



# **World Geography Academy**

**Norman, Oklahoma**

**Wednesday, September 14, 2016**

# ***Who Owns the Sea?***

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# Who Owns the Sea?



# EAST CHINA SEA

In the East China Sea, there is territory claimed by both China and Japan. A focus of this conflict is a small group of islands.

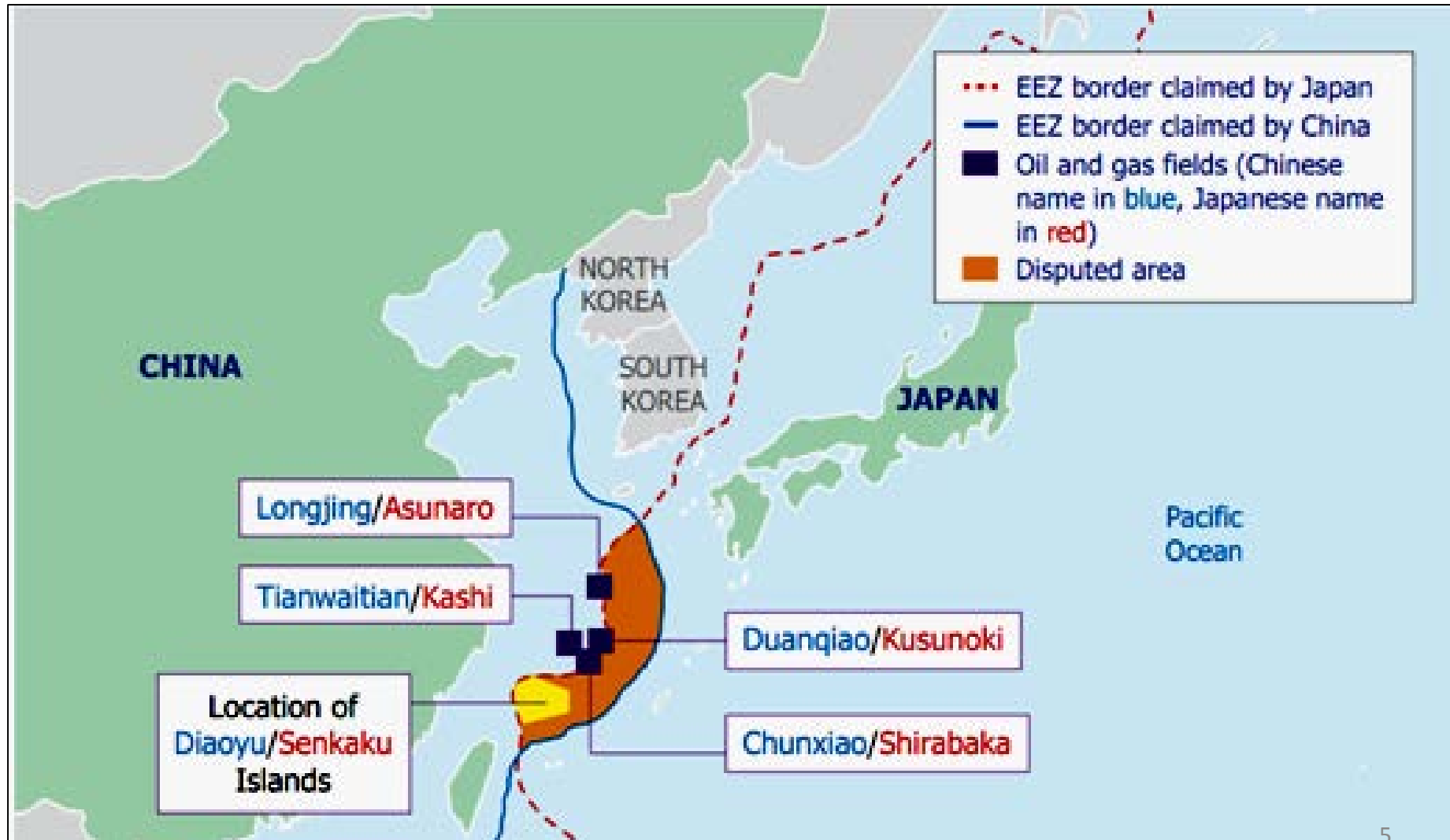


<http://www.standupamericaus.org/sua/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Senkaku-Dispute-Map.jpg>



<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-japan-idUSBRE9AM02920131124>

This area has oil and gas underwater.  
Both countries want that oil and gas.



