

The World This Week #229, Vol. 5, No. 33

The return of South China Sea and the controversy over Fukushima release

Femy Francis and Rishika Yadav



(Image Source: The New York Times)

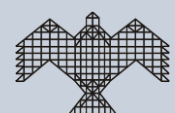
The return of the South China Sea

Femy Francis

What Happened?

On 28 August, the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources released a new ‘standard map’ that included contesting regions of Arunachal Pradesh, Aksai Chin, Taiwan and the South China Sea. The map outlines their infamous U-shaped “10-dash” line which covers 90 per cent of the South China Sea overriding many disputed regions, with some of the most tussled waterways aggregating USD 3 trillion worth of trade route passage every year. The “10-dash” line loop cuts into the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunie and Indonesia.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin asserted the claims stating: “China’s position on the South China Sea issue has always been clear... and We hope that relevant parties can view this in an objective and rational manner.”



Countries response

The map garnered regional outrage refuting China's claims with the Philippines Foreign Ministry stating that the: "latest attempt to legitimise China's purported sovereignty and jurisdiction over Philippine features and maritime zones has no basis under international law," and to "act responsibly and abide by its obligations under UNCLOS and the final and binding 2016 Arbitral Award." Vietnam's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Pham Thu Hang expressed that Vietnam: "resolutely rejects any claims in the East Sea by China that are based on the dashed line, and Vietnam opposes the use of force against Vietnamese fishing boats operating normally at sea." Malaysian Foreign Ministry refuting the claims said: "Malaysia does not recognize China's claims in the South China Sea as outlined in the '2023 edition of the standard map of China' which extends into the Malaysian maritime area." Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi questioned the standard map and urged China to release the map in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

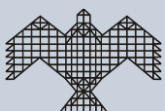
The U-shaped loop also extended its line to Taiwan which was vehemently discredited by the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jeff Liu stating: "No matter how the Chinese government twists its position on Taiwan's sovereignty, it cannot change the objective fact of our country's existence." India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar relegated that: "Just by putting out maps with parts of India... this doesn't change in anything. Our government is very clear about what our territory is. Making absurd claims does not make other people's territories yours."

What is the Background?

First, a brief background to the 10-dash line claim. Previously known as the "9 Dash line" was adopted in Chinese maps since the 1940s with Beijing claiming their indisputable sovereignty over the regions within. The Chinese officials referred to the area as 'blue national soil' and can be traced back to the maps made by the Nationalist Kuomintang or the Chinese National Party before World War Two. In 1947 Chinese geographer Yang Huairan came out with the U-shaped loop with a "11-dash line." A Chinese Marine geographer Wang Ying stated that the lines mean that all ocean, island and coral reefs belong to Beijing, but the discontinuous line portrays that other countries can pass through it.

Second, claims and opportunities in the South China Sea. The region has a thriving marine life with an abundance of fish which the regional countries are dependent on for fulfilling their major dietary requirements. Additionally, large reserves of natural gases and oil have been found on the floor of the South China Sea. The most significant is that the South China Sea has one of the world's busiest and most important shipping lanes with trillions of dollars' worth of trade and business opportunities. Philippines and Vietnam claim their historical right over the South China Sea whereas Indonesia and Brunei claim the right over their Exclusive Economic Zones as outlined by the UNCLOS.

Third, external interest in the South China Sea. There has been a significant external and especially US presence in the Southeast and East Asian region that has met with criticism by China as an unwarranted incursion. In the context of Southeast Asia, the Philippines and the US revived the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) which provides access to nine Philippines military bases that are of strategic significance as they are in close proximity to both Taiwan and the South China Sea. In 2023, Manila and Washington held an annual Balikatan military exercise and resumed joint military patrols in the region.



Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning called it a “zero-sum endeavour” by the US and warned regional players to be more responsible as it might lead to more competition than cooperation.

Fourth, the timing of the release of the “standard map.” The release of the map comes right before the G-20 summit where China wants to reassert its claims over the territories and is well aware that this would become aa a major focus of discussion. Additionally, the publishing of the 10-dash line after the 9-dash line was rejected by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016, relegates that Beijing refutes the ruling. This reassertion before the summit showcases their binding determination over its claims and the rumour of President Xi Jinping’s plans to not attend the G20 summit showcases no space for negotiations and discussion.

What does it mean?

There has been a revival of tensions within the South China Sea, which saw a lull in diplomatic confrontation but was frequent by Chinese aggression in the waterways. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) have been conducting anti-submarine exercise and patrol in the South China Sea stating that the region has been infested with foreign actors that threaten China’s national defence. In early August, Philippines accused Chinese coast guards of targeting Filipino vessels with water cannons and several local Philippines fishermen have faced harassment by Chinese coast guards. Within the span of a few years China has amped up its efforts to reclaim the region by either increasing the size of the islands or creating new islands. Additionally, they have been militarizing and weaponizing the Paracel, Woody and Spratly Islands by deploying fighter jets, cruise missile and radar systems. There is a collective fear of counterproductive results from the increased US and external involvement in the region that might further antagonize China. Additionally, the regional actors fear that the external interest might dilute the regional interests of the countries involved as the region might become of strategic dispute between China against US/ West allies and not China against Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Brunie and Malaysia.

