

The Role of International Law in the South China Sea Dispute: A Case Study of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea dispute stands as a complex intersection of international law, geopolitics, and regional security, involving competing territorial and maritime claims from China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Central to this thesis is the analysis of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling, which declared China's expansive "Nine-Dash Line" claim incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Despite the ruling's clear legal reasoning and reaffirmation of UNCLOS principles, China's refusal to recognize and comply with the judgment highlights the critical limitations of international legal enforcement when challenged by major powers. This study examines the effectiveness of the PCA ruling in shaping state behavior, the role of international and regional organizations such as ASEAN in dispute resolution, and the broader tension between legal norms and geopolitical interests. Drawing from legal theory, compliance studies, and international relations perspectives, the research reveals how the South China Sea case illustrates the fragile authority of international law in constraining powerful states. It further explores the implications for regional stability, maritime governance, and the evolving balance between law, sovereignty, and realpolitik in international order. The findings emphasize that while international law remains a vital framework for peaceful dispute resolution, its success ultimately depends on political will, diplomatic engagement, and multilateral cooperation.

Keywords: South China Sea, international law, PCA ruling, UNCLOS, Nine-Dash Line, maritime disputes, compliance, ASEAN, geopolitics, territorial sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS) is one of the most complicated territorial and maritime issues in the Asia-Pacific. The value of the water in that region is that it is strategically located, contains rich natural resources and houses one of the biggest trade routes in the world. It is a region where six claimant states (China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan) contest overlapping territorial claims, leading to a historical, nationalism and legal disputes (Fravel, 2011; Hayton, 2014).

The significance of the South China Sea cannot be understated, given its geographic and economic importance. It is an important waterway – 40% of the world's oil is shipped through the strait, and some 20% of all goods transact the strait – for the world shipping and oil trade routes (Editor, 2015). The Strait of Hormuz connects the Gulf to the Arabian Sea and to the Indian Ocean. It is also assumed that the sea has large deposits of oil and natural gas and sustains a wide variety of fish and fishery resources that is useful in diversifying economies and as a source of energy supply to the riparian states (Beckman, 2013). In history, the historic territorial jurisdictional provisions involving the SCS are based on historical title and proximity. China relies in part on ancient maps and navigational logs, and anchors its claims in the controversial “Nine-Dash Line,” which sweeps through nearly 90% of the South China Sea. This claim significantly overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and continental shelves of other states according to United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Valencia, Van Dyke, & Ludwig, 1997; Beckman, 2013). Vietnam and the Philippines are other claimants that similarly reference historical and effective occupation as basis for their sovereignty over islands and maritime features, such as the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal (Hayton, 2014).

The arguments are in relation to three main regions: the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands and Scarborough Shoal. The reefs, islets and rocks are not only resource-rich but also have strong geopolitical value, given the strategic location of these territories. Military bases and outposts have been built on many of these features, primarily by China, in a larger goal to project power and protect maritime claims (Fravel, 2017). Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan also have varying degrees of presence and infrastructure in the areas, adding to the competition.

The framework for claims at sea is to a great extent established by UNCLOS which entered into force in 1994. UNCLOS gives coastal states rights to a 12-nm territorial sea and a 200-nm EEZ. Where it fails is the issue of resolving sovereignty claims over land features which is to be determined by negotiation or adjudication between states (Beckman, 2013). The crux of the matter is the matter of interpretation as to what is legitimate sovereignty and rights under UNCLOS. The most important legal development in the dispute over the South China Sea, however, was the case of the Philippines against China before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) established in 2013. In 2016, the tribunal ruled that China's Nine-Dash Line had no legal basis under UNCLOS and that none of the features in the Spratly Islands could generate a full EEZ, as they are either low-tide elevations or rocks that cannot sustain human habitation (Kaplan, 2014).

The ruling also recognized the Philippines' sovereign rights in some parts of its EEZ, including the Scarborough Shoal. In any case, China refused to comply with the verdict and China has since construct military outposts there on reclaimed features (Fravel, 2017).

Regardless of the tribunal decision, the dispute is far from finished as enforcement and geopolitical hurdles hold back its resolution. China's strategic and military presence in the area is increasing and Southeast Asian states have invoked the assistance of extra regional powers like the US and Japan to that end (Hayton 2014). The absence of a binding multilateral code of conduct and ASEAN's lack of

leverage to calm tensions make de-escalation even more challenging. To sum up, the South China Sea dispute is a combination conflict of historical claims, resource contest, legal obscurity, and strategic competition. The international law regime, especially UNCLOS, provides us with an approach as to how to resolve these disputes but relatively far less enforcement can be achieved due to political will and imbalances in power. How it is handled will greatly impact stability in the region, the future of maritime rulemaking, and the ability to keep traffic moving through an indispensable chokepoint for some of the world's busiest and most important trade routes (Kaplan, 2014; Fravel, 2017).

Objectives

1. To analyze the effectiveness of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in resolving the South China Sea dispute and its impact on the enforcement of international law.
2. To explore the geopolitical dynamics that influence the implementation of international legal decisions, with a focus on China's rejection of the PCA ruling and the broader implications for regional stability.

Research Questions

1. How does the rejection of the 2016 PCA ruling by China challenge the enforcement of international law in the South China Sea dispute?
2. What role do international political and military factors play in shaping the effectiveness of international legal decisions in territorial disputes?

Significance of the Study

Among international disputes and legal challenges, the South China Sea dispute caused by territorial fights is one of the most heated. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei are involved and each of these countries claims authority over sections of the South China Sea, an area valued for its resources, key trade routes and strategic role. Nonetheless, China's large claim to most of the South China Sea, drawn by the well-known "nine-dash line," has caused a sharp rise in tensions in the area.

The resolution published by the PCA in 2016 had a strong impact on the dispute. According to the PCA's ruling in the Philippine case, China's declared historic rights over most of the South China Sea were illegal under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and international law. In addition, the court pointed out that China had infringed on its neighbor's rights in a special economic zone and had adversely affected the environment by setting up artificial islands and through activities such as fishing there.

China has firmly stated it does not accept the court's verdict, even though the Philippines has succeeded. It has not followed the tribunal's ruling and has kept building and fortifying artificial islands, added military forces to the area and pressured other countries with both persuasion and threats. When a country like China does this, it makes it difficult to know whether global legal decisions can really be followed.

One serious problem is that when a powerful state disagrees with a decision from international law, it may not be enforced. Most of the time, the PCA and other international bodies trust states to obey their decisions, as there is no central authority to ensure that states comply. If a country like China which wields considerable power in the world, rejects an international court's ruling, international law's tools for action seem weak.