# SOUTH CHINA SEA

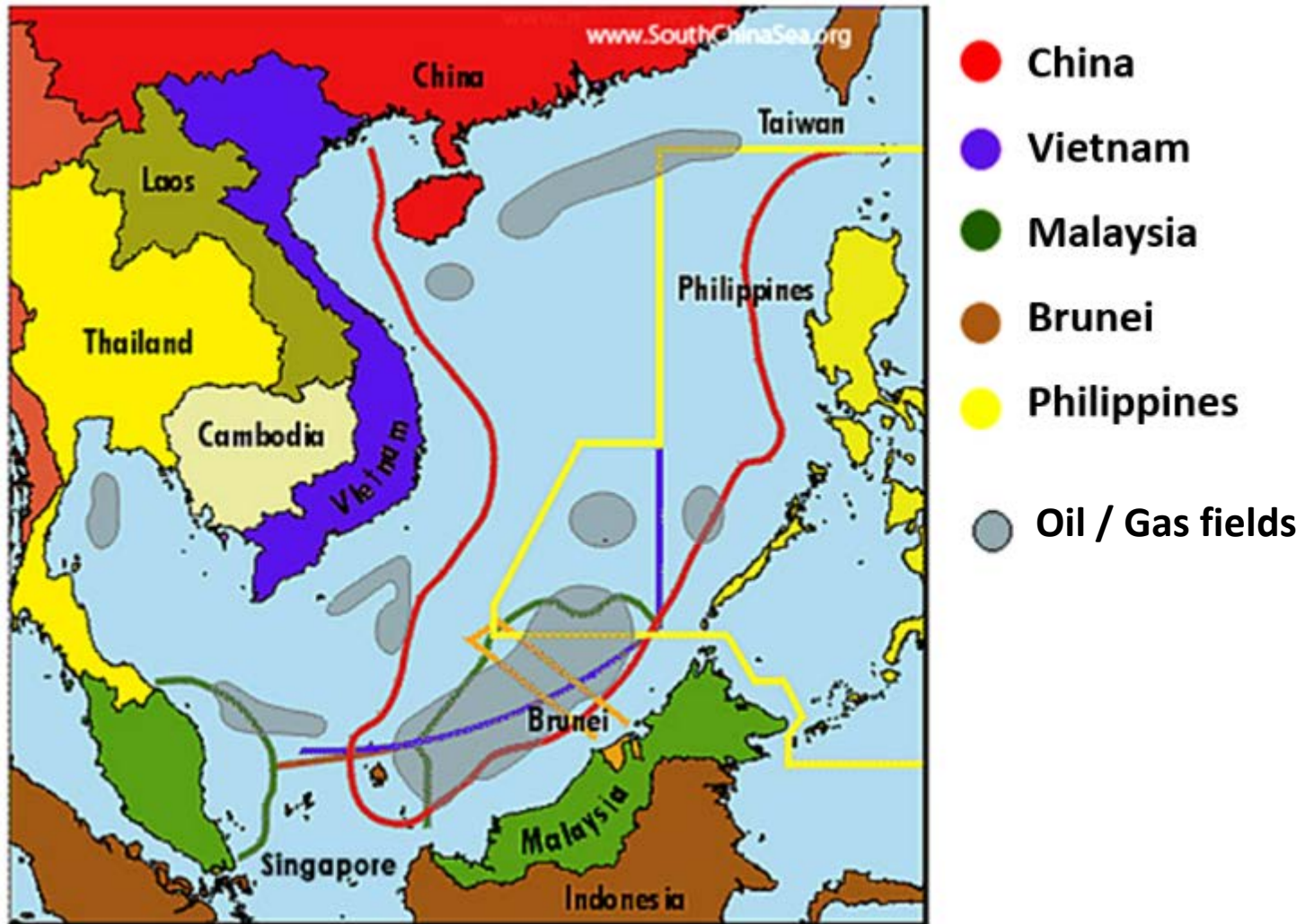


China  
claims the  
entire  
South  
China Sea.

But other nations also  
claim parts of that sea.



As in the **East** China Sea, these countries in the **South** China Sea are all after the oil and gas under the area's shallow ocean floor.



*For example. . .*



*Vietnam and China  
both claim this area  
where China built  
oil rig Nanhai No. 9*



*The rig is guarded by Chinese military ships.*



*China doesn't want Vietnam's Coast Guard ships poking around the area, and China lets them know!*



*The Chinese government also claims areas where Vietnamese fishermen have fished for centuries.*



*A Vietnamese fisherman took cell phone video of this Chinese Coast Guard ship ramming his fishing boat off the coast of Vietnam.*

*As you might imagine, the Vietnamese get a bit ticked off about this.*



Countries try different ways to claim some of the 250 atolls, reefs, and tiny islands in the area.



