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**Navigating Sovereignty: Legal and Geopolitical Implications of Territorial
Disputes in South China Sea**

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Abstract

The escalating maritime conflicts present an increasingly grave global concern, characterized by contentious assertions of territorial sovereignty and legal jurisdiction over maritime territories. These disputes transcend national boundaries, necessitating a robust legal framework for their resolution. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) stands as the cornerstone for addressing maritime disputes, yet the divergent interpretations of UNCLOS classifications inject additional layers of complexity into the fray. The paramount concern are the South China Sea disputes

involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. These disputes wield significant implications for regional stability, driven by intricate geopolitical dynamics, competing interests in maritime resources, apprehensions regarding energy security, assertions of navigational rights, maritime commerce, and evolving military strategies. The trajectory of the South China Sea remains uncertain, with potential outcomes ranging from diplomatic negotiations, heightened military tensions, collaborative resource-sharing agreements, to the invocation of international legal mechanisms. In essence, the evolving landscape of maritime disputes underscores the imperative for concerted multilateral engagement, diplomatic maneuvering, and adherence to established legal norms to effectively manage the complexities of maritime governance.

Methodology

The methodology for this research essay entails several key components. The introductory section will offer a succinct overview of the subject matter, providing contextual insights into the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea and their legal implications. Subsequently, the literature review section will meticulously examine existing secondary sources concerning the legal and geopolitical dimensions of territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This review will encompass academic publications, books, reports, and other relevant materials, aiming to offer a comprehensive understanding of the current discourse surrounding these conflicts. Furthermore, the research paper will employ a secondary data analysis approach to delve into the legal and geopolitical ramifications of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This method will involve scrutinizing and synthesizing existing data, scholarly insights, and expert analyses to enrich the understanding of the complexities inherent in these conflicts. In essence, this research endeavor seeks to provide a thorough examination of the methodologies employed, ensuring a rigorous and comprehensive exploration of the legal and geopolitical dynamics shaping the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Results/ Findings

The South China Sea stands as a historical hotbed of contention, with numerous nations staking claims to its islands and marine resources. China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei all assert conflicting territorial rights in this strategic region. China's sovereignty extends over the Paracel Islands, while the Spratly Islands are subject to occupation by Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, and China itself. In recent years, China's extensive land reclamation endeavors and the militarization of artificial islands within the South China Sea have exacerbated tensions significantly. These actions have evoked strong reactions and apprehensions from neighboring states, particularly Vietnam, which finds itself directly impacted by China's assertive maneuvers. China's territorial assertions in the South China Sea, epitomized by its "nine-dash line" concept, lack recognition under international law, including the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore, China's reluctance to engage in neutral arbitration mechanisms, particularly evident in its refusal to participate in resolving disputes with the Philippines, undermines the established norms of peaceful conflict resolution. Despite the ongoing disagreements and potential for conflicts, all regional stakeholders share a common goal of prioritizing economic development. However, the South China Sea remains a multifaceted and volatile theater, characterized by intersecting economic interests and security concerns that have profound implications for regional stability and global geopolitics.

Future Direction/ Implication

The South China Sea's geopolitical significance renders it a focal point of substantial concern and interest for the foreseeable future. China's expansive territorial claims in the region, marked by the construction of artificial islands and the strategic deployment of military assets, have markedly escalated tensions among neighboring nations, precipitating conflicts over territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction. China's assertive posture and robust military presence in the South China Sea pose a tangible risk to the freedom of navigation and overflight, potentially obstructing the passage of vessels from other nations. This militarization raises legitimate concerns

about the security of maritime routes vital for global trade and commerce. Moreover, the simmering disputes in the South China Sea harbor the ominous potential to escalate into full-blown military confrontations, threatening regional peace and stability on an unprecedented scale. The ramifications of such conflicts would reverberate far beyond the region, exerting significant geopolitical repercussions and exacerbating existing tensions among major powers. In essence, the evolving dynamics in the South China Sea underscore the urgent imperative for diplomatic dialogue, adherence to international law, and the preservation of multilateral frameworks to mitigate the risk of conflict and safeguard the collective interests of all stakeholders involved.

Key Terms:South China Sea, Regional Stability, Chinese Assertiveness, legal and Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

The South China Sea has become a focal point for territorial disputes, giving rise to intricate legal and geopolitical consequences that reverberate across the Indo-Pacific region. China's assertive actions in this maritime domain have triggered concerns and spurred a reevaluation of future strategic alignments. The construction of artificial islands and the expansive assertion of its nine-dash line by China have raised significant apprehensions regarding the unfettered movement of vessels and aircraft in these contested or internationally recognized areas. China's militarization of these disputed islands, coupled with its reluctance to participate in impartial arbitration processes, has heightened tensions with neighboring claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines. Consequently, there has been a discernible shift in the geopolitical and geo-economic landscape, leading to the formation of both formal and informal alliances among countries in the region. The strategic interests and objectives of QUAD countries in the Indo-Pacific are under scrutiny as they seek to counter China's assertive maneuvers. The South China Sea disputes transcend mere territorial claims; they have far-reaching implications for regional security and stability. Additionally, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, characterized by substantial investments in

infrastructure across Asia, Africa, and Europe, has raised concerns regarding its long-term strategic intentions and potential disruption to the existing global order. The territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as underscored by Baruah (2020) and Delisle (2012), are laden with extensive and complex legal and geopolitical ramifications. These complexities highlight the intricate interplay between maritime law, regional power dynamics, and global geopolitics, underscoring the urgent imperative for diplomatic dialogue and multilateral cooperation to confront these pressing challenges. Such matters encompass the assertion of national authority, the regulatory frameworks governing interstate relations, the imperative of unhindered navigation across waterways, regional partnerships, national security considerations, economic advancement, and the distribution of influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea carry profound legal and geopolitical implications. They extend beyond mere claims of territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction, impacting regional security, economic development, and the equilibrium of power in the Indo-Pacific. The emergence of alliances and cooperative efforts among QUAD countries reflects shared concerns regarding China's expansionist pursuits. Furthermore, China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands and the deployment of military assets, have engendered concerns about the unrestricted movement of vessels and aircraft in these contested waters. This poses a tangible threat to the passage of ships through critical maritime routes, heightening anxieties among nations reliant on maritime trade. Issues surrounding the integrity and efficacy of international arbitration mechanisms also come to the forefront, particularly as China rebuffs impartial arbitration with other claimants. The ongoing complexities in the South China Sea necessitate adjustments to international legal principles and a recalibration of the interests of concerned states to address these challenges effectively. The legal claims asserted by China in the South China Sea present formidable obstacles that demand concerted efforts to reconcile conflicting interests and uphold the principles of international law amidst evolving regional dynamics. (Park, 1978).

Literature review

The South China Sea has long been a crucible of geopolitical tensions and maritime disputes, largely centered on questions of sovereignty and territorial claims. These conflicts pivot around two pivotal issues: the ownership of islands and the corresponding legal entitlements defining maritime boundaries. Shen (2002) illuminates the complexity of these matters, underlining their significance in shaping regional stability, fostering economic development, and influencing the global order. Among China's unresolved territorial disputes, the South China Sea stands out as the most intricate and contentious. China's claims in this region are deemed paramount, intricate, and unsettling due to the substantial economic and security interests at stake, as well as the involvement of diverse stakeholders with vested interests in the area. China's assertions in the South China Sea are grounded in three distinct conceptual frameworks, each posing unique challenges and necessitating adjustments to international legal norms and the interests of other nations. The first perspective delves into the influence of national policies on the Spratly Islands conflicts, examining their impact on regional dynamics and China's stance on the issue. Gao (1994) emphasizes the deep-rooted sovereignty concerns and vested interests in marine resources and energy security that underpin conflicts in the South China Sea, highlighting the complexity of the disputes. Additionally, the fourth source underscores the legal dimensions of the disputes, rooted in divergent interpretations of maritime law and historical legacies. Schofield (2013) delves into the geopolitical factors driving tensions in the region, including the quest for sovereignty, resource interests, energy security, navigational freedom, maritime trade, and evolving military dynamics. The multifaceted nature of conflicts in the South China Sea demands nuanced approaches to resolution. Diplomatic dialogues and military posturing represent contrasting strategies for addressing these complex issues, each fraught with its own set of challenges and implications for regional stability and global security. As such, a comprehensive understanding of the legal, geopolitical, and strategic dynamics at play is imperative for forging sustainable solutions to the South China Sea conundrum. The sovereignty

