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The Sea Disputes

Welcome delegates to the United Nations Environment Assembly of SharkMUN 2026.

In this committee, delegates will examine the growing environmental consequences of maritime and territorial disputes around the world. As competition over strategic waterways, natural resources, and exclusive economic zones intensifies, fragile marine ecosystems are increasingly threatened by militarization, overexploitation, pollution, and unsustainable extraction practices.

This topic combines environmental sustainability with geopolitics, international law, economic interests, and maritime security. Delegates must evaluate how international cooperation can prevent environmental degradation in contested waters while balancing sovereignty claims and resource competition.

The UNEA provides a platform for innovative environmental diplomacy and sustainable policymaking. Delegates are encouraged to develop practical, internationally cooperative solutions capable of protecting marine ecosystems amid rising geopolitical tensions.

Introduction

Maritime and territorial sea disputes have become increasingly significant in international relations due to the economic and strategic importance of oceans. States compete for control over shipping routes, fisheries, oil and gas reserves, rare minerals, and maritime trade corridors. However, these disputes also create serious environmental risks.

Contested waters frequently experience overfishing, oil spills, illegal extraction activities, naval militarization, and ecosystem destruction. The absence of clear jurisdiction often weakens



environmental regulation and enforcement, allowing marine biodiversity to suffer.

Several regions around the world have become major centers of maritime tension, including the South China Sea, the Arctic Ocean, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. In these areas, competing territorial claims have intensified resource extraction and military presence, increasing environmental vulnerability.

Climate change further complicates these disputes. Rising sea levels, melting Arctic ice, and shifting marine resources are altering traditional maritime boundaries and creating new competition over previously inaccessible areas.

International legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) attempt to regulate maritime claims and environmental responsibilities. However, enforcement remains difficult when geopolitical rivalries escalate.

The international community must therefore determine how environmental protection can be maintained in disputed maritime territories while reducing the risks of ecological collapse and international conflict.

Timeline of Key Environmental-Security Events

Year	Event
1982	UNCLOS was adopted, establishing EEZ and environmental obligations
2012	Arctic sea ice reaches record low; new shipping routes emerge.
2016	Permanent Court of Arbitration rules on South China Sea (Philippines v. China)



Year	Event
2020	Major oil spill near disputed waters in the Eastern Mediterranean
2021	Coral reef degradation in the Spratly Islands is linked to land reclamation.
2023	Illegal fishing vessels detected in 70% of contested EEZ areas
2024	Arctic Council reports accelerated biodiversity loss in polar waters.

Key terms

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

A maritime zone extending up to 200 nautical miles from a state's coastline in which the state has rights to exploit natural resources.

Maritime Dispute

A disagreement between states regarding maritime boundaries, territorial waters, or control over marine resources.

UNCLOS

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the primary international treaty governing maritime rights and responsibilities.

Marine Biodiversity

The variety of marine life and ecosystems found within oceans and coastal regions.



Current situation

Maritime disputes affect both environmental sustainability and global security. In contested waters, countries often prioritize strategic and economic interests over ecological preservation.

One of the most significant examples is the South China Sea, where competing claims by multiple countries have resulted in artificial island construction, coral reef destruction, overfishing, and increased naval activity. Environmental experts warn that ecosystem damage in the region could become irreversible.

The Arctic has also emerged as a growing area of competition. As climate change melts polar ice, new shipping routes and natural resource opportunities are becoming accessible. However, the Arctic ecosystem is highly fragile, and increased extraction activities threaten biodiversity and indigenous communities.

Oil and gas exploration in disputed waters presents additional environmental dangers. Offshore drilling accidents, chemical pollution, and habitat destruction may affect entire regions beyond national borders. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing is another major concern in maritime conflict zones. Weak enforcement mechanisms often enable the depletion of fish populations and the collapse of marine ecosystems.

International cooperation remains limited due to geopolitical rivalries and disagreements regarding sovereignty. Some countries prioritize military deterrence and resource control, while others emphasize environmental diplomacy and sustainable development.

UNEA must therefore examine how international environmental governance can function effectively in regions where political and territorial disputes continue unresolved.



Main Countries Involved

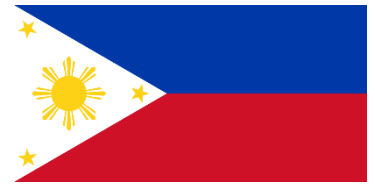
China

China plays a central role in South China Sea disputes and has expanded maritime infrastructure and military presence in contested waters.



Philippines

The Philippines has pursued international legal action regarding maritime disputes and advocates for maritime sovereignty and environmental protection.



Russia

Russia is heavily involved in Arctic maritime competition and resource extraction projects.



United States

The United States maintains strategic naval interests in multiple contested maritime regions and supports freedom of navigation operations.



Canada

Canada is involved in Arctic sovereignty discussions and environmental concerns related to polar resource development.





Additional Stakeholder Positions on Environmental Protection

Country/Entity	Position on Environment in Disputed Waters
Vietnam	Supports international monitoring of coral reefs; opposes Chinese reclamation
Norway	Advocates Arctic environmental protocols; balances resource extraction with conservation
Indonesia	Concerned about overfishing in disputed EEZs; seeks regional cooperation.
European Union	Promotes UNCLOS compliance; supports marine protected areas regardless of sovereignty claims.
Small Island States (e.g., Palau, Fiji)	Fear that great power disputes undermine marine conservation; demand climate-action linkage.

Previous attempts

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) established legal frameworks for maritime boundaries, navigation rights, and environmental obligations. International courts and tribunals have also issued rulings regarding territorial disputes and maritime claims. Regional organizations and environmental agreements have attempted to promote marine conservation and sustainable fishing practices. Some countries have signed bilateral agreements for joint resource management and environmental cooperation in disputed areas. However, enforcement mechanisms remain limited, especially when disputes involve major geopolitical powers unwilling to compromise territorial claims.



Possible solutions

- Strengthening international environmental monitoring in disputed maritime zones.
- Expanding marine protected areas under international supervision.
- Developing joint resource management agreements between rival states.
- Increasing international regulation of offshore drilling activities.
- Enhancing cooperation against illegal fishing operations.
- Creating UN-led environmental observation missions in contested waters.
- Promoting climate adaptation strategies for vulnerable marine ecosystems.
- Encouraging peaceful diplomatic negotiation under the UNCLOS framework.

Guiding Questions for Delegates

1. How can UNEA promote environmental protection without adjudicating sovereignty claims?
2. Should states operating in disputed waters face international environmental liability?
3. Can joint conservation measures serve as confidence-building steps toward dispute resolution?
4. How should climate change which alters maritime boundaries and resources, affect UNEA's approach?
5. What enforcement mechanisms are realistic when permanent Security Council members are dispute parties?
6. Do indigenous and local communities in disputed regions have a voice in UNEA deliberations?



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