Map 1: The South China Sea

*This reef is claimed by the Philippines. It is a few  
a few feet below the ocean, but easy to see.*





*Almost 20 years ago, a military ship from the Philippines “beached” an old ship there in order to protect it. There are always 5-10 soldiers stationed there.*





China and Vietnam have both  
“reclaimed land from the sea”.



January 3, 2010



April 30, 2015



30 March 2014

Original structure

30 January 2015

Helipad

Original structure

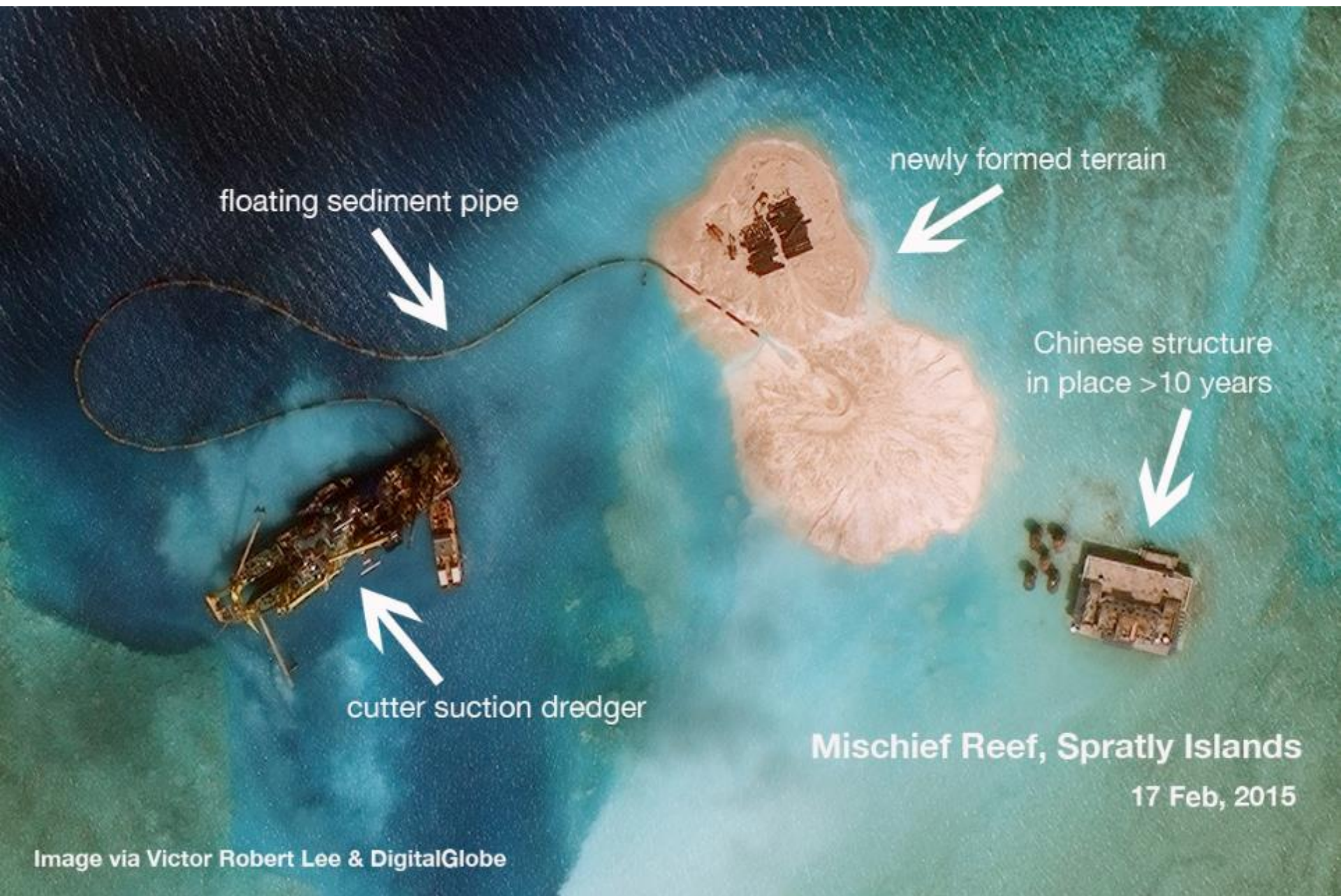
This means  
“building  
islands” on area  
reefs. Most of  
these are built  
by China.