In addition, the case reflects the fact that international institutions are often not able to cope with conflicts involving major countries. Even if there are set guidelines and groups for resolving disagreements such efforts can be influenced by politics and goals. It shows that concerns about national security, economy

and regional leadership can easily outweigh any legal rules. Because China did not obey the ruling from the PCA, it is clear that international law's effectiveness lies mostly with countries' political choice to respect it.

Analysts will explore these limits further, studying the changing global political climate and the way in which China has started to oppose the established concepts of international law. It will look at the part regional and global bodies, including ASEAN and the United Nations, play in settling arguments and their results with regard to managing disputes between mighty nations. Examining international diplomacy will be necessary, because the lack of joint action from nearby nations and the world has helped China maintain its actions in the South China Sea.

The study will also look at whether South China Sea disputes provide lessons for wider issues in international law such as boundaries between the rule of law and its role in international politics and between nations' sovereignty and respected international laws. It will examine if international organizations can design tougher systems that will prevent international law from just existing on paper.

Theoretical Framework

The basis of this study comes from international legal theory which studies what causes countries to obey or break the laws of other nations in maritime disputes. The framework uses concepts from international law, politics and international relations to explore what causes countries to either obey or violate international laws.

Essentially, international legal theory sees compliance as when states follow their legal commitments and non-compliance as when states either break or ignore international law (Chayes & Chayes, 1993). Experts in compliance theories believe that the desire to be legal, face enforcement, maintain standing and get something back are key to following rules. But non-compliance is widely viewed as arising from disagreements over interests, unequal power, strictly enforcing laws and arguing over the acceptable meaning or authority of the law.

The factors that most influence compliance in this system are a rule's legality and how widely accepted it is. Countries usually comply with international conventions when the agreements such as the UNCLOS, are seen as legitimate and just. They comply to maintain their standing, enhance cooperation and uphold tradition (Goldsmith & Posner, 2005). If people think legal regulations are fair and understandable, it makes them more likely for all states to support and obey them.

It also considers that international organizations offer ways for nations to settle disputes using adjudication, arbitration and mediation. The ITLOS and PCA are independent organizations that ensure disputes can be considered legally and solutions can be applied as decided by the court (Beckman, 2013). They minimize risks and costs involved in transactions to support peaceful agreements. The 2016 decision in the South China Sea dispute demonstrates the kinds of responsibilities institutions can have.

It also acknowledges that enforcing these law rules becomes tricky when big states believe following them could set back their primary national goals. Realist thinking in the framework shows that powerful countries can pay more attention to their independence and protection than to the decisions made by international courts (Mearsheimer, 2001). Deciding not to follow regulations may become an intentional choice when the pros from disobeying are higher than the cons. In China's PCA case, historical background and strategy were used to justify its position that ignoring the verdict is aligned with its sovereignty (Ordeshook, 2016).

As well, political issues at the national level and what the public thinks are important factors in influencing the state's practices of compliance. It is common for governments to avoid following legal strictures to show strength, please the public and support their regime's legitimacy (Moravcsik, 2000). There is a continuous affect between how countries run their politics and what international law requires of them.

The model also takes into account constructivist views on the role of identity, routines and social pressures in legal behavior of states. States comply in order to follow customary behavior and their views on their place in the global arena (Wendt, 1999). With time, following normative change, societal influence and diplomatic efforts, compliance is more likely to happen, even in serious conflicts.

In brief, an International Legal Theory of Compliance and Non-Compliance used in this work helps examine how a mix of legal, political, strategic and normative matters can affect how countries act in maritime disagreements. It shows how the agreement behind UNCLOS comes about and how conflict between law and power affects international relations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design used for this study is qualitative, focusing on a case study about the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on the South China Sea dispute. Since legal compliance, geopolitical factors and international relations cannot be easily measured, a qualitative approach is best for this study. Using a detailed case study, the research wants to offer a careful analysis of how the PCA viewed the dispute, how the states accepted this ruling and how it may shape international maritime law and how disputes are handled.

The case study approach helps explore how the PCA ruling relates to important issues of international law, what roles states play and how conflicts of power affect their actions. By using this method, the study explores how well international agreements work when handling sea disputes, especially when leading countries are engaged. By using different kinds of data, the method makes the findings more credible and advanced.

Data Sources

This study gathers its data from a variety of reliable sources to construct a detailed analysis. These include:

Academic literature: Using theoretical journal articles, books and findings from scholars, we have gained a clear understanding of the South China Sea dispute, UNCLOS and compliance theories.

Policy papers: From think tanks' and policy institutes' reports and white papers, I was able to follow the latest views on geopolitics, important strategies and the opinions of experts on the ruling and what happened next.

Government statements: A number of documents, statements and speeches contain the opinions and reactions from claimant states (China, the Philippines, Vietnam), along with responses from the United States and ASEAN.

International organization reports: The United Nations, the Permanent Court of Arbitration and regional organizations produce important legal materials and case decisions used in this field.

The use of several sources of data guards against a single viewpoint and instead gives consideration to legal, political and international elements to improve our thinking about the 2016 PCA ruling's influence on resolving maritime issues.

Case Study Focus

This case study mainly looks at the 2016 decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the South China Sea dispute, including their rulings on maritime rights, property ownership and how the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea should be interpreted. The study will closely review what the PCA said in its ruling, the rules it applied and the reasons it found to deliver those decisions. The study will also review how states in Asia and internationally have responded to the ruling, especially the views of China, the Philippines, other ASEAN states and outside countries such as the United States. With this focus, you can see the relationship between international law, geopolitics and the way decisions affect the region's policies.

This study attempts to show how effective and limited international legal tools are in controlling maritime disputes, particularly when strong states refuse or dismiss the decisions. Part of the study will also examine how these responses affect security, obedience to laws and settling future disputes.

Data Analysis Methods

A thematic analysis will be carried out to highlight, analyze and explain the main themes found in the secondary information. The method enables thorough study of how states interpret the ruling, follow or break the rules and adapt their geopolitical strategies. The information is organized into themes such as legal reasoning, diplomatic activities, how armed forces are used and what roles different parties play, to make the dispute easier to understand.

Additionally, a comparison of different viewpoints and behaviors by the stakeholders will be done. Evaluated are the official statements from claimant countries, the activities of local organizations and the involved external nations' decisions. Integrating these assessments allows the study to identify both differences and similarities between countries which improves the examination of compliance and larger effects on international maritime governance. By using both thematic and comparative methods, the study catches the legal and political aspects of the South China Sea dispute in detail.

This research acknowledges that the main challenges are due to the sensitivity and lack of ready access to the data about the dispute in the South China Sea. Firstly, using secondary data means that inaccessible or private state details about strategies, negotiations and enforcement cannot be used. Adequate access is lacking, so it is tough to discover what really happens behind the scenes or in live decision-making that results in either compliance or non-compliance.

Additionally, because the issue is politically complicated, official messages or policy documents may intend to be unclear, hide details or use propaganda, making it hard to assess the accuracy of open information. To deal with this shortcoming, researchers carefully check diverse sources and analyze their critical aspects.

Because geopolitics keeps evolving, interpretations and responses to the ruling in 2016 are still developing and some data or analyses might soon become outdated. While dealing with these issues, the study tries to present a fair and accurate analysis using respected academic, government and international organizational data sources.

The 2016 PCA Ruling and International Law in the South China Sea Dispute

Legal Foundations: UNCLOS and Maritime Rights

The South China Sea disputes and issues of maritime rights are guided by the broad terms of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS was adopted by states in 1982 and came into effect in 1994, arranging how each state must use oceans and their resources and it defined major marine zones such as the territorial sea, contiguous zone, EEZ and continental shelf (Churchill & Lowe, 1999). Relevant to the South China Sea dispute are the provisions defining territorial seas extending up to 12 nautical miles from a state's baseline, within which the state exercises sovereignty, and the EEZ extending up to 200 nautical miles, where a coastal state has sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage natural resources (Beckman, 2013).

A further part of UNCLOS is settling disputes over the sea, outlining how nations with overlapping claims can solve this problem peacefully and designing systems for resolving conflicts such as arbitration and the ITLOS (Beckman, 2016). An important focus of UNCLOS deals with assigning islands, rocks and low-tide elevations to their correct categories which defines the claims to waters and reserves above them. The point of law distinguishing between islands and rocks matters in the South China Sea, where issues over the Spratly and Paracel Islands are closely decided by the law (Hayton, 2017).

By using rules from UNCLOS, the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration said China's "Nine-Dash Line" could not interfere with the EEZ rights held by neighboring Southeast Asian nations (Beckman, 2016). Even though UNCLOS creates clear guidelines, enforcing them is hard because of differences in interpretations, imbalances of power and disputes between claimant nations (Thayer, 2016). Worth noting, UNCLOS forms the foundation of ocean law and sets out rules for maritime regions, dispute settlement and stability in strongly disputed seas like the South China Sea.

Summary of the PCA Ruling

In August 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration decided in "*The Republic of the Philippines v. When the People's Republic of China*" entered the dispute, key parts of maritime law and sovereignty were clarified. The tribunal clearly confirmed that the Philippines has sovereignty over the EEZ and continental shelf that are tied to its occupied features, according to the UNCLOS (PCA, 2016). The court established that Scarborough Shoal and reefs in the Spratly Islands are inside Philippine maritime territory and are legally protected, even from attempts by China to take over (Beckman, 2016; Hayton, 2017).

The way the tribunal explained how maritime features should be viewed had a major impact. In its view, islands could have full maritime zones, but in order for this to happen, islands had to be capable of providing a place for people or economic functions (PCA, 2016). Under the UN Law of the Sea, many features China claimed were called rocks or low-tide elevations, so they could not support China's huge claim to the South China Sea (Beckman, 2016). Based on this more detailed understanding, earlier excuses for China's claims are now contested and the legal boundaries in the South China Sea have been vastly revised.

A pivotal component of the ruling was the invalidation of China's "Nine-Dash Line" claim. According to the tribunal, China did not present a valid reason for its broad claim under UNCLOS and it specifically disagreed with China by arguing that historic rights cannot cut into anything within a state's EEZ (PCA, 2016; Beckman, 2016). This move matched prior scholarly opinions that point out that China's argument does not fit with current international ocean laws, in particular the laws for coastal states given under

UNCLOS (Valencia, Van Dyke, & Ludwig, 1997; Thayer, 2016). The tribunal made it clear that, with the invalidation of the Nine-Dash Line, UNCLOS is effectively the main source of international law for this issue, as old claims have to follow those guidelines to hold (Beckman, 2013).

The tribunal also identified several violations by China. With respect to fishing vessels, the TRB decided that China had unlawfully stopped ships fishing in the EEZ and violated Philippines' rights under UNCLOS (PCA, 2016). China was accused of breaking the law and damaging the environment by carrying out significant land reclamation and infrastructure building on maritime features classed as unable to make territory-defining territorial seas. Experts criticized the Chinese government's acts of dredging in the seas as against its obligations to protect marine life (Thayer, 2016; Beckman, 2016). Many researchers confirm that these environmental harms not only threaten nature but also increase territorial disputes by leaving clear signs of China's activity in those waters.

The fact that China refused to take part in the proceedings and refused the tribunal's verdict indicates the difficulties in applying law in these cases. According to Fravel (2017), China's approach is determined by its bigger strategic ideas and by stories that cast the South China Sea as a key national issue. This case points out that important international law rules are strong only because major countries choose to follow them (Thayer, 2016).

Still, the decision has created an important legal rule that restricts huge claims regarding history, defines who is entitled to what in the oceans and supports the concept of following marine guidelines. Both academic literature and diplomatic talks have frequently mentioned it as confirming UNCLOS's vital role and the need for lawful dispute management (Beckman, 2013; Valencia et al., 1997). Its concentration on protecting the environment and supporting maritime interests helps make sure that claims to sovereignty do not harm the sustainability of ocean use (PCA, 2016).

Legal Implications of the Ruling

The verdict made by the PCA in 2016 in the South China Sea case has particularly important legal consequences for claims of sovereignty, boundaries at sea and rights to resources worldwide. Thanks to UNCLOS, the ruling explained important rules that help hold back overly large claims on maritime territories and uphold the rule-driven order in those areas.

Sovereignty Claims

The ruling did not choose to decide who owns these land features, but did establish important guidelines about how they are connected to maritime areas governed by UNCLOS (PCA, 2016). It made a difference among islands, rocks and low-tide elevations and specified that only islands that could be used for human life or work produced full coastal zones, including both their territorial sea and exclusive economic zone (EEZ), according to Beckman (2016). Because some of the claimant states did not have the needed features, this classification prevented further expansion of sovereignty such as those sought by China. In this way, the decision reduces the validity of China's Nine-Dash Line by proving it does not agree with maritime sovereignty and zones as outlined by UNCLOS (Hayton, 2017).

Maritime Boundaries

According to the ruling, agreed UNCLOS provisions remain the main way countries determine maritime boundaries and claim their EEZs and continental shelves for up to 200 nautical miles past their coastlines, unless different terms are agreed (PCA, 2016). Because of this, Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia have

better legal grounds to protect their marine areas from the larger claims found in the South China Sea. As per the ruling, no country can depend on big claims to go against claims that are based on UNCLOS (Thayer, 2016). In addition, it clearly stated that preventing authorized activities in these waters such as fishing and finding resources, violates the law and helps uphold the sovereign rights of nations along the coasts.

Resource Rights

UNCLOS gives countries with coastlines the right to use and manage both living and non-living resources inside their Exclusive Economic Zones and their continental shelves. By finding that China's actions against Philippine fishermen and explorers were against international law, the PCA supported the strengthened rights of the Philippines (Beckman, 2016). The tribunal added that China's significant reclamation and harm to the sea went against international standards. In line with new international rules, this strategy reveals that we must ensure resource extraction does not harm the environment.

Broader Legal Impact

Through its ruling, the PCA has underlined that UNCLOS is the main legal guide to resolve maritime disputes peacefully and by law. Because of the ruling, states are encouraged to negotiate and use arbitration instead of making unilateral moves, since historic rights arguments need UNCLOS support (Valencia, Van Dyke, & Ludwig, 1997). Nevertheless, getting China to follow the ruling has proved difficult, mainly because China has refused to accept the verdict and emphasizes the challenges of international adjudication with major powers (Fravel, 2017).

Regional and Global Reactions

The PCA's judgment in 2016 greatly changed the law governing who owns land, territorial waters and natural resources in the busy South China Sea. The decision spelt out the main principles in the UNCLOS, put limits on wide claims to territories and stated that coastal nations have their own rights recognized by the international law.

Sovereignty Claims

Even though the tribunal refused to settle sovereignty over land features, its list of maritime features (differentiating islands, rocks and low-tide elevations) led to decisive results regarding sovereignty (PCA, 2016). Article 121 of UNCLOS explains that islands that can sustain human settlement or economic activity can have all the maritime zones, while rocks and low-tide elevations are not given EEZs or continental shelves (Beckman, 2016; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). According to Valencia, Van Dyke and Ludwig (1997), because some of these features can't make lawful maritime zones, the legal clarity lessens China's claims to disputed areas. Because of the ruling, China can no longer use its control over these features to justify claims without following recognized laws.

Maritime Boundaries

PCA found that UNCLOS is the foundation for determining maritime boundaries. When it ruled against the "Nine-Dash Line," the tribunal was saying that coastal countries' maritime entitlements should come from UNCLOS, rather than being based on old or unclear claims (Beckman, 2016; Thayer, 2016). As a result of this, China's wide claims over the South China Sea are contradicted by the EEZ and continental shelf rights of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and others (Hayton, 2017). Experts assert that this

fulfills the “freedom of the seas” principle and defends essential rights and entry points needed for world trade (Kaplan, 2014). Also, the judgement highlights that acting alone against the international rules for the seas is wrong and contributes to an orderly system.

Resource Rights and Environmental Protection

Under UNCLOS, coastal states own sovereign rights to all resources, alive or dead, within their EEZs and continental settings which the PCA mentioned in its findings (Beckman, 2016). The tribunal said China interfered with Philippines’ rights to gather resources and explore for oil, indicating how important sovereignty over resources is. For the first time, a tribunal held that by damaging the marine environment, China violated its obligation to protect the ocean environment under UNCLOS (PCA, 2016; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). It matches with recent studies in international law that emphasize that environmental concerns are fundamental to managing the seas (Weiss, 2016). PCA’s verdict makes it clear that taking resources needs to be both legal and environmentally responsible, starting a new standard for protecting nature in disputed areas.

Broader Legal and Geopolitical Impact

The ruling by PCA has effects on both present land claims and the system of international sea laws. The UNCLOS remains the primary legal base and the States agree that it guides peaceful dispute resolution rather than the use of force or independence (Beckman, 2013). Still, the outcome showed that international judgment can be challenged when parties prioritize their interests and show a strong, unyielding stance (Fravel, 2017; Thayer, 2016). This situation is known among scholars as the “law-politics nexus,” which points out the way legal findings sometimes disagree with real-world political realities in maritime affairs (Jones & Smith, 2019).

Remarkably, the decision has affected both regional relationships and the way laws are discussed. As a result, states and external partners such as the United States and Australia have promoted following UNCLOS and peaceful ways to settle disputes and adopted legal concepts in their security systems (Kaplan, 2014; Thayer, 2016). According to Buszynski in 2012, the ruling makes the international legal order more reliable, yet how it is applied relies on governments’ cooperation. As a result of the PCA decision, many began to discuss updating the structures for regional security to ensure that laws are considered in solving conflicts (Valencia et al., 1997).

Enforcement Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite its legal clarity, the ruling’s enforcement remains problematic. Without an enforcement system in UNCLOS, countries remain free to act or not and commitments depend on gentle diplomatic nudges and engaging several nations (Beckman, 2016). This makes it clear that legal laws must be supported by diplomatic, economic and security actions. They propose increasing cooperation at the regional level, promoting confidence between states and resorting to small-steps dispute management as well as legal settlements (Valencia et al., 1997; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). Because of this ruling, we now need to reinforce international law by cooperating on strategies in the face of continued geopolitical challenges.

Assessment of International Law’s Authority

The 2016 PCA arbitration on the South China Sea case helps us understand how international law is used to decide disputes in this region between big nations. According to many experts, this case confirms that UNCLOS is the main instrument that dictates how nations address their marine entitlements and

disagreements (Beckman, 2016; Churchill & Lowe, 1999). But how much law international organizations wield and the extent to which their decisions are enforced tell us about the important role power and politics play in world affairs.

Legal Significance and Normative Authority

Since the ruling applies the UNCLOS rules strictly to boundary decisions, it confirms that China's large "Nine-Dash Line" was not supported under international law (PCA, 2016; Beckman, 2016). It is acknowledged that thanks to the ruling, scholars believe the international legal order was strengthened because the Court highlighted that maritime rights have to be regulated by written international laws instead of history or politics (Hayton, 2017; Valencia et al., 1997). The case confirms important rules about protecting the environment and meeting other countries' rights (Rothwell & Stephens, 2016; Weiss, 2016).

The case points out that arbitration resolves disputes using law and prefers this method over the use of power or solo solutions (Beckman, 2013). Because of its authority, the law in maritime matters is followed, bringing predictability, steadiness and respect for others to international community.

Challenges of Enforceability

Despite its legal importance, it is still difficult to enforce the ruling made by the PCA. Unlike domestic law, international law does not have a main organization to enforce its rules with force. Most of the time, compliance with decisions made by the UN relies on states wanting to respect them and on whether they consider the political, economic and security costs (Mearsheimer, 2001; Thayer, 2016). It is clear from China refusing the verdict, not taking part in arbitration and continuing its actions in South China Sea that these limits exist (Fravel, 2017). It makes us concerned about the impact of international law when dealing with the actions and ambitions of leading countries.

Many legal experts believe that while the decision must be respected under UNCLOS by the disputing parties, effective implementation is mostly influenced by efforts to achieve consensus and cooperation by countries around the region and worldwide (Beckman, 2016; Jones & Smith, 2019). Often, the power of a ruling is limited by real-world areas of conflict, where armed forces, economics and partnerships can undermine what the law states.

