

Tensions in the South China Sea

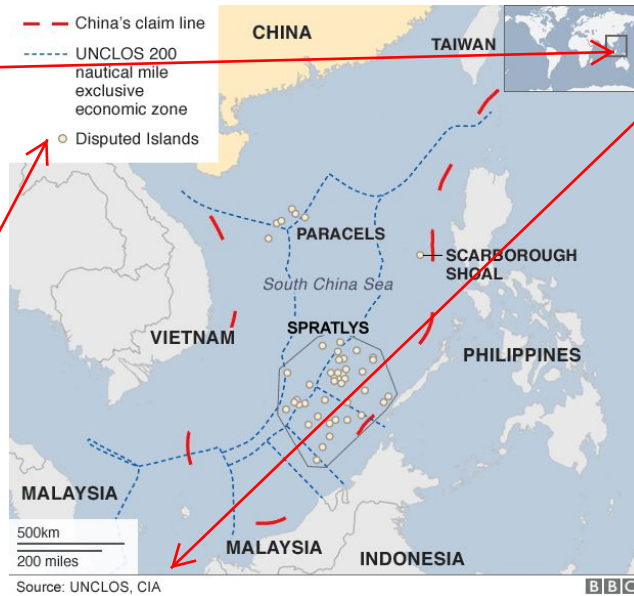
1 The South China Sea (picture: BBC, 2016).

1. Locate the area.

The South China Sea is a maritime area between China in the North, Vietnam in the West, the Philippines in the East, Malaysia and Indonesia in the South.

2. What can we see on this map ? (use the legend)

There are maritime disputes. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, Montego bay, 1982) says that each state should have an EEZ possibly extending to 200 miles of its shores. China, however, claims most of the South China Sea within the limits of a unilaterally declared "nine-dash line".



3. Whose viewpoint is it ?

This is a western standpoint: a map published by the British Broadcasting Corporation, and based on data from the American Central Intelligence Agency. It suggests that China's claims are against international law (as a matter of fact, they are conflicting).

4. What are the stakes ?

We know that China occupies most of the disputed islands. Meanwhile, the USA and her allies carry out "freedom of navigation operations" to vindicate the idea that those are international waters. The international Court of justice has rejected the Chinese claims, but China does not recognize that judgement. The worst that could happen might be a war between China and the United States.

2 A Chinese map of the South China Sea published on Twitter in April 2020.

1. As we have already defined the area, we can focus on the differences between the two maps.

(Nothing to add here).

3. Hence, a very different representation of the same area.

– the map is written in English; we can argue that it is intended for foreigners.
– but the disputed territories bear their Chinese names:

- * Xisha islands for the Paracels;
- * Nansha islands for the Spratlys;
- * Huangyan for Scarborough shoal.

shoal.

– again, we have the nine-dash line, but the EEZs have vanished. There is no reference to the UNCLOS.



2. Compared to the first map, it is a reversed perspective.

We now have the Chinese viewpoint: to make it simple, China says that the South China Sea is... Chinese!

4. What are the stakes ?

- From the Chinese viewpoint, there is no reason for dispute;
- the South China Sea is Chinese territory, based on "historical rights";
- even though the International court has rejected those claims, China does not care.
- the other countries may be tempted to find a counterweight to Chinese hegemony. E.g, the relationship between Vietnam and the US has recently improved.

➤ Using the documents and your knowledge, explain the geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea.