

DiploMatrix: A case study.

Comparative analysis of the China-Philippines and China-Vietnam pairs

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1 - DiploMatrix – Analysis of China-Philippines tensions 2015-2024

Summary

DiploMatrix ranks the Philippines in the top 10 countries with the highest tensions with China. The indicator rose from 0.6 to 1.3 during 2023, reflecting a significant increase in tensions. Note that the index highlights a rise in tensions classified as “verbal” but remains stable regarding their “material” expression as defined by the methodology.

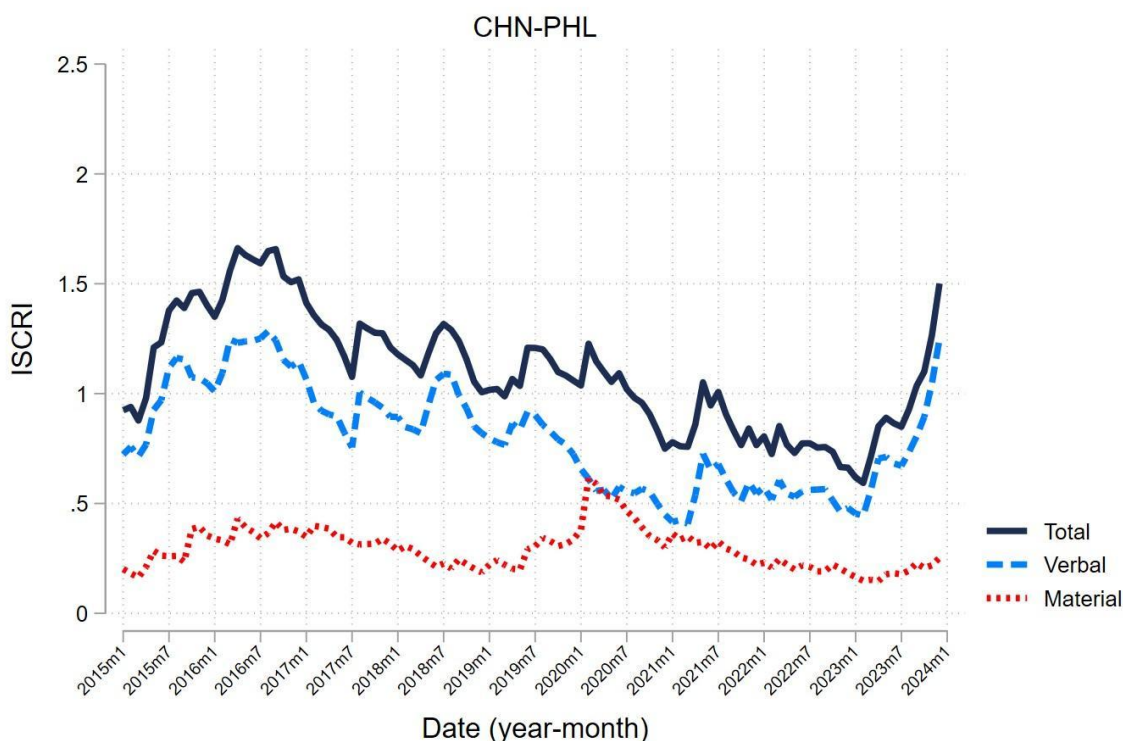


Fig. 1: DiploMatrix China-Philippines graph: Variation in tension indices 2015-2024

In the Philippines, a political context now more favorable to the United States.

- Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines from 2016 to 2022, maintained a relatively pro-Chinese position throughout his mandate, the objective of which was to obtain benefits for his own economy from his neighbor who had become an economic giant. This more favorable attitude towards China was also strengthened as the bilateral relationship with the United States deteriorated at the same time due in part to the reproaches of the American administration concerning the drastic police

practices implemented by the Philippines president to address the drug problem in his country.