disputes in the South China Sea carry profound implications for regional stability, economic development, and the global order. The unresolved conflicts therein resonate across multiple dimensions, reflecting the intricate and pivotal nature of the issues at hand. As highlighted by various sources, the South China Sea disputes are characterized by their complexity and significance. Multiple stakeholders, including China, assert their respective claims to the contested territories, grounding their positions in three distinct legal justifications. Central to these debates are China's assertions of historical entitlements, the validity of the nine-dash line demarcation, and adherence to international legal frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China's approach to the South China Sea issues reflects a strategic calculus shaped by the intricate factual, legal, and geopolitical realities of the region. The disputes encompass not only questions of territorial sovereignty but also competing interests in vital resources and energy security. The South China Sea remains a hotbed of contention, with countries such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei asserting ownership over various islands and maritime zones. Beyond mere territorial claims, these conflicts entail a complex interplay of legal arguments, historical legacies, and geopolitical considerations. The sources underscore the evolving and convoluted nature of the disputes, which stem from historical legacies and divergent interpretations of international law, notably maritime regulations. Against the backdrop of escalating economic and strategic significance in the Asia-Pacific region, the intensity of these conflicts has only heightened as nations seek to safeguard their interests and resources. In essence, the sovereignty concerns surrounding the South China Sea disputes are multifaceted and of paramount importance. The territorial disagreements involve a myriad of states with divergent interests, each advancing its claims based on historical rights, the nine-dash line assertion, and interpretations of international legal principles. Resolving these conflicts demands a nuanced understanding of the complexities at play and a concerted effort towards diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution mechanisms. The South China Sea issues extend far beyond mere questions of territorial sovereignty, encapsulating a myriad of competing interests ranging from resource exploitation and

energy security to considerations of navigational freedom, maritime trade, and complex military and geopolitical dynamics. China's approach to these issues, as evidenced by the sources, is characterized by a blend of inconsistent actions and rhetoric, presenting a challenge in assessing its potential impact on regional and global stability. The dynamic behavior and verbal posturing of China in the South China Sea conflicts raise fundamental questions about its role within the existing regional and global order. This literature review underscores the nuanced nature of sovereignty concerns in the South China Sea disputes, highlighting the diverse array of variables contributing to ongoing tensions in the region. The South China Sea's tumultuous history is marked by enduring conflicts over territory, rooted in historical legacies and disparate interpretations of maritime law. China finds itself embroiled in jurisdictional disputes with neighboring coastal states that share borders with the South China Sea, revolving around the twin issues of territorial sovereignty over islands and jurisdictional rights concerning maritime boundaries. As elucidated by Guoxing (1995), these conflicts underscore the complex interplay of historical narratives and legal interpretations shaping the contours of maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea. Moving forward, resolving these disputes demands a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the diverse interests at stake and fosters constructive dialogue among all parties involved.