International Community and Soft Power Enforcement

The larger group of nations supports the authority of international law by agreeing diplomatically, applying economic sanctions or using cooperation between countries. As an example, the United States and other countries have expressed support for UNCLOS and its court decisions every time they carry out freedom of navigation activities (Kaplan, 2014; Thayer, 2016). These behaviors are examples of "soft enforcement" that follow the law by endorsing international norms and sending messages about what will follow if rules are ignored.

Besides, organizations within the region such as ASEAN, have applied UNCLOS and its ruling to talks on a Code of Conduct, but progress on the issue has been slow (Valencia et al., 1997). These systems of diplomacy support legal rulings by allowing countries to speak and interact politely which makes international law more efficient.

Balancing Law and Power

Assessing international law in the South China Sea situation points to two sides to the picture. The PCA ruling clearly points out which legal rules should apply under UNCLOS which in turn bolsters the rules for resolving maritime disputes. Yet, it cannot be fully implemented because there are no strong enforcement tools and because China acts according to its own interests. The connection here is clear: In international relations, because of the balance between law and power, it's important for regulations to be promoted by people, conducted with other countries and continued through diplomacy to ensure that countries follow them and keep the region stable. Overall, the effectiveness of international law such as that established in the PCA ruling, depends on how these elements: law, politics and power operate globally (Beckman, 2016; Fravel, 2017).

Geopolitical Dynamics Affecting Enforcement of International Law China's Rejection of the PCA Ruling

The way China completely ignored the 2016 decision of the PCA on the South China Sea makes clear how all these interests play a role in maritime issues. Rejection comes from China's tried-and-true thinking and complex diplomatic practice that seek to keep it in power even if it is in conflict with international law.

China's Rationale

From the Chinese point of view, the PCA's authority over the issue is rejected due to their view that the tribunal has no right to settle this dispute (Zhao, 2017). The Chinese side stresses that the Philippines started the arbitration alone and that such matters are outside what is covered by UNCLOS (Beijing Declaration, 2016). In addition, China reclaims historic rights over the South China Sea by pointing to sailing and fishing activities, represented by the Nine-Dash Line, that took place well before modern international law and are the reason it claims sovereignty there (Zou, 2016; Fravel, 2017). Because this narrative links China's identity and boundaries, Beijing opposes rulings by other courts that may challenge its sovereignty, as noted by Johnston (2013).

Diplomatic Strategy

China has used different coordinated strategies to deal with the PCA ruling rejection. First, China has used lawfare and monitored the news to present the ruling as a decision aimed at stopping its rise (Zhao, 2017). Again and again, Chinese officials and state media try to protect the nation's unity and borders, rejecting foreign influence (Cheng, 2018).

In addition, China is following a strategy of negotiating individually and in groups, particularly with ASEAN nations, to propose a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea that it uses to manage issues without involving outside third-parties (Thayer, 2016). Using this approach, China attempts to change the way conflicts are managed by moving responsibility from courts to political systems where it counts for a lot.

Thirdly, China has used trade and military tools to bring more allies on board and stop opposition. BRI's investments, big projects and trade arrangements help to increase Southeast Asia's reliance on China and also win it support for its foreign policies (Rolland, 2017). By developing and equipping artificial islands with airstrips, missile stations and radars, China seeks to rule over those territories and update the status quo (Fravel, 2017; Hayton, 2017).

Continued Territorial Expansion

Even though the world has condemned China's actions in the South China Sea, its expansion has gone on as usual. After 2013, more construction on disputed reefs turned them into Chinese military areas, making it harder for countries to use the area freely (Fravel, 2017). They are relevant for military advantage and for China to show its claim to contested areas by physically occupying them (Hayton, 2017). However, this expansion is at odds with what the PCA found in 2016: many features do not grant maritime zones and activities there have caused major environmental harm (PCA, 2016).

Its rejection and actions in the region reveal that international law does not have enough authority to stop the behavior of strong nations. Experts claim that China uses power and what is important for its security, above following the rules and laws in foreign affairs (Mearsheimer, 2001). As a result, the ability of existing international dispute resolution mechanisms is tested and it becomes evident that there is a need for detailed and joint diplomatic approaches (Jones & Smith, 2019).

Military and Security Developments in the South China Sea

China's aggressive buildup of the military and responses from neighboring countries have turned the South China Sea into a hot area of military conflict. For more than ten years, China has systematically worked to turn key disputed areas into fortified outposts that help its military in the region (Fravel, 2017; Hayton, 2017).

China is building many artificial islands by filling up reefs and low-tide elevations in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos. There are now military facilities on these artificial islands, for example, runways, missile sites, radar installations and ship docks (Fravel, 2017). Because the South China Sea now has strong anti-aircraft and missile systems, these features are able to project power further into the South China Sea and even farther away (O'Rourke, 2020). Many scholars believe that these actions support China's plan to regulate contested waters, discourage countries from contesting its claims and challenge the U.S. military in the Indo-Pacific (Kaplan, 2014; Erickson & Strange, 2013).

Different responses have been seen from countries in the region and outside it after China's military growth. Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, along with other states in the SCS, are prioritizing patrolling their waters and seeking to update their maritime security, often supported by the United States, Japan, Australia and others (Thayer, 2016). FONOPs by the U.S. have risen as it attempts to stop what it sees as excessive territorial claims and emphasize its support for open lanes in the ocean (O'Rourke, 2020). The freedom of navigation exercises bring U.S. ships near areas claimed by China, to protect the principles of international law and challenge the Chinese military in these zones (Kaplan, 2014).

Its approach has reflected the range of interests within ASEAN and each country's link with China, meaning it has been mostly cautious and not united (Buszynski, 2012). Plans to institute a COC in the South China Sea are supposed to lessen tension and set rules for military activities, although growth has been slow because of the political concerns (Valencia et al., 1997). In addition, Australia and India have stepped up their naval collaboration and activity with local partners, realizing how important the South China Sea is for both regional and international stability and commerce (Pant, 2019).

Because of the growing military presence in the South China Sea and the many interactions between ships, people there have become more likely to experience accidents or misjudgments. Analysts see effective confidence-building, clear conversations and reliable crisis management as important for avoiding tension (Thayer, 2016).

Role of External Powers and Freedom of Navigation Operation

The dispute over the South China Sea matters to the entire world, not only Asia and is majorly about strategic competition among big nations, particularly the United States and its allies. By being involved, they support key international legal rules, mainly the ones in the UNCLOS and endeavor to maintain a balance of power that is not upset by China's growth.

The United States has repeatedly underlined that freedom of navigation and overflight forms the backbone of the global system at sea. Through regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), the U.S. Navy challenges what it considers excessive maritime claims, including China's expansive assertions based on the "Nine-Dash Line" and militarized features in the South China Sea (O'Rourke, 2020). They aim to prevent just one state from obstructing sea access to countries and making such restrictions unacceptable to all parties (Kaplan, 2014). FONOPs represent solid support for the 2016 PCA ruling, confirming the United States supports international law even though China disagrees with the tribunal's choice (Thayer, 2016).

