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China's "Frontiers": Issues Concerning Territorial Claims at Sea

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The South China Sea Islands are composed of four groups, namely, the Paracel Islands, the Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank, and the Spratly Islands. The Paracel Islands are occupied by China (the People's Republic of China: PRC), and the Pratas islands are occupied by Taiwan (Republic of China: ROC), though the reefs of Macclesfield Bank are all sunken reefs with the exception of the two rocks of Scarborough Shoal being occupied by the Philippines armed forces. Therefore the focal point is the territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands. According to Chinese sources, the sea area of the Spratly Islands is around 800,000 square km, or 38% of the total sea areas of the South China Sea; the area includes 230 islands, reefs and cays.

All the islands, reefs, and cays are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and some part of the islands and reefs are claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The sea area of the Spratly Islands is believed to be rich in oil and fishery resources. The four claimants, namely Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China occupies 7, Taiwan occupies 1, Vietnam occupies 21, Malaysia occupies 5, and the Philippines occupies 8, though most of them are rocks and sunken reefs. Almost all of the claimants except Brunei have built artificial islands and emplacements to station troops. Some have even built airstrips on them.

China is the biggest claimant of the Spratly Islands. People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval ships attacked Vietnamese troopships around Johnson Reef of the Spratly Islands in March 1988, sinking two Vietnamese ships and wrecking one. Further, Chinese relations with Vietnam and with the Philippines have been aggravated for some time, because the PLA navy built a territorial marker at the

Gaven Reefs in July 1992, and built some military posts for stationing troops on the Mischief Reef, which was also claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines, in February 1995, expanding them in October 1998. The ASEAN foreign ministers expressed several times their serious concern over Chinese military actions which have affected the peace and stability in the South China Sea at the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings.

The Chinese broken U-shaped line on the map of the South China Sea is also the focal point of ASEAN countries. The broken U-shaped line was officially drawn in the map of the ROC in 1947, and on the map of the PRC in 1953. It includes all four groups of the South China Sea islands, and the broken line appearing in a Chinese map also seemed to indicate that a part of the Natuna Islands of Indonesia belonged to China. A Taiwanese researcher pointed out that it is unclear as to whether the cartographer had full knowledge of international maritime law. If so, the legality of the broken line may be in doubt, though China claims that the broken line is the Chinese boundary of the historical waters.

The Indonesian government had requested the Chinese government to explain the implication of the broken line in 1994 and again in 1995. The Chinese government denied having territorial claims on the Natuna Islands, though they refused to explain the details of the meaning of the broken line. ASEAN leader tried to settle the South China Sea conflict peacefully at the ASEAN-China Summit Meeting which they had begun in 1997. Further, the ASEAN leaders agreed on the treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) in 1995, and they planned the Regional Code of Conduct for the South China Sea to check the Chinese claim in the South China Sea.

This article follows the process of the South China Sea dispute between China and ASEAN countries in the post Cold War era, and analyzes the security implications of the broken U-shaped line on the Chinese map.