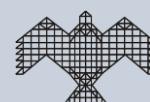
The Controversy over Fukushima wastewater release

Rishika Yadav

What happened?

On 01 August, Japan’s Fisheries Minister Tetsuro Nomura apologized for calling the treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant “contaminated.” His statement led to criticism and calls for his resignation from the opposition bloc. While Nomura retracted his statement, he ruled out resigning and expressed a desire to support the fisheries industry. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that Nomura’s reference to contaminated water is “nothing but mentioning the truth.”

On 30 August, Kishida ate Fukushima fish to demonstrate its safety after China banned seafood imports due to the wastewater release from Fukushima’s nuclear plant. On 24 August, Japan released the treated radioactive wastewater from its Fukushima nuclear power plant. The US ambassador to Japan, Rahm Emanuel, also visited Fukushima to show support and eat locally caught seafood. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) assured: “The discharge of filtered water into the Pacific Ocean is safe and will have ‘negligible’ impact on people and the environment.”



What is the Background?

First, background behind the decision to release. Japan released treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean, marking 12 years since the devastating meltdown. The decision was driven by the need to reclaim storage space over the concerns of potential tank collapses and decommissioning that was confirmed safety by scientific assessments while adhering to the global nuclear standards. Tritium, an unremovable radioactive form of hydrogen, is diluted to meet safety thresholds.

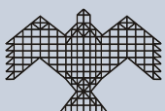
Second, concerns over safety and contamination. Recent IAEA reports confirm Japan's adherence to international safety standards, with minimal radiological impact. Director General of IAEA, Rafael Mariano Grossi, said: "The IAEA has committed to be present before, during and after this process." US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tests found no detectable Cesium in 51 samples from the area, supporting environmental safety. Despite assurances and monitoring from institutions like the UN, IAEA and FDA, concerns linger about potential contamination from Fukushima's release. Various NGOs and campaigners within Japan have voiced similar domestic concerns. Climate and Energy campaigner at Greenpeace Japan, Kazue Suzuki, said: "The government has taken the wholly unjustified decision to deliberately contaminate the Pacific Ocean with radioactive wastes."

Third, objections over the release. China initiated a widespread boycott of Japanese seafood products, fueled by nationalist sentiment and supported by state media. Japanese citizens in China have faced harassment and security concerns, domestically and within China, including an attack on the Japanese embassy in Beijing. Additionally, a wave of online harassment targeted at Japanese citizens has further strained relations. Chinese internet users have been making calls to Japanese businesses and institutions, shouting concerns about the wastewater release. A professor of international politics at the University of Tokyo's Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, Yasuhiro Matsuda, claimed: "Contamination is scientifically not that serious, and China's own water release and other countries' water releases are much more (concentrated) than the Japanese case." A recent Gallup Korea poll of 1,002 people revealed that a majority of South Koreans remain concerned about the Fukushima release. Despite President Yoon Suk Yeol's campaign to encourage seafood consumption and his visit to a fisheries market, over 70 per cent of respondents expressed concerns about the impact on seafood, with 60 per cent being reluctant to eat seafood.

Fourth, responses from the Japanese government. Japanese Environment Ministry reported that tests conducted on seawater near Fukushima did not detect any radioactivity. Moreover, the regularly processed waters have been safely stored in specially designed tanks. The ministry plans to publish weekly test results for the next three months and will consider further disclosure thereafter. Collaborative analyses by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and Japan Atomic Energy Agency (JAEA) show radiation levels below targets, emphasizing safety commitment. Both entities regularly perform in-depth analyses of the groundwater, further validating the safety of the discharged water.

What does it mean?

First, apprehension over anything that is nuclear. Fukushima incident was classified as a level seven event, on par with Chernobyl. Its wastewater release exemplifies how nuclear-related matters raise shared global concerns. Debates, opposition, and meticulous assessments surrounding this decision showcase the universal apprehension about nuclear incidents.



Second, rekindling of existing bilateral fault lines. The release has reignited long standing bilateral tensions between Japan and China, rooted in territorial disputes and historical grievances. China's immediate retaliatory ban on Japanese fish imports mirrors past reactions to such disputes. In South Korea, while Yeol's government faces public apprehension, affecting approval ratings, people seek to protect its citizens and safeguard its economy. The US, while not directly involved, has an interest in supporting its ally Japan while ensuring the safety of its own consumers. Furthermore, the US is actively advocating for improved relations between South Korea and Japan. This scenario underscores a notable discrepancy; while the South Korean government does not oppose the release, it faces domestic public condemnation, illustrating conflicting interests within the country.