Since 2019, allies and partners, including Japan, Australia and India, have frequently joined U.S. efforts aimed at exercising together, sharing expertise and maintaining maritime order by opposing China's strong actions (Pant, 2019; Erickson & Strange, 2013). In the area, Japan sends ships on FONOP-type trips and backs freedom of navigation using its own interpretations, whereas Australia has increased naval operations and formed closer security alliances with Southeast Asian states (Buszynski, 2012). India, while expanding its "Act East" approach, joins regional efforts diplomatically and militarily in the Indo-Pacific to promote security and the right of passage (Pant, 2019).

They try to encourage disputing parties to settle conflicts in a peaceful manner and to follow international rules by joining calls for peace in ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit (Valencia et al., 1997). Because of their involvement such states can feel safe and resist pressure which prevents serious disputes from developing.

Even so, it is important for scholars to stress that this type of involvement must take care to avoid causing more problems for both sides, while still being a presence to deter issues from getting out of hand. The U.S. and its partners aim to maintain the rule of law in situations China sees as boundary crossing or a threat to their interests (Fravel, 2017; Jones & Smith, 2019). To help ensure stability in such areas, these powers need to bring together their defense with significant diplomacy, faith-building activities and support for regional systems such as the Code of Conduct talks (Thayer, 2016).

ASEAN's Position and Diplomatic Challenges

ASEAN holds a key position in the South China Sea dispute, needing to balance the many different claims of its states, the way they relate to China and the need for regional peace. Both unity and collective security are important to ASEAN, while the group always values and respects the sovereignty and specific interests of its member states (Acharya, 2014).

Diverse interests among ASEAN countries that have or do not have territorial claims with China are one of the organization's major diplomatic obstacles. The Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia have problems with China over both their land and maritime borders and normally call for firmer enforcement of international rules, together with the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA's) ruling (Thayer, 2016). Unlike certain other ASEAN members, Cambodia and Laos seem to rely more on China politically

and economically and are less willing to directly contest China's positions (Buszynski, 2017). Because ASEAN cannot reach a consistent position, its influence and power are decreased in diplomacy.

The way ASEAN traditionally agrees on decisions has allowed group efforts but kept the bloc from tackling big conflicts such as the South China Sea (Acharya, 2014). The group has tried to promote peace between nations and obedience to international rules, even though its statements are sometimes carefully made to keep from angering major players such as China (Valencia et al., 1997). Many critique this way of working, saying its statements are too open and do not push enough for change or outline ways to address conflicts (Buszynski, 2012).

Working towards a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea is one of ASEAN's main efforts to address tensions and increase confidence. Even so, discussions in the COC have been postponed or slowed by debates on its authority, enforcement system and the agreement of both countries' governments (Thayer, 2016; Hayton, 2017). To keep claimant states from clashing or seeking outside help and to lessen the possibility of conflict, the COC has to succeed.

ASEAN is finding it tough to remain an important part of the regional security setup while the USA and China are in direct competition. Even though ASEAN seeks to be a peaceful place for discussions and work among countries, its unity is frequently challenged by forces and plans outside the region (Jones & Smith, 2019). Improving the bond among nations and developing firm, secure agreements is key to the strength of the association in helping to mediate.

These difficulties haven't stopped ASEAN from serving as a platform for conversation, conflict resolution and increasing trust. It encourages forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), to help disputants and external powers communicate more easily (Valencia et al., 1997). The association works to stop further tensions and help parties negotiate peace which supports stability in a region that is often full of disputes.

Implications for International Legal Institutions

The PCA decision in 2016 regarding the South China Sea matter has important effects on organizations that settle maritime disputes and ensure upholding the rule of international law. The case signals two things: advancing the application of UNCLOS to difficult sovereignty and maritime issues and recognizing issues with enforcement and legitimacy when some countries do not comply.

Limitations in Enforcement

Compared to local courts, the PCA and ITLOS and other similar organizations, depend mostly on states following international law willingly (Beckman, 2013). The South China Sea arbitration proves this point clearly: China, a big world power, dismissed the tribunal's judgment and did not stop its activities in the region, despite the claim it made being ruled invalid by the court (Fravel, 2017; Thayer, 2016). The way countries are not living up to these rules exposes their dependence on government will and international influence.

Scholars argue that since international law does not include coercive power, its decisions can go unfollowed without much effect (Mearsheimer, 2001; Goldsmith & Posner, 2005). That is why international legal institutions, whose authority is frequently more symbolic or ideal, count on diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions or joining with others to help achieve agreement (Beckman, 2016; Jones & Smith, 2019).

Legitimacy Challenges

When major countries disobey international law, many begin to doubt the validity of legal bodies. Since rejecting the PCA verdict, China has presented stories arguing that the tribunal lacks authority and fairness, calling the tribunal's judgment politically motivated or biased (Zhao, 2017; Cheng, 2018). Such circumstances threaten the respect for the law given to international judges and might also make states less sure of using the courts in future politically charged disputes.

In addition, citizens imagine legal norms as valid if they think processes and laws are inclusive and just. The situation in the South China Sea reveals that small nations may count on a judicial system to fix disputes, but big states may simply ignore decisions they disagree with (Johnston, 2013). Because of this, building a respected and effective international law is complicated.

Institutional Adaptations and Future Prospects

In view of these difficulties, experts put forward the idea that international law should be supported by strong institutions. To do this, we should make legal decisions clearer, strive for impartiality, provide extra dispute resolution choices and associate legal rulings with international security and diplomatic systems. By guiding efforts in the South China Sea, ASEAN demonstrates that legal institutions can be linked to regional mechanisms and supported by political and security talks (Valencia et al., 1997).

The situation in the South China Sea demonstrates how effectively international law can deal with clashes at sea when there are many powerful nations involved. Although it is hard to enforce them, laws are still relied on to state the rules, define rights and give people a peaceful way to address problems (Thayer, 2016). Fair actions, equal code application and team-based diplomacy are still necessary for effective running of institutions.