Research Methodology/ Theoretical framework

The concept of geopolitics offers a robust theoretical lens through which to understand the complexities of sovereignty in the South China Sea disputes. Geopolitics delves into how geography, power dynamics, and territorial interests shape international relations, providing valuable insights into the underlying reasons driving conflicts in the region. Key factors encompassed within this framework include enduring imperatives related to sovereignty, competing interests in marine resources and energy security, considerations of navigation and maritime trade, and evolving military and strategic concerns. By scrutinizing geopolitical issues in the South China Sea disputes, policymakers and researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of the motivations and interests of the states involved, thus enabling the formulation of peaceful conflict

resolution measures. International law serves as an additional theoretical framework for addressing sovereignty issues in the conflicts over the South China Sea. It establishes a framework of regulations and standards governing interactions between nations, including principles such as territorial sovereignty and unrestricted navigation. Utilizing international law allows for the evaluation of legal assertions and entitlements of states making claims in the disputes, facilitating the establishment of a structured process for conflict resolution. Realpolitik, a theoretical framework emphasizing the practical pursuit of a country's interests and the analysis of power dynamics in international relations, offers valuable insights into understanding the actions and strategies of claimant states in the South China Sea conflicts. By considering perceived national interests and power dynamics through a realpolitik perspective, policymakers and academics can discern underlying motivations and identify potential paths for negotiation, cooperation, or conflict resolution aligned with strategic interests. The balance of power theory represents another theoretical lens for navigating sovereignty issues in the South China Sea disputes. This theory posits that the distribution of power among states significantly influences international relations and conflict resolution. Within the context of the South China Sea conflicts, the balance of power theory aids in examining interactions between China and other claimant governments and sheds light on the role of external powers in determining dispute resolution outcomes.

Findings of legal and Geopolitical implications

In an era of increasing global interconnectedness, maritime disputes have emerged as a pressing concern among numerous states, often centering on conflicting assertions regarding territorial sovereignty and jurisdictional rights over marine boundaries. These disputes transcend the jurisdiction of individual nations and necessitate a robust legal framework for effective resolution. As national jurisdiction expands to encompass maritime resources, every inch of seabed in the area becomes subject to claims. China finds itself embroiled in maritime jurisdictional conflicts with neighboring countries that share coastlines with the China Seas. The legal architecture governing maritime disputes assumes paramount importance in resolving conflicts and

maintaining stability in the international maritime domain. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) serves as the primary authority for this legal framework, establishing a comprehensive framework outlining the rights and obligations of nations regarding the utilization and administration of the Earth's oceans. However, disagreements often arise from divergent interpretations of UNCLOS classifications, particularly concerning the categorization of territorial features and their entitlements to larger marine zones. These conflicting interpretations exacerbate the complexity and severity of maritime conflicts, underscoring a significant concern in maritime disputes as highlighted by Talmon (2018). Territorial conflicts have historically been a source of tension and conflict worldwide, with the protracted disputes in the South China Sea garnering considerable attention in recent times. Involving multiple nations such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, these disputes significantly impact regional security due to geopolitical considerations, interests in maritime resources, energy security concerns, navigation and maritime trade considerations, and evolving military and strategic dynamics.

The disputes in the South China Sea, steeped in historical context and intricate legal assertions, stem from enduring sovereignty concerns and the aspiration of countries to establish supremacy and control in the region. Geopolitical factors serve as primary catalysts for these conflicts, encompassing territorial, resource-related, and influence distribution issues within the region. The countries involved, particularly China, vie for dominance and economic exploitation of the abundant natural resources in the South China Sea, including oil, gas, and seafood. The economic value and potential of these resources drive the assertion of jurisdictional rights over the oceans and islands in the region. Furthermore, factors related to navigation and maritime trade significantly influence the territorial disputes, further complicating an already intricate geopolitical landscape. The future of the South China Sea holds increasing significance due to its profound geopolitical implications and the diverse interests at stake among the involved parties. Multiple potential scenarios and projections outline the trajectory of the South China Sea in the years ahead. These possibilities range from peaceful resolutions

through diplomatic negotiations to the escalation of conflicts leading to armed confrontations, heightened militarization, cooperative resource-sharing agreements, or the implementation of international legal frameworks to address the issues. Constructive dialogue and collaboration among all stakeholders are imperative to ensure a peaceful and stable future for the South China Sea. The outlined perspectives encompass the primary concepts and potential outcomes for the region's future, drawing insights from existing sources. However, it is vital to acknowledge the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the South China Sea, which will primarily hinge on the actions and decisions of the states asserting sovereignty and influential maritime forces. Despite efforts to encapsulate key concepts and potential trajectories, it remains challenging to predict the future of the South China Sea accurately. The conclusion offers a comprehensive overview of various possibilities and projections deliberated in the sources. Given the intricate and evolving nature of the disputes, the region's future remains fluid, shaped by dynamic geopolitical circumstances and the choices made by key actors involved.

