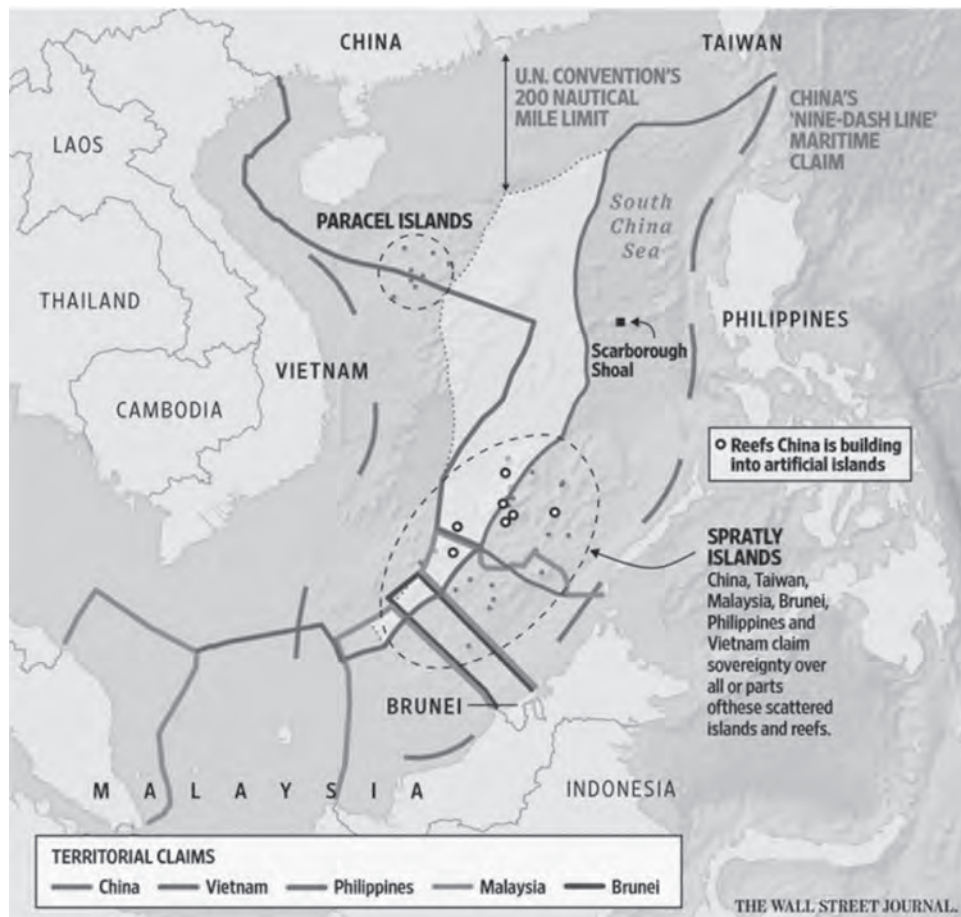


The Small Islands Debate

Exploring Critical Controversies in Maritime East Asia

By Patrick Grant



China's South China Sea claims (2009). Source: *Journal of Law and International Affairs* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y9nn2ocu>.

Considering Asia's Maritime Controversies: Why Are Asia's Maritime Disputes Important?

Tensions among East Asian countries have significantly increased during the twenty-first century because of maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Sea of Japan. Many serious conflicts about sovereignty over small islands and seabeds exist among China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, along with Việt Nam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Governments have acted assertively to support their national interests; this not only threatens harmony among nations but imposes worrisome risks on international trade. Given the substantial role that East Asian nations play in world trade and that approximately one-third of all ships pass through the South China Sea annually, these could significantly affect all corners of the world.

Applying the Model United Nations Simulation Approach to This Controversy

High school students who are intellectually curious about world problems love to participate in Model United Nations simulations. They enjoy the process of learning deeply about the issues and then debating them as delegates from a particular country. Hundreds of Model United Nations events occur each year throughout the world. This simulation, based on the Model UN idea, asks students to dive deeply into this major regional

problem: marine boundaries and the sovereignty of small islands in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Sea of Japan.

Seabeds are increasingly seen as valuable given the potential resources there, so countries throughout the world have eagerly sought to maximize the potential wealth they might gain from them. International treaties have gradually shrunk areas considered to be international waters. The United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea established clear agreements in 1982, but many issues in East Asia remain unresolved.

In the Sea of Japan, South Korea claims and possesses the Liancourt Rocks, called Dokdo by Korea and claimed by Japan as Takeshima. In the East China Sea, Japan possesses Senkaku, claimed by China as Diaoyu. In the South China Sea, there are numerous islands, island groups, and atolls, most but not all under Chinese control and claimed by up to six countries. China is developing several of these possessions by building runways, etc., to assert control. These are *some* examples of disputes in East Asia.

Preparing for the Debate

To prepare for this debate, I assign students to countries, but give students some agency over the choices by having them list a number of countries in order of preference, then I assign countries to best accommodate their interests. The following countries must be included for a debate about all three seas: the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Japan, the Philippines, and Việt Nam.

When I decide to lead a simulation on just the South China Sea, I include Taiwan along with the People's Republic of China, Việt Nam, and the Philippines, but also add Malaysia. Japan doesn't need to be included.