- The arrival to power of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in June 2022, son of the eponymous dictator, was not a priori expected to bring major change for its relations with China.
- But the year 2023 finally demonstrated a notable evolution. After more than ten years without an official visit, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. went to the United States in May 2023, to meet American President Biden, underlining his desire to begin a rapprochement in the face of assertiveness increasingly characterized in the South China Sea in areas disputed by the two nations, some clearly within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- The Philippines have also decided to document through visual testimony (invitation of foreign journalists, video recordings, etc.) and to systematically make known and publicize without censorship the slightest incident occurring at sea with Chinese vessels, whether they emanate from coastguards, maritime militias or fishing boats, an unusual highlighting practice among ASEAN partners and a priori contrary to the "code of conduct" currently being negotiated between ASEAN and China.
- In defiance of complaints raised by the Philippines as early as 2013, and without regard for some of the most remarkable coral reefs in the South China Sea, China has indeed dredged huge areas of coral reefs and poured foundations for landing strips for wide-body aircraft as is the case on the Fiery Cross reef in the Spratly archipelago, claimed by the Philippines.
- It is recalled that in 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague (PCA) disavowed China in favor of the Philippines regarding China's alleged historical rights over most of the waters of the South China Sea, an unrecognized disavowal by China but which the new Philippines' administration of Marcos Jr. seems determined to exploit to the best of its interests.
- We also recall that in 2014 the United States and the Philippines signed a military cooperation agreement, known by its acronym EDCA ("Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement"), initially giving the United States access to five military bases located on the territory. And in February 2023, the Philippines strengthened this agreement by adding four additional such bases. These new bases are in the north of the Philippines - one is close to Taiwan - as well as in Palawan, in the immediate vicinity of the South China Sea and the Spratly archipelago, which would tend to show a desire to create a lasting American presence near maritime areas considered strategic.
- The last of the "Balikatan" military exercises, which took place from April 11 to 28, 2023, and aimed to make the US and Philippines armed forces work together, took on an unusual intensity. It brought together more than 17,000 soldiers; a clear increase compared to the previous year (only 9,000 soldiers involved). The objectives were multiple, but notably aimed to work on cooperation and interoperability of the armed forces.

Recurring tensions.

In this context of rapprochement with the United States, tensions were particularly significant in 2023 in the South China Sea, an area renowned as much for its fishing and oil resources

as for its strategic commercial dimension (this maritime route transits around a third of the international trade flows).

- In August 2023, an incident occurred around the “Second Thomas Shoal” (fig.4), after the use of water cannons against Philippines’ ships coming to resupply the BRP ship Sierra Madre, deliberately beached in 1999 by the Philippines military in order to maintain control over the atoll. This incident led to the summoning of the Chinese ambassador to the Philippines.
- More generally, the Spratly archipelago, where the “Second Thomas Shoal” is located as well as a series of other islets, is the subject of particular attention and military occupation attempts from several neighboring countries (Vietnam, Malaysia, China, etc.). This zone is in principle located within the Philippines' EEZ (fig. 5) but also within the maritime space claimed by China, delimited by the contentious so-called “nine lines” line, extended in 2023 with a tenth line, intended to completely encompass the island of Taiwan.
- In December 2023, the Philippines and Chinese governments blamed each other for two boat collisions in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Water cannon fire was also reported further north near the Scarborough Reef, another area of high tension between the two states.

These various events highlight the strong tensions persisting in the South China Sea despite the settlement in favor of the Philippines issued by the Hague arbitration court in 2016, a judgment which was not recognized by Beijing.

How does the year 2024, year of the Dragon, look?

Whether on territorial issues or on environmental questions, the start of the year 2024 seems to be in continuity with 2023:

- Following the Taiwanese presidential elections on January 13, 2024, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. sent his congratulations to President-elect Lai Ching-te (William Lai) of the DPP, specifying that he wanted to increase collaboration with Taiwan, this which earned him a call to order from the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recalling that it was a serious violation of the principle of one China and a significant interference in Chinese interior politics. In this context, the Philippines reiterated its commitment to the “One China” principle.
- This was followed by bilateral exchanges between the respective ministries of foreign affairs which highlighted last January the need to improve maritime communication and the management of conflicts at sea to prevent any minor incident from escalating.
- But at the end of February 2024, satellite images made public revealed that China had positioned floating barriers off the Scarborough Reef, inside the Philippines' EEZ, with the aim of denying access to Filipino fishermen. Manila also accused Beijing of using cyanide which destroys flora and fauna (for environmental protection considerations, the use of cyanide, used to stun fish, was banned worldwide in sea fishing in 1998), these assertions being denied by China.

Conclusion:

While the Philippines' administration continues to play a balancing act between Beijing and Washington, the coming to power of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has resulted in increased assertiveness on the part of the Philippines towards China. The causes of friction being what they are and expected to persist, the first elements observed in 2024 do not allow to envisage a reduction in tensions in the short or medium term.

