition of control exercised in fact, but not yet in law, over the disputed features, consequently increasing the likelihood of an accidental situation and keeping the regional tension at a high level, even though this route happens to be a vital global trade connection.¹⁵

While the focus of this section was on the actions of China, this committee must always focus on the issue as a potential global problem. The lack of mechanisms in place that recognize and put a stop to the use of artificial islands for military or strategic purposes is a grey zone that needs to be addressed. Otherwise many other actors and countries can also make use of it, making the security on the international scene much more fragile than it already is.

Critical Events and Timeline:

Territorial confrontations are rising between China and a host of other nations in the South China Sea:

The sea, the islands, and rocks that sit within it are subject to a long-running and fierce territorial dispute. China claims that it owns a very big part of it, ignoring a Hague tribunal finding from 2016 that its claims are without legal grounds. Since 2013, it has undertaken huge construction work, building militarized artificial islands in the area. Other countries also have overlapping claims, one of which is the Philippines, a US ally, which has accused Chinese vessels of aggressive behavior at sea; and Vietnam, which is now having rapid island-building work.¹⁶

Gray Zone fight at Second Thomas Shoal:

This is the most effort China has shown to take the reef without a war. This reef is a part of the Philippines, and the Philippines keeps a small group of soldiers on an older ship called BRP Sierra Madre, as a sign of ownership of that land. China wants that land due to its strategic position, so it is retaliating by using “the maritime militia,” which consists of Chinese coast guard and fishing boats to stop supplies provided by the Philippines from reaching the island. They do that by using powerful water cannons and driving their boats dangerously close to the Philippines with the intention of blocking and hitting them. China’s intention is for the Philippines to give up on the island and just take its citizens and leave. Gaining control over the island of the Second Thomas Shoal is just a piece of China’s much larger plan to take control over the entire South China Sea.¹⁷

The Philippines against China in the UNCLOS international court:

On 22 January 2013, the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings against China in a dispute concerning their respective “maritime entitlements” and the legality of Chinese activities in the South China Sea. In response, by a diplomatic note dated 19 February 2013 addressed to the Philippines, China expressed its rejection of the arbitration.

¹⁵ <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/08/philippine-military-reports-surge-in-chinese-activity-at-second-thomas-shoal/>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/30/south-china-sea-map-visual-guide-key-shoals-reefs-islands#img-1>

¹⁷ <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/08/philippine-military-reports-surge-in-chinese-activity-at-second-thomas-shoal/>

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In China's view, the Arbitral Tribunal did not have jurisdiction in the case because China's acceptance of dispute settlement under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) – the basis put forward by the Philippines – was limited and excluded sea boundary delimitations and the determination of historic titles. Since then, China has continuously refused either to accept or to participate in the arbitral proceedings initiated by the Philippines. The tribunal, however, did not see this as an obstacle: on 29 October 2015, it delivered its first award finding that it had jurisdiction, and, on 12 July 2016, its award deciding on the merits of the dispute.¹⁸

The Timeline:

2013 Philippines Initiates UNCLOS Arbitration:

The Philippines is challenging China's claims about the nine-dash line in an international court under the law of the sea

2013 – 2016 China's "Great Wall of Sand" Peak:

China started building over 3,200 acres worth of coral reefs, turning them into new land used for military bases

July 12, 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) Ruling:

An international court ruled against China, stating that the nine-dash line claim is illegal and illegitimate, and that its artificial islands do not have territorial rights.

2021–Present Vietnam's Accelerated Land Reclamation:

Vietnam started building its own artificial islands, becoming the second actor to make use of this in the South China Sea.

June 17, 2024 Second Thomas Shoal Collision & Escalation:

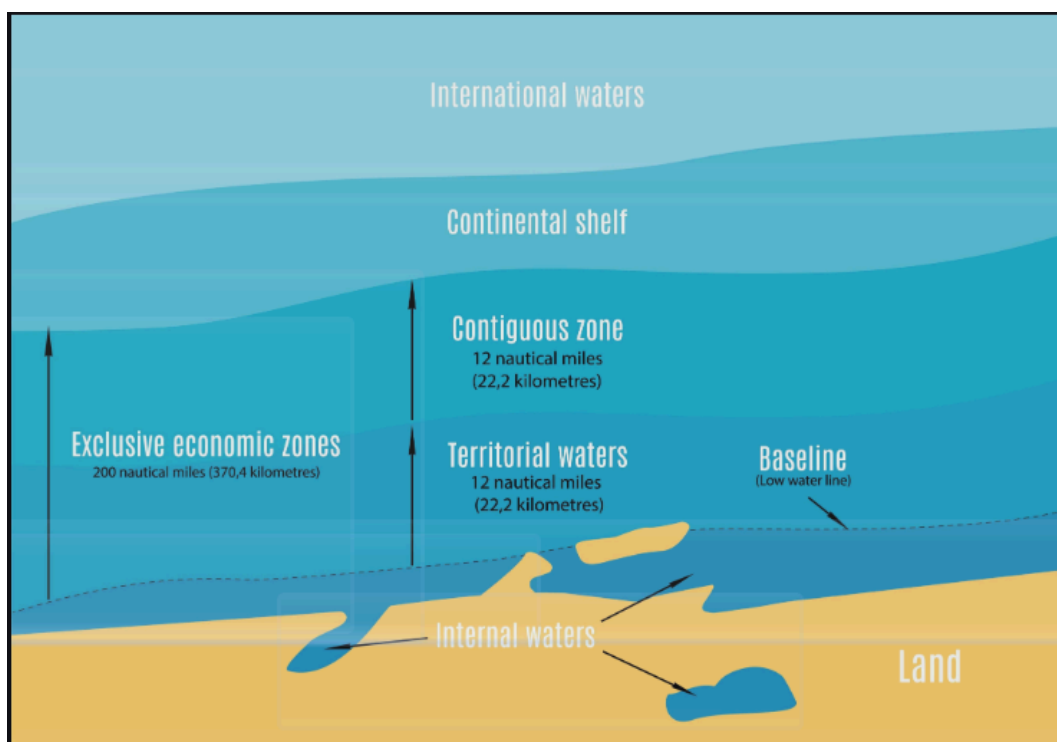
The Chinese Coast Guard used violence (blades, water cannons) against Philippine resupply boats, marking a dangerous shift to physical, kinetic confrontation in the "gray zone."

Questions to consider:

- How is my country's EEZ affected (if applicable) by the rise of militarized artificial islands?
- What side is my country on when it comes to China against the Philippines over maritime disputes?
- What resources might be a motive for countries to break another country's maritime sovereignty?
- What kind of resolutions have been used, and what effect did they have on global relations?
- What international framework should be adopted by the international community to regulate the use of Artificial Islands as military assets? Should this strategy be allowed or should it be heavily limited?
- How should international law of the Sea be enforced?

¹⁸ <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/1/legal-victory-for-the-philippines-against-china-a-case-study/>

Relevant media



Helpful resources:

- [Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative](#): gives no biased opinions about the Philippines vs China disputes in the South China Sea
- [The UNCLOS](#) provides a list of laws of the sea
- [The kmi international journal of maritime affairs and fishers](#): an article about The Legality of Militarization of the South China Sea and Its Legal Implications
- [Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea | Global Conflict Tracker](#)
- [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea YouTube video](#)
- [Why China is building islands in the South China Sea \(YouTube video\)](#)
- [International Maritime Organization official website](#)

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