Power Politics and the Future of Maritime Dispute Resolution

Resolving maritime disputes involves balancing international law with international politics, a situation that is growing more obvious as the world becomes more multipolar. The struggle over the South China Sea demonstrates that countries like China challenge the established legal order, including UNCLOS and this causes legal ways of solving problems to fail when there are serious rivalries among national interests (Beckman, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Power Politics as a Constraint on Legal Enforcement

After all, in a situation where several countries have significant military, economic and diplomatic abilities, nations generally put decisions about enforcing international laws on a backburner. Quite often, main powers adjust the meanings of legal rules or step around decisions that oppose their main objectives (Fravel, 2017; Thayer, 2016). China failed to comply with the PCA ruling of 2016 which clarified the dispute, because power politics influenced its decision more than the rules of international law (Zhao, 2017). This example proves that realist scholars consider the world structure to be "anarchical" due to law's effectiveness connected to the interests of the strong (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Challenges for Legal Frameworks in a Multipolar World:

Because there isn't a single dominant enforcer in today's multipolar world, laws are followed differently and their meanings can differ (Jones & Smith, 2019). Groups such as ASEAN attempt to manage

disagreements as a team, though internal conflicts and changes in allies with major powers make their roles more limited (Acharya, 2014). With many power sources at work, it becomes difficult to keep laws simple and enforce such laws everywhere (Buszynski, 2017).

Prospects for Adaptation and Cooperation

Legal frameworks are still necessary parts of any country's normative system and are used to settle disagreements. Some scholars believe the answer to maritime disputes is to use a combination of law, diplomacy, building mutual trust and security approaches (Beckman, 2013; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). This means improving regional agreements, boosting discussions among different countries and promoting joint efforts that correct for unequal power while maintaining the law (Valencia et al., 1997; Thayer, 2016).

In addition, the moved toward a multipolar world could cause legal pluralism, meaning several systems with overlapping rules exist and public institutions and states must handle technical issues related to different regulations and norms (Johnston, 2013). A less explosive approach using flexibility, practical approaches and small confidence steps may work better than solely using strict adjudications.

Technological and Environmental Drivers

Currently, challenges like looking after the environment, supporting sustainable resources and new technology in monitoring the seas make the legal-political link more difficult but allow for teamwork thanks to global interests on these topics (Weiss, 2016). As result, countries are able to work together despite their rows, manage seas cooperatively and follow common laws.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the PCA Ruling's Effectiveness

The ruling from the PCA on the South China Sea dispute is clearly a major event for international maritime law; however, we need to look at the situation from various angles to judge its worth. Although legally the ruling clarified many matters, its political and security effects prove that it is often hard for regions to comply and remain stable.

Legal Effectiveness

The PCA decision greatly enhanced the way UNCLOS is interpreted and put into practice. The court clarified what scattered maritime features really are, rejected China's wide M9-dash claim and decisively acknowledged that the Philippines is the only one responsible in its exclusive economic zone (Beckman, 2016; PCA, 2016). Because of the ruling, nations' responsibilities and environmental rights are better recognized, raising the significance of international law (Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). Therefore, by law, the decision helps increase the quality of international guidelines for resolving maritime disputes.

Political Effectiveness

The ruling's political effect has been limited by China, the biggest claimant, refusing to comply and go beyond showing non-compliance (Fravel, 2017; Zhao, 2017). Even though the ruling goes against China's actions, the fact that it persists in controlling disputed zones shows how legal orders matter less if authorities refuse to enforce them. In addition, the result showed disagreements among Southeast Asian states and made it tricky for ASEAN to speak as one group, according to Buszynski (2017) and Acharya

(2014). Yet, the decision has made it possible for states putting in a claim to do so on legal grounds and draw backing from other countries for a governed international order (Thayer, 2016). As such, it facilitates global dialog and acts as a standard, regardless of how quickly some states carry out the changes.

Security Implications

Because of the ruling, security in the region became more competitive and China decided to increase its military presence and try to prevent challenges (Fravel, 2017; Hayton, 2017). The United States and similar external forces have used Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and improved defense cooperation with nations in the area, to show how their legal decisions and military maneuvers work together (Kaplan, 2014; O'Rourke, 2020). The result is that while the ruling supports law, it also increases the risk of confrontation in an already strained climate.

Integrated Assessment

PCA decisions are both flexible and depend on the situation they apply to. It provides legal direction and helps decide tough challenges, but meeting its terms is difficult politically and in the matter of security, it plays a role in preventing conflict and adding to regional issues. Experts think that for a ruling to be effective, it should be combined with diplomatic actions, multilateral security agreements and measures to encourage trust, so that the possibility of a new conflict is reduced (Jones & Smith, 2019; Valencia et al., 1997). Even if the ruling doesn't have much impact right away, its significance for a stable rules-based ocean system is very high.

Challenges of Enforcement in the Face of Major Power Defiance

It is very difficult to enforce international law against major powers, as we saw in actions like the South China Sea arbitration. China's actions in the South China Sea, based on its refusal to accept the ruling of the PCA in 2016, demonstrate that law enforcement is limited in a world where no higher authority remains over masterless states (Fravel, 2017; Beckman, 2016). To know about these enforcement challenges, we should study leading theories of compliance and check how they fit the actions of major nations.

Compliance Theories: Rationalist, Constructivist, and Institutional Approaches

According to Rationalists, governments follow international law because the positive results, like a good name, help them compensate for any costs involved (Krasner, 1991; Goldsmith & Posner, 2005). Controlling the South China Sea seems to China a better choice than risking diplomatic consequences or international criticism (Mearsheimer, 2001). It also points out that important states can ignore rulings when such rulings challenge significant interests of their country.

In constructivist theories, it is believed that social norms, who we identify as and how we learn help to promote obedience. International norms become part of states' identity, so they act on them beyond simply looking after themselves (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wendt, 1999). However, China's defiance of the PCA's verdict reflects that the environment for norms is uncertain, since what China believes about its own history and identity makes it hard for external law to be seen as valid (Johnston, 2013; Zhao, 2017).

These approaches concentrate on the development of international institutions and procedures for arbitration which encourage states to comply by reducing unpredictability, overseeing activities and offering ways to deal peacefully with conflicts (Keohane, 1984; Abbott & Snidal, 2000). Institutions like the PCA can explain what rights people have, but their limited authority to enforce decisions against big states makes them unable to achieve much when those states resist (Beckman, 2013).

Challenges Posed by Major Power Defiance:

The way China acts despite international law proves the major problems in enforcing rules around the world. While domestic law has one main agent responsible for enforcement, the international legal system only functions through the support of each country and the idea of balance among them (Mearsheimer, 2001). High-status countries may not obey or only partially observe legal decisions that go against their most important interests, thus reducing the position of such legal institutions (Goldsmith & Posner, 2005). As a result, there is an imbalance since big nations are not bound by law, but small countries and weaker sides hold to it.

Additionally, enforcement is hindered by political and economic interdependencies. Because of China's economic power in the region, partners often face difficulty using economic sanctions or diplomatic pressure to support rulings by the court (Rolland, 2017). Problems inside organizations such as ASEAN make it harder to act as one which reduces their capacity to enforce rules (Buszynski, 2017).

