Scarborough Shoal (Bajo de Masinloc)

Prelims: *Current events of national & International importance | World Geography*

Why in News?

Recent satellite imagery confirms China's deployment of floating barriers and a naval blockade at the entrance of Scarborough Shoal, escalating tensions in the South China Sea.

Scarborough Shoal

- **Feature** – It is a ***triangular-shaped coral atoll*** formed on an underwater volcanic mount.
- **Classification**– It is defined as a ***high-tide feature (not an island),*** consisting of a chain of reefs and rocks surrounding a central lagoon.
- With a shallow lagoon it is the largest atoll in the South China Sea, covering around 150 sq. km
- **Location** – Situated in the eastern South China Sea, it lies approximately 120 nautical miles (within the EEZ) west of Luzon, Philippines, and roughly 470 nautical miles from mainland China.
- **Nomenclature** – Locally known in the Philippines as Bajo de Masinloc and in China as Huangyan Island.

Territorial Claims

- **Philippines** – Claims sovereignty based on proximity and its position within its 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)***
- **China** – Claims the shoal as historical territory via the controversial **"Nine-Dash Line"** (often cited now as "historical rights").
- It is known as Huangyan Island (China) and Panatag Shoal / Bajo de Masinloc (Philippines)
- **Taiwan** – Maintains a claim similar to China's. Hence a disputed Area.
- **2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) Ruling** – The tribunal ruled that China's "historical rights" lacked legal basis and the blockade violated international law. However, China maintains **de facto control** since the 2012 standoff.

Strategic Concerns

- **Militarization** – China utilizes its Maritime Militia (armed fishing trawlers) and Coast Guard to maintain a persistent presence and install floating barriers.
- **Legal Pretext** – The establishment of a "national nature reserve" by China is viewed

as a precursor to permanent occupation and potential artificial island construction.
- **Defense Treaties** – The shoal is a critical flashpoint that could invoke the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty in the event of an armed attack on Philippine assets.

Socio-Economic Impact

- **Fisheries** – It is a traditionally rich fishing ground. The blockade has led to significant economic distress for Filipino fishing communities in provinces like Zambales.
- **Geopolitics** – Persistent blockades test the limits of the Manila-Washington alliance, especially during periods of global geopolitical distraction.

Reference

The Hindu| Scarborough Shoal

