South China Sea Dispute:

Location of South China Sea:

- The South China Sea is a marginal sea that is part of the Pacific Ocean, encompassing an area from the Karimata and Malacca Straits to the Strait of Taiwan of around 3,500,000 square kms (1,400,000 sq mi).
- Approximately 3.5 million square km area of the South China has been under dispute as China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei have all claimed sovereignty over this territory.
- There are a few hundred small islands in the SCS, a part of the Pacific Ocean. Some of the main ones are Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands and Scarborough Shoal the bone of contention between China and the Philippines.

It is located to:

- South of China;
- East of Vietnam;
- West of the Philippines;
- East of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, up to the Strait of Singapore in the western, and north of the Bangka Belitung Islands and Borneo.

Why China wants to control SCS:

- The SCS is a busy international waterway, being one of the main arteries of the global economy and trade.
- More than $5 trillion of world trade ships pass through the SCS every year.
- Major commercial shipping routes pass through the SCS, which links the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.
- 40 percent of global liquefied natural gas trade transited through the South China Sea in 2017.
The SCS is also resource rich, with numerous offshore oil and gas blocks.

Main Parties to the dispute and their claims

- The main parties to the dispute are the China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Philippines, and Malaysia.
- China claims around 80% of the region through its nine-dash line which stretches hundreds of miles south and east from its most southerly province of Hainan.
- Taiwan’s claims in the South China Sea are as extensive as the China’s claims.
- Vietnam disputes the China’s historical account and says it actively ruled over both the Paracels and the Spratlys since the 17th Century.
- Philippines claim is based on its geographical proximity to the Spratly Islands. It claims a part of the Spratly Islands and also contends with China about the Scarborough Shoal (also known as Huangyan Island in China). Scarborough Shoal is nearer to Philippines than China.
- Malaysia and Brunei’s claim to the territory in the South China Sea is based on the area that falls within their economic exclusion zones, as defined by UNCLOS.
- Through, Brunei does not claim any of the disputed islands; Malaysia claims a small number of islands in the Spratlys.
- The United States contends that the South China Sea is international water, and sovereignty in the area should be determined by the United Nations Convention on Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- UNCLOS states that countries can't claim sovereignty over any land masses that are submerged at high tide, or that were previously submerged but have been raised above high tide level by construction.
- Under the current laws, the sea is divided into several maritime zones.
- These zones include territorial sea (TS), contiguous zone (CZ), exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and continental shelf (CS).
- According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), if a state has territorial sovereignty over an island or a
mainland, it can claim a TS of no more than 12 nautical miles (nm), an EEZ of no more than 200nm, and normally a CS of no more than 200nm.

- The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, Netherlands, has ruled that China’s claim of historical rights over South China Sea (SCS) has no legal basis.
- The case against China was initiated by the Philippines.

Maritime Territorial Disputes

- A dispute over the Paracel Islands in the SCS, which are claimed by China and Vietnam, and occupied by China.
- A dispute over the Spratly Islands in the SCS, which are claimed entirely by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and in part by the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, and which are occupied in part by all these countries except Brunei.
- A dispute over Scarborough Shoal in the SCS, which is claimed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines, and controlled since 2012 by China.
- A dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the ECS, which are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Japan, and administered by Japan.

Recent Development

- In recent years, satellite imagery has shown China’s increased efforts to reclaim land in the South China Sea by physically increasing the size of islands or creating new islands altogether.
- China has constructed ports, military installations, and airstrips particularly in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, where it has twenty and seven outposts, respectively.
- China has militarized Woody Island by deploying fighter jets, cruise missiles, and a radar system.
• To protect its political, security, and economic interests in the region, the United States has challenged China’s assertive territorial claims and land reclamation efforts by conducting FONOPs and bolstering support for Southeast Asian partners.

• Also in response to China’s assertive presence in the disputed territory, Japan has sold military ships and equipment to the Philippines and Vietnam in order to improve their maritime security capacity and to deter Chinese aggression.

• US has stepped up its military activity and naval presence in the region and also has conducted six FONOPs (Freedom of Navigation Operations) since May 2017.

India’s Position:

• Development in South China Sea have serious implications for India’s strategic interests in and its role in Indo-Pacific region.

• Over 55% of India’s trade passes through South China Sea. Peace and stability in the region is of great significance to India. India undertakes various activities, including cooperation in oil and gas sector, with littoral states of South China Sea.

• Indian analysts must take note of Chinese maritime tactics in the South China Sea.

• Indian Navy can observe Chinese maritime tactics and learned how to prevent Chinese aggression in Indian Ocean

Indo-Pacific region:

• Because, The ‘Asia-Pacific‘ region is the new geo-political ‘pivot’ accounting for approximately 56 per cent of the world’s population, 33 per cent of the world’s gross product, and an increase in oil demand of over 7 million barrels per day over the last decade.
• It consists of the most unexploited oceans—the Indian and the Pacific—with regard to the vast potential hydrocarbon reserves of submarine crude and natural gas, high-grade mineral deposits, and huge fishing resources.

• Earlier, India remained a passive observer in SCS for many years.

• In 2004 Vajpayee government classified SCS as extended neighborhood.

• In 2006, the ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) signed a contract with Petro-Vietnam to jointly explore petroleum resources in Phu Khanh Basin. In 2007, India’s Maritime Military Strategy defined South China Sea as an area of “strategic interest” to India.

• In 2011 also OVL signed few more deals to jointly explore oil and natural gas in these blocks.

• India has strong ties with Vietnam and has tried to use those ties to play some important / constructive role in South China Sea.

• India’s engagement in the South China Sea, on one hand shows its deeper economic and security cooperation with ASEAN countries, on the other hand it shows India’s recognition that the escalation of the maritime disputes in South China Sea may have larger implications in international world order.