Dispute over Paracel and Spratly Islands - China's Moves

Why in news?

- In the middle of the global coronavirus pandemic, China is busy increasing its presence in the South China Sea.
- This has again brought the dispute over Spratly and Paracel Islands to the fore.

What are the recent developments?

- Both these isalnds are in the middle of the South China Sea waters, between the territory of Vietnam and the Philippines.
- Very recently, Beijing unilaterally renamed 80 islands and other geographical features in the area.
- This drew criticism from neighbouring countries who have also laid claim to the same territory.
- If the dispute were to aggravate, it could likely have serious consequences for diplomatic relations and stability in the region.

What is the Spratly Islands dispute about?

- This relates to the tussle over the ownership of the Spratly Islands archipelago and nearby geographical features like corals reefs, cays etc.
- The ongoing territorial dispute is among China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.
- Since 1968, these nations have engaged in varying kinds of military occupation of the islands and the surrounding waters.
- The only exception is Brunei that has contained its objections to the use of its maritime waters for commercial fishing.
- The Spratly Islands are largely uninhabited.
- But there is a possibility that they may have large reserves of untapped natural resources.
- However, due to the ongoing dispute, there have been few initiatives to explore the scale of these reserves.
- So, the amount of natural resources present there is based on speculation and extrapolation by studying resources available in nearby islands.
- In the 1970s, oil was discovered in neighbouring islands, specifically off the coast of Palawan.

- This discovery ramped up territorial claims by these countries.
- Over the years, US government agencies have claimed that there is little to no oil and natural gas in these islands.
- But these reports have done little to reduce the territorial dispute.

What is the Paracel Islands dispute about?

- The Paracel Islands dispute is slightly more complex.
- This archipelago is a collection of 130 islands and coral reefs and is located in the South China Sea.
- This is almost equidistant from China and Vietnam.
- Beijing says that references to the Paracel Islands as a part of China sovereign territory can be found in 14th century writings from the Song Dynasty.
- Vietnam on the other hand, says that historical texts from at least the 15th century show that the islands were a part of its territory.
- These islands also find mention in records starting from the 16th century by explorers who led expeditions to the East.
- These include the Portuguese, British, Dutch, French and Spanish.
- They have all written about the Paracel Islands in various texts.
- Colonial powers of the French-Indochina further accelerated the tensions with regard to the Islands due to their colonial policies in the 20th century.
- By 1954, tensions had dramatically increased between China and Vietnam over the archipelago.
- In January 1974, China and Vietnam fought over their territorial disputes after which China took over control of the islands.
- In retaliation, in 1982, Vietnam said it had extended its administrative powers over these islands.
- In 1999, Taiwan jumped into the fray laying its claim over the entire archipelago.
- Since 2012, China, Taiwan and Vietnam have attempted to reinforce their claims on the territory.
- They have engaged in construction of government administrative buildings, tourism, land-reclamation initiatives etc.
- Countries have also established and expanded military presence on the archipelago.

What are China's recent moves?

- China recently established new administrative districts on both Spratly and Paracel Islands.

- Following this, the Chinese government had renamed 80 islands, reefs and other geographical features around the two archipelagos with Chinese names.
- The last time China had unilaterally engaged in a similar initiative was in 1983 (287 geographical features had been renamed in the disputed chain of islands).
- In the past few years, China has stepped up military aggression and has created artificial islands for military and economic purposes in the South China Sea.
- This invited criticisms from neighbouring countries and other western powers as well.
- Recently, Vietnam had lodged a complaint at the UN stating that China had illegally sunk a fishing trawler near Paracel Islands, killing 8 people on board.
- In March 2020, China built two research stations on territory claimed by the Philippines.

What is the U.S.'s role?

- The US has no territorial claims in the South China Sea.
- But it is known to send its naval force into the waters each time there are provocative developments in the waters, particularly angering China.
- Following China’s renaming of the islands, the US sent in an assault ship and a guided missile cruiser into the waters near Spratly and Paracel Islands, off the coast of Malaysia.
- Soon after, Chinese and Australian warships also entered the fray.
- The arrival of American warships, indicate that the US’s presence may only serve to heighten tensions.

Source: Indian Express

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