Discussions

The regions of South East and South West Asia have long been embroiled in a plethora of disputes and conflicts, often stemming from territorial disagreements, ethnic tensions, religious disparities, and geopolitical rivalries. A notable case in point is the South China Sea, where multiple nations, prominently China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, lay claim to different islands and reefs, fueling heightened tensions and resulting in naval confrontations, clashes among fishing vessels, and competing efforts to exploit resources. Efforts to mitigate these conflicts have involved diplomatic negotiations, engagement in multilateral forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and legal arbitration. However, in cases where diplomacy fails, there is a noticeable trend among claimants to bolster their military capabilities to assert their rights through coercive means, as evidenced by the ongoing tensions surrounding China's claims in the South China Sea. China's assertions in the disputed areas are grounded in three main legal justifications: historical claims, which cite China's past

control over the islands and waters; legal claims, predicated on interpretations of international law like the contentious nine-dash line; and strategic claims, arguing the critical importance of the South China Sea for China's national security and economic interests. These assertions have elicited significant apprehension among neighboring nations and the global community, particularly concerning unrestricted maritime movement and the specter of armed conflict. Geopolitical considerations, including the imperative to establish sovereignty, resource interests, energy security concerns, navigation and maritime trade, and evolving military dynamics, primarily drive the conflicts in the South China Sea. Efforts to address these conflicts have involved a combination of diplomatic dialogue, international consultations, and legal avenues, as highlighted by Al-Naqeeb (2010).

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) stands as a crucial instrument for addressing maritime disputes, providing a comprehensive legal framework governing the utilization and conservation of global waters. However, interpretations and implementations of UNCLOS, particularly regarding the South China Sea conflicts, have been sources of contention among the involved parties. A central concern in the South China Sea disputes revolves around the classification of territorial features and their corresponding maritime zones under UNCLOS, dictating the extent of a state's authority and control over contested territories. Disagreements persist regarding the categorization of geographical elements and the scope of maritime boundaries, especially concerning islands' entitlement to exclusive economic zones. China's assertive stance, grounded in historical claims and the nine-dash line, has encountered resistance from other claimant states and the international community, challenging the compatibility of China's claims with prevailing international law. It is imperative for all parties to adhere to UNCLOS principles to ensure peaceful conflict resolution. Despite efforts to address these disputes through UNCLOS, tensions in the South China Sea persist, underscoring the imperative for continued engagement and adherence to international legal norms. UNCLOS provides a structured framework for classifying territorial characteristics and delineating marine areas, facilitating peaceful

conflict resolution through negotiation and arbitration. However, the path to resolution remains fraught with challenges, necessitating sustained diplomatic efforts and adherence to international law to achieve lasting stability in the region. The South China Sea is a highly contested region, with multiple countries vying for dominance and power. Among the primary stakeholders are China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, each with distinct strategic interests in the area. China, in particular, seeks to enforce its territorial claims and establish hegemony in the region, viewing it as essential for national security and territorial integrity. China also has significant economic interests in the South China Sea due to its perceived abundance of oil and natural gas deposits.

