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The South China Sea Dispute: Is it Worth?

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1. Introduction

This research paper sets the context for the study and provides an overview of the key themes that the article will be focused on. In doing so, it introduces the South China Sea dispute and outlines the paper's main focus in exploring its relevance to border security, particularly in the region. First and foremost, it will provide definitions and historical background to the South China Sea dispute and the concept of border security before reviewing it. It will also be introduced as a study in politics and geography, emphasizing the concept of multiscalarity in border security. By exploring the link between these concepts and particular case study examples in the South China Sea, this research paper advertises itself as a study of the practical implications of those ideas and the complex interplay between political power, territorial space, and strategic security. By focusing

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explicitly on the South China Sea dispute, this paper will suggest that this offers a critical case study in an area of border security.

2. Literature Review

Yoshimatsu explains that The South China Sea dispute is a multifaceted issue with significant implications for border security. Its strategic goals and assertive diplomacy influence China's behavior in this dispute.[1] Wong asserts that the conflict management strategies observed in the South China Sea have implications for understanding Chinese behavior not only in the region but also beyond.[2] Nicole explains that while the South China Sea case informs perceptions about conflict management, it may not fully represent other territorial disputes in Southeast Asia.[3]

Tréglodé explains that the dispute in the South China Sea has led to geopolitical tensions and has implications for maritime security cooperation in the region.[4] Moreover, Zha asserts that the involvement of major powers like the United States and Japan further complicates the situation, as they have vested interests in the area.[5] Widian and Arimadona explain that the security dilemma caused by China's power capabilities in the South China Sea inhibits cooperation among claimant

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[1] Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, "China, Japan and the South China Sea Dispute: Pursuing Strategic Goals Through Economic and Institutional Means," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 4, no. 3 (December 2017): 295, https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797017733821.

[2] Audrye Wong, "More than Peripheral: How Provinces Influence China's Foreign Policy," *The China Quarterly* 235 (September 2018): 736, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018000930.

[3] Nicole Jenne, "Managing Territorial Disputes in Southeast Asia: Is There More than the South China Sea?," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3 (December 2017): 47, https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341703600302.

[4] Benoît De Tréglodé, "Maritime Boundary Delimitation and Sino-Vietnamese Cooperation in the Gulf of Tonkin (1994-2016)," *China Perspectives* 2016, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 41, https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7030.

[5] Daojiong Zha, "Security in the South China Sea," *Sage Publications* 26, no. 1 (January 2001): 36, https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540102600102.

states.[6] Additionally, the disputes in the South China Sea involve not only the claiming countries but also other nations with interests in the region, increasing the potential for conflict.

The South China Sea dispute is a complex issue with far-reaching implications for border security, as evidenced by the multifaceted perspectives presented by various scholars. Yoshimatsu, Wong, and Nicole highlight the significance of the dispute in understanding Chinese behavior and conflict management strategies, both within the region and beyond. However, Nicole cautions that the South China Sea case may not be entirely representative of other territorial disputes in Southeast Asia. Tréglodé and Zha emphasize the geopolitical tensions and the involvement of major powers, such as the United States and Japan, which further complicate the situation and have implications for maritime security cooperation. Widian and Arimadona argue that China's power capabilities in the South China Sea contribute to a security dilemma, hindering cooperation among claimant states. My point of view is that the South China Sea dispute serves as a critical case study for understanding the complex interplay between territorial claims, regional stability, and global security interests. Resolving this dispute will require a concerted effort from all involved parties to engage in diplomatic negotiations and find mutually acceptable solutions that prioritize peace and stability in the region.

3. Multiscalarity in the South China Sea Disputes

The concept of multiscalarity in border security is particularly relevant when examining the South China Sea dispute. Multiscalarity refers to the idea that border security operates at multiple spatial scales, ranging from the local to the global level. In the context of the South China

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Sea, this perspective helps to understand how the actions and decisions of individual claimant state, regional actors and international powers interact to shape the security landscape. Su and Miao explain that border security in the context of the South China Sea dispute requires a comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of border control and territorial politics.[7] For instance, while the dispute is primarily centered around the competing territorial claims of the littoral states, it also involves the strategic interests of more considerable powers, such as the United States and China, which view the region as crucial to their geopolitical ambitions. Thus, the multiscalar approach highlights the complex interactions and power dynamics underlying the dispute.

Moreover, the multiscalarity perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of various aspects of border security, such as maritime governance, economic interests, and environmental concerns. Policy experimentation in Chinese border cities influences sovereignty, politics, and economics, impacting border security measures.[8] The conflict in the South China Sea is not about who owns what but also involves issues like fishing rights, using resources, and ensuring freedom to sail. These matters significantly affect the safety and prosperity of those living along the coast who rely on the sea for their livelihoods. Moreover, the environmental damage caused by activities and building projects in the area has sparked worries about the health of marine life. Looking at things from different perspectives shows that the South China Sea conflict is more than a border security issue; it is a complex mix of social, economic, and environmental factors that go beyond traditional ideas of territorial limits.

