SOUTH CHINA SEA
fingers in the cookie jar

**Basic statistics**

**Spratlys**

**Area:** less than 5 sq km; includes 100 or so islets, coral reefs, and sea mounts scattered over an area of nearly 410,000 sq km of the central South China Sea.

**Climate:** tropical

**Terrain:** flat

**Natural resources:** fish, guano, undetermined oil and natural gas potential

**Natural hazards:** typhoons; serious maritime hazard because of numerous reefs and shoals no indigenous inhabitants note - there are scattered garrisons.

---

**Issue**

Two island chains in the South China Sea have been at the heart of several political disputes between various countries in the region. Just who do these pieces of 'rock' in the middle of the ocean belong to and why do they matter so much?

The Spratlys and the Paracels are two island chains in the South China Sea. Many of the islands in these chains are literally pieces of rock exposed only during low tide. China, together with several Southeast Asian countries, claim ownership of these islands even though they may be hundreds of kilometres away from the mainland.

This is because these islands represent the following natural resources.

- **Oil and gas reserves** — Much of the area still remains unexplored and the true size of the oil and gas reserves around these islands is yet to be accurately determined. However, if the oil traps do exist, they are relatively accessible even though they are underwater. This is because at least 10 300 sq km of seabed is in shallow water, less than 200 m deep.

- **Fisheries** — the area around the islands is teeming with marine life, attracted by the shallow water, bright sunlight and coral reefs.

- **Guano** — seabirds are attracted to the marine life around the islands. Droppings from the birds is known as guano and it is a very effective fertiliser.

- **Strategic geographic location** — during the World War II, Japan used one of the largest islands, Taiping, as a submarine base to launch attacks on the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaya. Today, the islands lie on the paths of major international shipping lanes. For instance, giant tankers carrying more than 70% of Japan's imports of oil, cruise close to the islands, and as much as a quarter of the world's total trade in goods and raw materials pass through the shipping lanes too.

The Paracels are a group of low coral atolls. Their ownership has changed hands several times in the 20th century. From 1932 till the start of the World War II, the islands were part of French Indochina. The Japanese occupied the islands during the World War II. Since the end of the war, China has been occupying the islands. These islands are also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam.
The Spratlys have also seen a colourful history out of all proportion to their physical size. An estimation between 35 to 100 small reefs are spread over an area of about 190 000 sq km in size.

All the Spratlys islands are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Indeed, China and Taiwan claim all features in the Spratlys above and below sea level. China has placed markers on as many as ten of the reefs. As for Taiwan, it occupies the island of Taiping. Vietnam claims everything above sea level in the Spratly chain. It has outposts on about 25 reefs.

In addition, some of the Spratlys are also claimed by Malaysia and the Philippines. Malaysia claims about seven islands within a continental shelf line defined in 1979. It occupies three of those islands. The Philippines occupies eight islands, which it calls the Kalayaan (‘freedom land’) region. Part of the Kalayaan region includes the Louisa Reef, which lies within an Exclusive Economic Zone established by Brunei since 1984.

Given all these competing claims, it should come as no surprise that at one time or another, the navies of China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines have skirmishes with one another.

One of the most well-known of the reefs in the Spratlys chain is the Mischief Reef. In 1995, China built several three-storey concrete buildings on this reef. This angered the Philippines which removed the Chinese markers from the reef immediately and brought journalists to the reef to observe the actions of the Chinese. On its part, China claimed that it was only repairing fishing shelters which were damaged from storms.

**Points for discussion and further research – lessons for Singapore**

1. Why do you think the Chinese chose to start building new structures on Mischief Reef in 1998?
2. What other major events were happening in the region at that time?