

Nine Dash Line: Deciphering the South China Sea Conundrum (Pooja Bhatt)

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Nine Dash Line by Dr. Pooja Bhatt serves a valuable starting point for understanding the ongoing contestation in the region. For example, while China has increased its coast guard patrols, artificial island constructions, and naval buildups in support of its territorial claims, Southeast Asian nations have also bolstered their own capabilities in the same disputed regions (Schochet, 2025).²

Claims of the use of poisons like cyanide in disputed maritime zones point to the broadening nature of the dispute in non-military forms such as environmental and resource issues (Reuters, 2026)³. At the same time, the dispute has gained an international dimension. Examples of international joint military exercises include the U.S.-led Balikatan military exercises with countries like Japan and Australia (Reuters, 2026)⁴. The dashes of the line, as the author points out of landforms and marine resources of this geopolitical puzzle is an attempt to provide a succinct understanding of the claim in the South China Sea. The issue with this region is a combination of historical truth of Beijing's threat to have a geographical rival.

The author uses different methods of study to understand Chinese viewpoint of seeking dominance of its sea-lanes. The book consists of the eight chapters; each chapter deals with the problem from the different angle. These chapters can be considered as the different tentacles of the octopus-each acting as an organ for the development of the Chinese position. As the book argues, the concealed strategic importance is on the natural resources in the region. The future is all about resources, especially oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) the potential reserves is a core issue of divergence and hits out strategic motives.

The book has dwelt on the evolution from a historical check which explains how the concept of 11-dash line came into existence. It is all vividly explained right at the first chapter itself by addressing the 2016 Permanent Court of arbitration's decision over the China-Philippines case as an example of the "Rise of China." A closer look reveals the dispute mechanisms from the very beginning, including issue of claims based on old maps, use of tactics such as artificial island creation, 'grey-zone' operations of the Chinese maritime forces, and Lawfare among its

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² Schochet, N. (2025, December 31). The Philippines should shore up ASEAN's undersea security. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2026/01/01/the-philippines-should-shore-up-aseans-undersea-security/>

³ Reuters. (2026, April 13). Philippines warns of "sabotage" after cyanide seizure in disputed South China Sea atoll. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-warns-sabotage-after-cyanide-seizure-disputed-south-china-sea-atoll-2026-04-13/>

⁴ Corrales, N. (2026, April 20). Philippines, US and allies start military exercises testing "real-world" readiness. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-us-allies-start-military-exercises-testing-realworld-readiness-2026-04-20/>

ideological rivals from the US to Philippines and Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia. This sheds light on the 'historic rights' over nearly 80% of the SCS, rejecting the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling which was in favour of the Philippines, and highlights China's militarization of disputed islands and its grand strategic ambition to become a maritime superpower by 2050 with the NDL as a centrepiece (U.S. Department of State, 2022; Permanent Court of Arbitration [PCA], 2016)⁵.

International politics are always multi-layered and thus any prediction does not stick well, such is the case, which is highlighted by China's use of lawfare, gunboat diplomacy, and sea denial as Chinese aspiration towards the U-SHAPED LINE. There is a broad emphasis on creating the South China Sea as a "proxy" for China to expand its military capabilities, it hints at the development that maritime clashes have become an arena for domination and regional influence. It is perhaps more plausible to see the initial chapters not as a premonition of what is to come, but as a mentality in Chinese policy of this era. This view is further reinforced by the historical map which is primary evidence for overlooking the layout of Chinese maritime policy, it reverberates China's dream approach. The region is an extensively justified area which serves as a litmus test for the many misuses of international law by China. Dr. Bhatt once again confirms the established habit of the Chinese government giving lenient treatment to bilateral relations with its neighbours. This book is aimed at updating the game for a more egalitarian age which continues to resonate even today. The driving force behind the strength lies in the chapter on security dynamics as it deals having an effective secure strategy with a combination of culture, lawfare and domination.

At a spotlight, *Nine Dash Line* reflects the event that truly transformed traditional geopolitics and shifted the conversation with the debate of hybrid warfare and lawfare. The book's strength lies in its ability to synthesize these complex elements into a clear narrative in a simple language that usually lacks in great works. However, the book could say more about the role of non-state actors like maritime NGOs and fishing communities. Their stories would add real-life examples. Private companies that can affect power in these waters should also get more focus. Some parts need updates to show changes after Covid. While the book does a good job explaining the complicated Nine Dash Line argument, it offers very few solutions to the problems it talks about. The detailed way of explaining is helpful for understanding, but it is not enough to provide clear actions against China's growing grey-zone operations.

To summarise, Dr. Pooja Bhatt's "Nine Dash Line" is a very well documented narration of one of the most debated issues in International Law. The book tries to give readers a stepping stone for the anyone who is interested in South China Sea region. The book will influence security thinking for years to come in the military, diplomatic, maritime sectors, as well as the environment.

Rating: 4/5 ★ ★ ★ ★

⁵ https://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol_XXXIII/153-617.pdf