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[7] Xiaobo Su and Yi Miao, "Border Control: The Territorial Politics of Policy Experimentation in Chinese Border Cities," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 46, no. 4 (July 2022): 526, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13079.
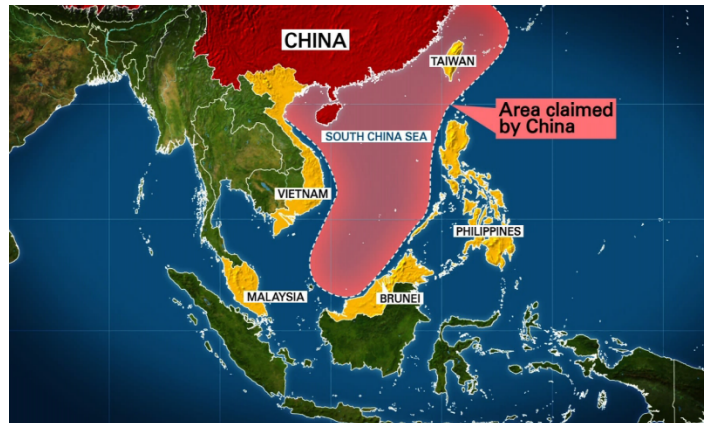
[8] Su and Miao, 540.

Figure 1. The area claimed by China[9]

Multiscalarity in border security also refers to the different agencies and levels of government involved in securing a country's border. The multiscalar production of borders emphasizes the spatial and geopolitical dimensions that influence border dynamics, necessitating a thorough analysis of state, geopolitics, and identity in border management.[10] The progress in technology has made it easier for both official and unofficial entities to influence the borders of the countries. This is especially noticeable in the development of the South China Sea, where the People's Republic of China has enacted a land reclamation project to bolster its claim to the region. The extraordinary length of the South China Sea borders, light to a sheer number of overlapping, multiscalar efforts to secure and control physical spaces in the region, is much less explored.

4. Securing Border Spaces in the South China Sea

The South China Sea is recognized as one of the most likely conflict zones in the current global environment. It is located in the Pacific Ocean, a semi-enclosed sea of numerous islands.

[9] Ryan Browne Lendon Brad, "US Destroyer Sails Close to Disputed Island in the South China Sea | CNN Politics," CNN, July 2, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/02/politics/us-navy-south-china-sea/index.html.
[10] Jussi P. Laine, "The Multiscalar Production of Borders," *Geopolitics* 21, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 467, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1195132.

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This writing critically examines the use and controls over the border spaces in the South China Sea. It argues that although bordering has pretty much focused on stopping people from crossing, states also increasingly use borders to use the resources in their borderlands to acquire borderline security in the South China Sea. Viewing border security as a socially negotiated space underscores the importance of understanding the practical aspects of securing borders and the activities of actors involved in border control.[11]
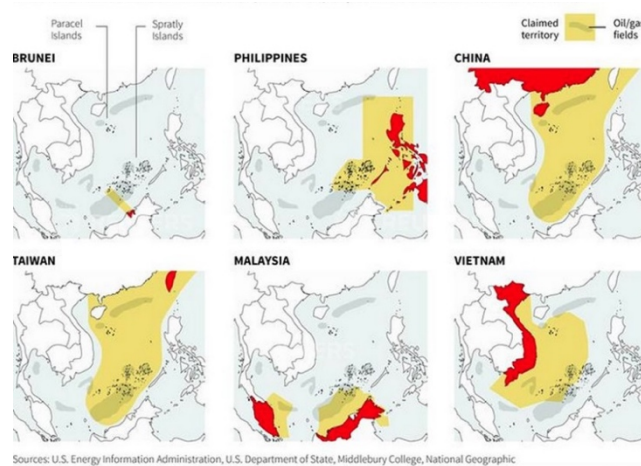

Figure 2. Claims on the South China Sea[12]

The ongoing conflicts in the South China Sea are heavily influenced by how different countries define and defend their boundaries. This region is a source of contention for nations like China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei due to their overlapping claims on

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[11] Karine Côté-Boucher, Federica Infantino, and Mark B. Salter, "Border Security as Practice: An Agenda for Research," *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 3 (June 2014): 196, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614533243.

[12] Jeremy Bender, "7 Charts That Show Why the Tit for Tat over Crumbs in the South China Sea Isn't for Nothing," Business Insider, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/7-charts-show-why-south-china-sea-is-crucial-2016-2.