The simulation also works to include Russia and the United States; neither have claims in these seas, although Russia and Japan have a long-standing island dispute of their own in the Kurile Islands. I have found that adding these two rival countries, however, can lead to interesting efforts toward a compromise. Moreover, it can also be interesting to include some disinterested countries, such as Germany and Brazil. While students may not find the perspective these countries have about East Asian conflicts, they can learn about the issues from multiple perspectives and attempt to find middle ground. I ask students to begin research by examining maps and other background information. See the Recommended Resources for a list of suggested resources for students.

Teachers may create a tent card or placard with each country's name. Having small flags and stands for each country adds to the atmosphere, although it is not necessary.

Running the Debate: Model One

There are many ways to run a debate, but I ask each country to prepare a written opening statement; the advantage here is that students then



From *South China Sea Maritime Dispute: "Most Pressing Security Concern."* A disputed Chinese reclaimed island. Source: *Metrovan Independent News* article available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y76uphqz>. Photo by Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

organize their ideas and arguments based on the evidence they have acquired. After all countries have given their opening statements, I allow general debate, with me chairing and ensuring that one student is recognized at a time. This prevents the debate from becoming unruly. I inform students that at any time a country may write and introduce a resolution; such a resolution can focus on a small dispute or offer a larger and more comprehensive solution.

The writing of the resolutions is often best done during the debate; to facilitate this, I allow unmoderated caucuses, a singular feature of many Model United Nations simulations. A delegate may “move” to call for an unmoderated caucus for fifteen minutes or so; this should be accompanied by a motion to “second.” As chair, I call for a voice vote to determine whether there is a clear consensus. During the caucus, students are allowed to meet with one another to work on resolutions while I merely observe. Students may extend an unmoderated caucus by a motion and vote. Usually, some consensus is reached at the end of the caucus so that a resolution is introduced.

Resolutions are considered by allowing the proponent to read it first, then allowing debate pertinent to the resolution. At the end of about twenty minutes or so (depending on the students’ enthusiasm), the debate time expires and the proponent rereads the resolution. Each nation votes to support, oppose, or abstain. I don’t recommended giving any nation veto power, even though China, Russia, and the US have that power in the United Nations Security Council.

Running the Debate: Model Two

An alternate debate approach is to break the class into two groups with at least some balance (for example, Group 1: Russia, Japan, Việt Nam, South Korea, and Malaysia; and Group 2: United States, People’s Republic of China, North Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan) and ask each to draw a map describing solutions. Each group must write and present a defense, based on evidence, for their solutions. The groups should work separately so they can compare and contrast the two proposals. Then, each group should ask questions of the other group that requires a response. Allow time for each of these steps so the questions and the responses are more thoughtful and supported by evidence.

Assessment and Conclusion

I evaluate student work based on evident preparation and participation; students should submit notes revealing their research and citing their sources. I also keep notes during unmoderated caucuses and other times when students negotiate compromises; here, some students emerge as leaders toward reaching a consensus. Another approach is to ask students to write about what they have contributed and learned as a way of demonstrating, through a kind of portfolio, the value of this experience to them.

This debate helps students learn about critical issues facing East Asia and the world. They also develop their skills and confidence in speaking and negotiating. Perhaps they may go on to help lead the world toward a successful resolution of these complex problems. ■

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

“How Uninhabited Islands Soured China–Japan Ties,” *BBC*, November 10, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/ycg2vjdu>. This map gives an overview of the situation in the East China Sea.

“Why Is the South China Sea Contentious?” *BBC*, July 12, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y7t-2vqsx>. This map gives some helpful information about the South China Sea.

“The United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, 1982.” See the United Nations introduction at <https://tinyurl.com/ycoboyqp>. And for a full text, see <https://tinyurl.com/7vbg4g7>. All East Asian countries are parties to this convention, except North Korea, who is a signatory. I recommend that students read the introduction first and then look at the text of UNCLOS. Students who wish to explore issues of international law would enjoy looking closely at part II, section 2 for some general definitions and at part V for rules about exclusive economic zones.

Education About Asia has published several helpful introductory articles, all available online. About the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, please see Sheila A. Smith, “The Senkaku Islands and Japan’s Evolving Diplomacy,” *Education About Asia* 19, no. 2 (2014): 41–43; William Norris, “Explaining Recent Senkaku/Diaoyu Tensions: The Domestic Dimension,” *Education About Asia* 19, no. 2 (2014): 43–44; and Vincent Wei-cheng Wang, “Taiwan’s Policy Toward the Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute and the Implications for the US,” *Education About Asia* 19 no. 2 (2014): 45–46.

Ivy Lee and Ming Fang, “Deconstructing Japan’s Claim of Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands,” *The Asia Pacific Journal* 10, issue 53, no. 1 (2012), <https://tinyurl.com/yagbg9n6>. This article includes maps of the East China Sea with background up to 2012.

D. Z., “Who Really Owns the Senaku Islands?,” *The Economist*, December 3, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/ycgdxg5t>. This article also gives significant background to the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute.

Robert Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2015). This book gives a clear and accessible introduction to the South China Sea controversy. See also the review of this book: Joe Renouard, “Teaching Robert D. Kaplan’s *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific.*” *Education About Asia* 19, no. 3 (2014): 63–64.

Students will find much information in leading reliable news sources. *The Economist* has published many informative articles in the past five years and has an excellent internal search engine, but requires an online subscription after viewing more than a few articles; many school and public library systems, however, allow more access. Other periodicals with information in English include *The Guardian* (UK), *The Japan Times*, *The South China Morning Post*, *The China Daily*, *The Korea Herald*, *The Korea Times*, and *The Taipei Times*.



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