*This is done using huge ships that scrape up coral from the shallow ocean floor and pile it up onto the reef.*







floating sediment pipe

newly formed terrain

Chinese structure  
in place >10 years

cutter suction dredger

**Mischief Reef, Spratly Islands**

17 Feb, 2015

Image via Victor Robert Lee & DigitalGlobe

*This creates tiny islands that depend on renewable energy (wind, solar). They must have pretty much everything – including food and water – delivered to them regularly.*





In February 2016, China even put land-to-air missiles on Woody Island in the South China Sea. This is especially strange since China doesn't legally own the tiny island.





China is much bigger and more powerful than the other countries, so that government seems to do whatever it wants to do.



Chinese ships patrol the South China Sea. Their ships have rammed and sunk fishing boats from Vietnam and the Philippines.



Many countries worry that war may break out with China over conflicting territory claims.

But there's something else happening that many ignore.

Coral reefs (*that should look like this*)



are killed when ships  
dig up the seafloor  
to build islands.





Corals are invertebrate animals, They cannot just re-grow after they die.



So, let's review:



**1.** China is in conflict with many of its neighbors. It is about territory claims and the oil and gas resources under the sea.

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2. Countries around the world worry that the conflict will get worse, possibly turn into war.



**1.** China is in conflict with many of its neighbors. It is about territory claims and the oil and gas resources under the sea.

**2.** Countries around the world worry that it will get ugly (or uglier), and possibly turn into war.

**3.** The shallow ocean reefs are destroyed as countries kill the coral and stack it up to form islands.



## WHO OWNS THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

### CHINA'S POSITION:



China's claim to the South China Sea is based in history. As proof, they have ancient sea maps used by Chinese ships.

China officially claimed the South China Sea in 1947. This was two years after World War II ended. Japan had lost their power in East Asia and China had become the most powerful country in the region. By this time, China had mapped and named 291 islands and reefs in the region.

Other countries in the area say China does not have a right to control these waters. The Philippines even filed charges against China in the World Court, accusing China of breaking international law. In June 2016, the World Court decided in favor of the Philippines, saying that China cannot claim the entire South China Sea.

But China is ignoring the legal decision. China says it is unfair for modern international law to judge their South China Sea claim. China points out that they officially claimed the South China Sea in 1947, over ten years before the Geneva Conventions on the Law of the Sea were first signed by nations in 1958. China's position is that it is wrong for a new law to take away a region they already claimed before the law ever existed.

The floor under the South China Sea may contain large oil and natural gas reserves. Control over the region could give China a level of energy independence. With their huge population and growing economy, these resources are very important to China.

Even if China's leaders wanted to give up their claims, it would be difficult. The leaders do not want to risk making their citizens believe they are weak. Their citizens feel strongly that these waters belong to China.

For these reasons, China has stated many times that it will not give up any of its territory in the South China Sea.

Adapted from Everything You Need to Know About the South China Sea Conflict in Under Five Minutes by retired Air Force Academy Professor William J. Burns. Accessed at: <https://blogs.pearson.com/gmat-debate/2015/08/10/who-owns-the-south-china-sea-conflict-is-under-five-or-not/>

## WHO OWNS THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

### THE UNITED STATES' POSITION:



The United States claims that the South China Sea is international water. They state that control in the area should be determined by the United Nations Convention on Laws of the Sea. Law of the Sea states that countries can't claim sovereignty over any land that is underwater at high tide. It also states that countries cannot claim an area simply by building on an under-water structure (such as a reef) to raise it above sea level.

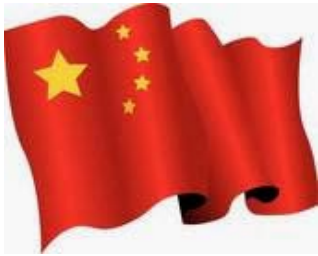
The US government is concerned that China could use control of the sea to threaten or to even stop trade shipments to countries in East and Southeast Asia. This could be a very big deal since about one-third of all international ship traffic sails through the South China Sea.

Of course, control of the sea would also allow China to keep foreign military forces out, including US military ships and planes.

So while the US government says it does not have any specific rights to waters in the South China Sea, the US is very interested in keeping those waters open to all countries. Therefore, the US has continued to send military ships and planes through the area, angering China.

China's smaller neighbors, including Vietnam and the Philippines, receive help from the US military. This help includes information and equipment for spying on China's activities in the sea. It also includes modern military equipment.

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## Your assignment:



Read the summaries of China's position and the US's position on the South China Sea conflict. Then write a 1-paragraph opinion on how you think US leaders should respond to the conflict.





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