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islands, reefs, and waters. These disputes stem from cultural and legal interpretations of borders, as seen in each country's maps and official documents. For instance, China's "nine-dash line" map outlines a portion of the South China Sea. It has been used to support its expansive maritime claims since the late 1940s. However, other countries in the area and globally have questioned the legitimacy of this map's claims, arguing that it violates the law and encroaches on their sovereignty over these waters.

The conflicting conceptual and cartographic borders in the South China Sea have heightened tensions among these nations vying for control over this region. Every country aims to demonstrate its understanding of boundaries and support its assertions using various methods, such as issuing declarations, carrying out military drills, and creating man-made islands and structures in contested areas. These actions have increased the potential for conflicts and complicated efforts to settle disagreements peacefully. Unlike the map-based boundaries, the physical borders in the South China Sea are clearly outlined and more challenging to enforce. The area is marked by a network of islands, reefs, and shoals, many of which are uninhabited or sparsely populated. Control over these features is often disputed, with several nations vying to assert their presence through building posts, airstrips, and other facilities. Occupying these sites is a way to bolster claims and project influence in the region.

The interaction between physical boundaries in the South China Sea holds consequences for resolving disputes. While theoretical and map-defined borders are crucial for shaping arguments and diplomatic positions of states' actual control, over-contested territories often dictate reality. To find a lasting solution to the disagreements in the South China Sea, it is crucial to consider both the physical aspects of borders, taking into account the cultural and legal influences that have shaped the region's geopolitical layout. The countries involved in these disputes should

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focus on communication, discussions, and actions that foster trust to resolve. This might entail understanding map-based borders and creating mechanisms for collaborative management and cooperation in contested areas. International law, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), offers a framework for addressing conflicting claims and encouraging peaceful dispute resolution.

5. Implications of the South China Sea Dispute on Border Security

The ongoing conflict in the South China Sea poses challenges for maintaining border security in the region and beyond. The intricate mix of disputes, strategic interests, and geopolitical tensions involving countries and major players like the United States and China has underscored the importance of effective border control and security measures. Scholars such as Su and Miao have emphasized the need to understand border management practices and territorial politics due to the nature of the dispute. Moving beyond border studies, it is crucial to consider an array of social control and surveillance methods in ensuring border security, given the diverse practices involved in demarcating boundaries. The collaboration among bodies at different levels combined with technological advancements has empowered state and nonstate entities to shape the dynamics of even formidable nations. This dynamic is particularly evident in the South China Sea, where China's land reclamation efforts have reshaped geography and political dynamics, challenging established notions of border security.

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Figure 3. China's land reclamation on Paracel Islands,
Scarborough Shoal and Spratly Island[13]

Furthermore, the repercussions of the South China Sea conflict extend beyond security concerns to encompass safety, economic stakes, and environmental sustainability considerations. The conflict involves issues concerning fishing rights, exploiting resources, and ensuring freedom of navigation, all of which have impacts on the safety and prosperity of communities. The presence of activities and land reclamation in the area has sparked worries about the long-term health of the marine environment. To maintain security in the South China Sea borders effectively, it is crucial to understand border aspects such as map-based, physical boundaries, and real-life borders. By seeing border security as a product of negotiation, policymakers and researchers can gain insight into how to secure borders practically and monitor those involved in border management. This approach would likely to help formulate strategies to address the issues arising from the disputes in the South China Sea region.

6. Conclusion

The ongoing disagreement in the South China Sea serves as an example for studying the dynamics of border security in today's world. This complex issue involves conflicting claims, strategic interests, and geopolitical tensions, underscoring the importance of a nuanced approach to managing borders. The concept of multiscalar offers a framework for examining how local,

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[13] Asia Insights, "Making Sense Of The South China Sea Dispute," Forbes, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/outofasia/2017/08/22/making-sense-of-the-south-china-sea-dispute/.

regional, and global factors interact to shape border security in the South China Sea region. Recognizing the dimensions of borders and the diverse practices associated with making them can help policymakers and scholars craft more effective strategies to tackle the challenges arising from this dispute.

Moreover, the impacts of the South China Sea conflict go beyond border security; they also touch upon matters concerning governance, economic progress, and environmental sustainability. With militarization activities and land reclamation efforts affecting the area, all involved parties need to engage in dialogues and collaborative initiatives aimed at fostering peace, stability, and sustainable growth. By viewing border security as a product of social negotiation processes and cultivating an understanding of approaches to securing borders, nations worldwide can strive towards finding mutually agreeable solutions that prioritize both peoples' well-being and environmental conservation in the South China Sea region.

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