

FAQs

Whitsun Reef

Why is it in News?

China's aggressive expansion in the South China Sea has found a new ground, **Whitsun Reef**, where 220 Chinese vessels are currently anchored under the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

What is Whitsun Reef and where is it located?

- Whitsun Reef is a reef at the northeast extreme limit of the Union Banks in the Spratly Islands of the West Philippine Sea.
- It is the largest reef of the Union Banks.
- The reef is V-shaped with an area of about 10 sq. km.
- Until at least the 1990s it was submerged most of the time and was visible above the water only during the low tide, at other times the reef could be detected due to the pattern of breaking waves.
- At the end of the 20th-century small sand dunes had developed on the reef making a territorial claim possible.
- The development of the dunes could have occurred naturally, but the rumours had it that the island was being built up by Vietnam and China.



FAQs

What is the Territorial dispute?

- As of 2016, the reef was unclaimed, However, due to the reef's strategic importance, it was expected that the reef would be occupied "soon".
- On March 2021, about 220 Chinese fishing ships were moored at the reef ostensibly taking shelter due to the sea conditions.

Why is the Philippines concerned?

- The Philippines considers the reef to be a part of its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf and protested the Chinese presence.
- Currently, Philippine military aircraft and navy are monitoring the situation daily, and China has been warned that there will be an increased military presence to conduct 'sovereignty patrols'.
- If China is successful with its moves, the Philippines may lose another fishing ground, similar to what happened in 2012 when China took control of Scarborough Shoal.

What is the larger dispute?

- China and the Philippines, along with other Southeast Asian countries, have long been part of disputes over sovereign claims over the region's islands, reefs and seabeds.
- A third of the world's maritime trade travels through the South China Sea annually.
- The seabeds here are believed to be reserves of oil and natural gas while being home to fisheries essential for the food security of millions in South Asia.
- The majority of the disputes concern the lack of adherence to the international 'Exclusive Economic Zones' which stretch up to 200 nautical miles from the coast of any state.
- China, especially, has been notorious for disregarding the law on various occasions.

What does China have to say?

- On the present matter, the Chinese have reiterated that the vessels are mere fishing boats seeking shelter from unruly weather, though no bad weather has been reported in the area.
- It is also unlikely that fishermen would have the financial capital to remain stationary for weeks on end.

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- Experts say through their present occupation, China might be looking to create a civilian base on the reef, an artificial island or even just control the airspace.
- It is widely assessed that Philippines's soft approach has further strengthened China's ambitions in the South China Sea.

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