Third, economic fallouts. China's seafood ban from Fukushima water release has severely impacted Japan's fishing industry. This could disrupt trade flows and affect bilateral balances. Prolonged disruptions may impact supply chains relying on Japanese inputs, challenging Southeast Asian manufacturers. These countries might diversify sources, reducing reliance on Japan, while their own seafood and agricultural producers could gain market share globally.

Regional Round-ups

China This Week

China: IMF looks to engage in future cooperation

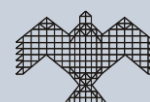
On 1 September, Chinese Premier Li Qiang met the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Kristalina Georgieva. The meeting aimed to promote economic growth and strengthen policy coordination. Qiang assured that China will provide an environment to promote growth for private enterprises and attract foreign capital. He hoped that the IMF would go against protectionist policies and promote globalization and free trade. Furthermore, he assured continued cooperation of China is aiding the debt issue in supporting the developing countries.

China: Meeting in Fiji between US and China's Defence officials

On 31 August, China and US defence officers held talks in Fiji as reported by the Chinese Ministry of National Defence (MOD). MOD spokesperson Senior Colonel Wu Qian expressed that talks between the two countries have not been suspended and that both sides have maintained open and effective communication. The meeting comes right after the announcement made by the US State Department approving USD 80 million worth of military support to Taiwan under the "Foreign Military Financing program." An international affairs expert in China Zhuo Hua states: "If the two militaries want to have further positive interactions, the key lies in whether the US can truly change its erroneous perception and policies towards China in the coming period, and whether it can take concrete goodwill actions"

China: President Xi Jinping announces measures to expand market access

On 02 September, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that they plan to widen the market access for the service industry and welcome cross-border service trade. The initiative plans to expand on the domestic market by increasing imports of high-quality services. This comes in as China is facing an economic slump where some US-based think tanks are stating the once thriving but now diminishing Chinese economy poses no threat to the US.



China: Discusses export controls with the US

On 28 August, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo met with her Chinese counterpart Wang Wentao in Beijing. The meeting aimed to serve as a platform to mitigate misunderstanding and to further explain their export control systems. They decided that every year both government and private sector representatives would be allowed to discuss trade and investment policy. Several analysts found that while the meeting won't lead to any concrete provisions, talking is better than not talking.

East and Southeast Asia This Week

Malaysia: Allocates USD 1.77 billion for National Industrial Master Plan

On 01 September, Malaysia's government will invest RM8.2 billion in a national industrial master plan, targeting the development of a stronger manufacturing sector, the enhancement of SME competitiveness, and the creation of high-skilled jobs by 2030. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim estimates a total investment of RM95 billion, mostly from the private sector. The plan seeks to boost the manufacturing sector's value by 6.5 per cent over seven years and projects 2.3 per cent employment growth in the sector from 2023.

Vietnam: President meets newly accredited Ambassadors from four countries

On 29 August, Vietnamese President Võ Văn Thưởng met with newly accredited ambassadors from Ireland, Italy, South Korea, and Lithuania in Hanoi. The leaders discussed enhancing bilateral relations in various fields, including politics, economics, culture, trade, and investment. They also expressed hopes for increased cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. Vietnam is actively engaging with multiple countries to strengthen diplomatic ties and promote economic cooperation, reflecting its commitment to international engagement and partnerships.

South Asia This Week

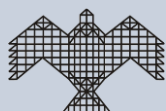
Afghanistan: Ban on Women from Visiting a National Park

On 27 August, the Guardian reported that the Taliban government has banned women from visiting one of its most popular national parks called the Band-e-Amir. The ban was announced in the wake of a complaint made by the acting minister of vice and virtue, Mohammad Khalid Hanafi, regarding women visiting the park not adhering to the proper way of wearing the hijab. He further stated, "Going sightseeing is not a must for women" and requested religious clerics and security forces to enforce the same. This ban is another addition to a long list of bans restricting women's access to public places in Afghanistan like bathhouses, gyms and parks.

Pakistan: Protests in Pakistan over steep electricity bills and inflation

On 30 August, *Dawn* reported that protest demonstrations were held in several areas of the provincial metropolis and other cities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa against the 'unprecedented' hike in electricity tariff. Over the course of last week, several major cities in Pakistan, like Peshawar, Karachi, Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi have seen protests emerge over the steep power bills of July amidst soaring inflation the protestors have refused to pay the bills and their other complaints are regarding massive power cuts, backbreaking inflation and high unemployment. According to the Pakistani news agency *Dawn*, average electricity cost has "more than doubled for low- to middle-class households since May".