Implications for International Law and Policy

Looking at challenges in enforcement from a compliance perspective makes it clear that relying only on law alone is not enough to get big countries to comply. It takes a mix of legal certainty, diplomatic effort, economic support and security guarantees to make states comply (Thayer, 2016). Making sure that norms and institutions consider power realities, but still help in settling disagreements, is very important. In addition, by building confidence and spreading new norms, organizations can slowly change how rules are viewed and create lasting agreement that encourages more people to comply long term (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Still, making progress here depends on consistent cooperation among several countries and patience.

Implications for Regional Security and International Order

The results of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling and the reactions to it greatly affected both regional security and the overall development of world order. Laws, politics and diplomatic disputes in this rich but potentially competing sea area bring into focus the difficulties and options for both law and diplomacy in securing peace and stability.

Implications for Regional Security

A third of world trade is carried through the South China Sea and it also contains major natural resources, making it a major reason for competition among nations (Kaplan, 2014). Although the PCA settlement explained what the territories could or could not do, it did not settle the larger disagreements over who was in charge, so the problems continued. China's strengthening its military on artificial islands and blocking them to foreign ships prompted rival claimants and other countries to strengthen their military and security ties (Fravel, 2017; Hayton, 2017). Reinforcing security in Europe increases the threat of misunderstandings which can complicate policies aimed at avoiding conflicts (O'Rourke, 2020).

This problem points out how deterrence and diplomacy are fragile in regional security. The rules made by law only offer a basic guide and the way countries act is determined by their interests. That means countries require both diplomacy and measures to build trust (Thayer, 2016). Additional involvement by the United States and its supporters means the dispute takes on global significance, adding challenges and risks to the region's security (Buszynski, 2012). As a result, the dispute in the South China Sea represents the broader regional security problems in the Indo-Pacific.

Consequences for International Order:

The disagreement is placing strain on the system based on widely recognized laws, settlement of disputes by negotiation and cooperation from several states (Beckman, 2013). PCA's decision made clear that any unilateral practice or historical justification cannot override UNCLOS in the enjoyment of maritime rights (PCA, 2016). Although China ignored the tribunal's verdict and acted boldly, its actions show that when major powers are involved, it may be hard to make international law effective (Zhao, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2001).

As a result, people question the legitimacy and authority of international organizations working to keep order. The case shows that following a ruling depends on both political measures and arrangements to enforce it (Jones & Smith, 2019). It points out that diplomacy should be updated to cover law, security and the economy, handle multiple centers of power and encourage countries to cooperate (Acharya, 2014).

Diplomatic Implications

The issue in the South China Sea has prompted sides to negotiate common rules, increase dialogue and build trust with outsiders involved (Valencia et al., 1997). Although it is an important regional leader, ASEAN must overcome both internal tensions and pressures from other countries (Buszynski, 2017). Because of the dispute, nations seek multilateral diplomacy to manage conflict and maintain their shared standards.

Since the South China Sea involves disputes over both land and ocean, it points out the need to address national interests while promoting joint protection of the sea and the environment (Weiss, 2016). It demonstrates how modern diplomacy requires dealing with law, politics and security together.

CONCLUSION

The People's Republic of China represents a landmark moment in the application of international law to maritime disputes. The decision not only invalidated China's extensive "Nine-Dash Line" claims but also clarified the scope of maritime entitlements under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). By reaffirming the Philippines' sovereign rights within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the PCA ruling underscored the importance of legal mechanisms in addressing complex geopolitical tensions. Although the non-binding nature of the decision and China's outright rejection of the award exposed limitations in enforcement, the case has significantly contributed to the normative strength of international law in maritime governance.

The ruling's implications extend beyond the immediate parties involved. It provided smaller states with a legal avenue to challenge the actions of more powerful nations, thereby reinforcing the principle of equality before international law. Moreover, the PCA award emphasized the significance of evidence-based adjudication and the role of multilateral treaties in preserving regional peace and order. While the enforcement of such decisions remains a challenge, particularly when major powers refuse to comply, the

South China Sea case highlighted the symbolic and strategic utility of international adjudication in shaping global discourse and diplomatic engagement.

In conclusion, the role of international law in the South China Sea dispute illustrates both its potential as a peaceful conflict resolution mechanism and its structural limitations in realpolitik environments. The 2016 PCA ruling remains a critical reference point for future legal interpretations of maritime boundaries and rights. It reinforces the necessity for broader international support, diplomatic pressure, and institutional reforms to ensure the effectiveness and credibility of the international legal system in contested geopolitical arenas.

The 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the case between the Philippines and China marked a watershed moment in the application of international law to maritime disputes. The tribunal's decision, grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), categorically rejected China's expansive "Nine-Dash Line" claims, affirming that they had no legal basis under international law. It upheld the Philippines' sovereign rights over resources within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), setting a critical legal precedent in the interpretation of maritime entitlements.

While the ruling strengthened the legal position of smaller claimant states and reinforced the authority of UNCLOS, its effectiveness has been constrained by China's refusal to recognize or comply with the award. This exposes a central limitation in the international legal framework—namely, the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms to compel compliance by major powers. Nonetheless, the decision remains legally significant and symbolically powerful. It has contributed to shaping regional and international discourse on maritime rights, promoting the rules-based international order, and encouraging diplomatic engagement grounded in law rather than force.

Furthermore, the case underscores the importance of legal avenues for dispute resolution, particularly for smaller nations seeking to assert their rights without escalating conflict. It also reflects the broader challenges facing international law in an era of strategic rivalry and geopolitical competition. The PCA ruling has not resolved the South China Sea dispute, but it has laid a foundation for future negotiations, legal actions, and multilateral efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthening International Law's Role and Regional Cooperation

Properly managing maritime disputes like the South China Sea needs everyone to push for stronger international law and greater teamwork in the region. Emerging from the analysis of legal, political and security issues are several policy recommendations.

Enhance Legal Compliance through Multilateral Diplomacy: International partners ought to try to convince major nations to accept and follow rulings like those given by the PCA. The region makes use of ASEAN, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum to gather agreement on UNCLOS rules and to resolve disputes smoothly (Beckman, 2013; Thayer, 2016).

Develop Binding and Enforceable Regional Codes of Conduct: Advance talks on a tough, legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea that covers dispute resolution, keeping military activities open and safeguarding the environment. Doing so can make interactions between people calmer and easier to control (Hayton, 2017; Valencia et al., 1997).

Promote Capacity Building for Smaller Claimants: Help Southeast Asian states improve their security at sea, legal knowledge and ways of using resources by working with external powers. As a result, their participation in law and diplomacy becomes more successful (Buszynski, 2012).

Strengthen Environmental Cooperation: Focus collaboration among nearby countries on taking care of the sea and addressing environmental damage from reclamation and the harmful use of marine resources, staying within UNCLOS rules and following sustainable development goals (Weiss, 2016).

Balance Power Dynamics with Confidence-Building Measures: By holding joint patrols, using military hotlines and openly communicating, countries in the region can prevent problems and help each other trust more (Fravel, 2017).

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