Vietnam, on the other hand, focuses on safeguarding its sovereignty and marine entitlements, expressing concerns about China's assertive behavior and seeking diplomatic solutions and alliances with other claimant nations. The Philippines prioritizes safeguarding its maritime rights and resources, engaging in territorial conflicts with China and pursuing international arbitration to support its claims. Malaysia and Brunei, despite being smaller nations in the region, are concerned with upholding peace and stability in the South China Sea, emphasizing nonviolent conflict resolution and ensuring the smooth operation of economic activities like fishing and oil prospecting. Taiwan asserts its sovereignty over the region to safeguard its economic and security interests, aiming to maintain its influence and presence in the South China Sea. These nations pursue diverse strategic objectives in the South China Sea, including establishing territorial rights, safeguarding sovereignty, protecting economic resources, and maintaining peace and stability. However, China's strategic intentions pose a significant challenge to the current situation in the South China Sea, potentially exacerbating tensions and instability in the long run.

Recommendations

The issues in the South China Sea are intricate and encompass various geopolitical elements, such as claims of sovereignty, interests in resources, concerns

regarding navigation, and considerations related to the military. In order to resolve these conflicts, the following resolutions can be contemplated:

- ❖ **Diplomatic Negotiations:** Encourage claimant states to engage in peaceful and constructive diplomatic dialogues, either bilaterally or multilaterally, with the aim of achieving mutually acceptable resolutions to the disputes.
- ❖ **Foster Cooperation:** Encourage agreements among the disputing states to jointly develop resources in the contested areas, ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefits and promoting regional stability.
- ❖ **Strengthen Maritime Collaboration:** Enhance regional maritime cooperation by implementing a Code of Conduct and other trust-building measures to improve communication and prevent maritime incidents.
- ❖ **Utilize Third-Party Mediation:** Advocate for the involvement of impartial third-party mediators or international organizations, such as the United Nations or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to facilitate discussions, offer unbiased suggestions, and aid in conflict resolution.
- ❖ **Uphold International Law:** Promote adherence to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and encourage legal arbitration as a means to resolve disputes peacefully.
- ❖ **Enhance Regional Collaboration:** Foster enhanced collaboration among claimant states and relevant stakeholders to address common challenges, build trust, and collectively ensure the security and stability of the South China Sea region.
- ❖ **Build Capacity:** Support capacity-building efforts aimed at enhancing the technical and legal skills of claimant nations in navigating international law and handling disputes through training and education programs.
- ❖ **Advocate Peaceful Resolution:** Emphasize the importance of resolving conflicts in the South China Sea through peaceful means, rejecting

violence in favor of dialogue, negotiation, and adherence to international legal principles.

- ❖ **Promote Environmental Conservation:** Encourage cooperative initiatives among claimant states to protect the marine ecosystem, address issues such as overfishing and pollution, and promote sustainable development strategies.
- ❖ **Foster Multilateral Communication:** Advocate for the utilization of multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit to facilitate transparent conversations and collaboration among all parties involved in the disputes.
- ❖ **Resource Development:** Facilitate collaborative efforts among claimant governments to explore and develop resources in the South China Sea, ensuring equitable distribution of benefits to mitigate tensions and promote mutual cooperation.
- ❖ **Inclusive Negotiations:** Advocate for the participation of all relevant parties in both multilateral and bilateral negotiations aimed at resolving territorial and maritime conflicts, with the goal of reaching mutually acceptable resolutions and fostering peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

The escalation of maritime conflicts presents an increasingly grave global concern, characterized by conflicting claims of territorial ownership and legal jurisdiction over maritime boundaries. These disputes often transcend the jurisdiction of individual nations, necessitating a robust legal framework for effective resolution. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) serves as the principal legal instrument for addressing marine conflicts. However, divergent interpretations of

UNCLOS classifications add layers of complexity to the issue. The South China Sea disputes, involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, hold profound implications for regional security due to geopolitical dynamics, interests in maritime resources, energy security concerns, navigation and maritime trade, and evolving military and strategic considerations. The future of the South China Sea remains uncertain, with potential scenarios including diplomatic negotiations leading to peaceful resolution, heightened conflicts and military maneuvers, collaborative resource-sharing agreements, or the establishment of international legal frameworks to govern the disputes.

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