In the wake of the protests, the caretaker Prime Minister, Anwaar ul Haq Kakar, had held an emergency meeting and directed authorities to take "concrete steps" within 48 hours for a cut in the power tariff.



The hike has mainly to do with the conditions Pakistan agreed to for a USD 3-billion bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in June. Under a host of regimes to boost fiscal discipline, the IMF has asked Pakistan to shore up tax revenue.

Middle East and Africa This Week

Zimbabwe: Emmerson Mnangagwa wins presidential elections

On 27 August, Al Jazeera reported that Zimbabwe's President and leader of the Zanu-PF party, Emmerson Mnangagwa, won the presidential elections securing 52.6 per cent of votes against opposition party Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) leader, Nelson Chamisa, who secured 44 per cent. The opposition has rejected the results and called for a re-run. The elections were hampered by delays, which fueled opposition claims of bribery and voter suppression. International election monitors have commented that the polls failed to meet regional and international standards. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) said that the elections curtailed "fundamental freedoms" adding that "acts of violence and intimidation" have caused a "climate of fear." More than 40 election monitors were arrested while trying to compare the official poll count. On 28 August, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, called on the "political actors to peacefully settle any disputes through established legal and institutional channels" and urged "the competent authorities to resolve any disputes in a fair, expeditious, and transparent manner."

Europe and the Americas This Week

Greece: Indian Prime Minister visits Athen to boost bilateral ties

On 25 August, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Athens. The meeting focused on improving bilateral relations in trade, defence, and strategic cooperation. India and Greece will boost military ties, promote skilled migration, and aim to double bilateral trade by 2030. Modi said: "In the sector of defence and security, we agreed to reinforce our military ties and our defence industries." Establishing direct flights and collaboration in tourism, pharmaceuticals, and technology was also in the discussion.

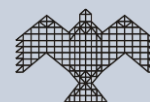
Europe: New EU Digital Services Act imposes rules on tech giants

On 25 August, the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) came into effect. Henceforth, major tech platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Google will be monitored under the act. Under these 45 million EU users, like Alibaba, Amazon, and Twitter will face stringent rules to prevent illegal content, protect rights, and ensure public security. If violated, the firms will be subjected to a fine of six per cent from the turnover and service suspension. DSA requires transparency in algorithms and sharing data with researchers. Some platforms have already implemented changes in line with DSA, impacting advertising and content visibility for younger users.

Europe: Poland takes legal action against three EU climate policies

On 28 August, European Commission published a lawsuit filed by Poland against the European Parliament and the EU Council. The three policies include the EU's ban on the sale of cars emitting carbon dioxide from 2035, the cut down national emissions and the policies to reform the carbon market.

According to Poland, these policies seem to endanger its energy security and widen social inequality. It also stated that due to its high dependency on coal where 70 per cent of its power is produced, the EU policies will affect the coal mining jobs.



About the authors

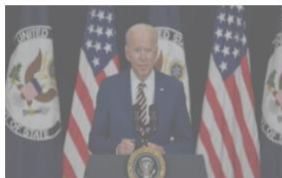
Rohini Reenum is a PhD scholar in the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. Padmashree Anandhan, Anu Maria Joseph, and Femy Francis, Rishika Yadav, Dhriti Mukherjee and Shamini Velayutham are Research Associates at NIAS.

About Global Politics:

The course introduces contemporary world affairs. The primary objective of the course is two – first, to enhance the understanding of contemporary global developments, with an attempt to comprehend the larger picture. Second, to identify trends leading forecasts on contemporary world affairs.

The Course will also invite senior scholars within and outside NIAS – also from within and outside India to provide lectures on contemporary world affairs.

The World This Week



6 February 2021

Biden's new US foreign policy priorities, Russia-EU tensions over Navalny, and China's redline on Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan



30 January 2021

The Daniel Pearl case in Pakistan and the new vaccine complications in Europe



23 January 2021

The US returns to the Paris Agreement, and India reengages the region through a Vaccine diplomacy



16 January 2021

North Korea's Party Congress, Houthis as terrorists, and Elections in Uganda



9 January 2021

Disorderly transition in the US, Breakthrough over Qatar, Enrichment in Iran and Arrests in Hong Kong



27 December 2020

The Year of COVID, Protests and Elections



20 December 2020

India-Bangladesh reset and China's Chang'e-5 success



13 December 2020

Morocco recognizes Israel, Maduro consolidates in Venezuela and No-deal Brexit gets real

About TWTW

The World This Week is an academic initiative of the Global Politics course at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore. The alert, published every Saturday aims to provide its readers with a ready reckoner of major developments during the week under three heads - what happened, what is the background and what does it mean. The Alert also provides an opportunity for the young scholars at NIAS and its partner institutions to follow and comment on contemporary global developments.

Editor: D. Suba Chandran

Assistant Editors: Femy Francis and Shamini Velayutham