The unfolding of these events over the years analyzed is well recorded by the variations of the "DiploMatrix" index: first a regular decrease in tensions under the Duterte era from 2016 to 2022, followed by their sudden increase since mid-2022 with Marcos Jr. coming to power and Chinese fears of an increased US military presence in the South China Sea under the guise of "freedom of navigation".

Until now, tensions have manifested themselves in "verbal" rather than "material" form, it being admitted that the use of water cannons is not one of the forms of tension classified as "material" by the methodology.

2 - DiploMatrix - Analysis of China-Vietnam tensions 2015-2024

Summary: Unlike the deterioration of China-Philippines relations illustrated by the "DiploMatrix" tool (previous chapter), it is a certain "graphic" stability or even relative calm that can be observed between China and Vietnam during the same period of analysis (2015-2024), a situation which could be surprising given the significant disputed areas between the two countries. Areas which also have the characteristic of being both subjects of "simple" territorial sovereignty (as for the Philippines) and subjects with a strong economic impact since they notably involve the control of potential oil resources, without forgetting the competition for the exploitation of fishery resources around the Paracel Islands for example.

The index also shows that the recent rise in bilateral tensions is expressed more in a "material" way than on a "verbal" way, which is consistent with the particular mode of resolution of these relations between the two states.

How can we explain these differences in behavior and this relative calm in the external expression of the relationship which is a priori fundamentally conflictual in nature and what does this say about the two types of bilateral relations?

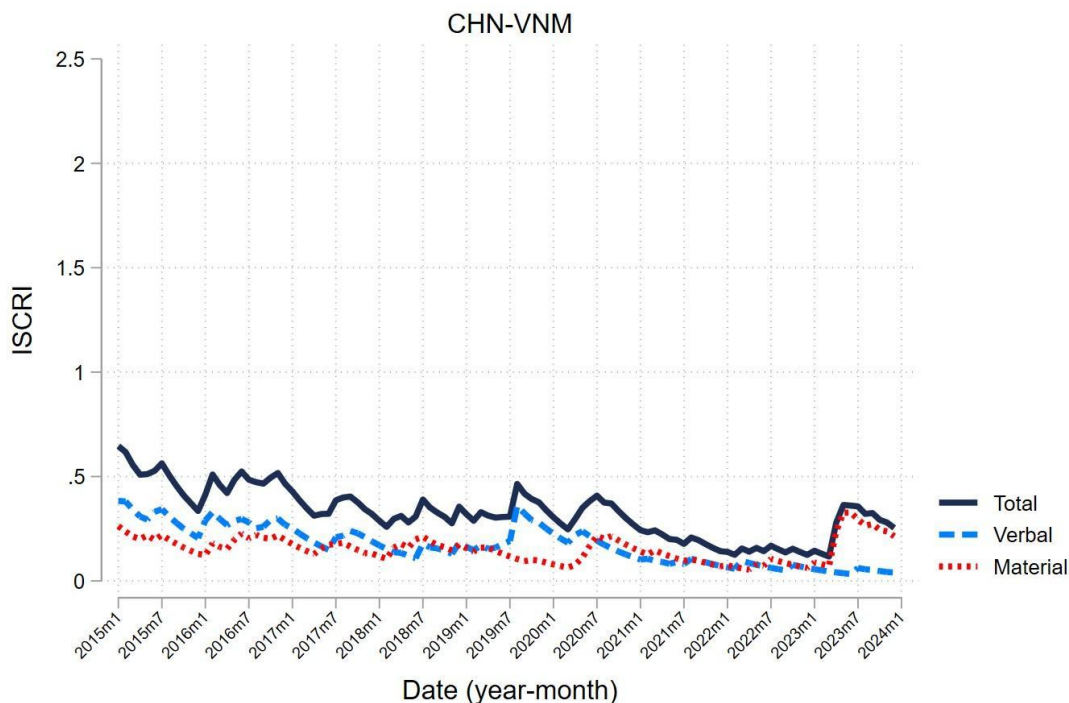


Fig. 2: DiploMatrix China-Vietnam graph: Variation in tension indices 2015-2024

China and Vietnam: similar political systems and “brother” communist parties.

Unlike the China-Philippines relationship, the China-Vietnam relationship and its disagreements are managed directly and not through the media and public declarations. This mode of management is undoubtedly at least partially a reflection of the political structural proximity of the two states, where single parties of communist essence are installed in power and driven by the assurance of their sustainability.

It should also be noted that China is more tolerant with the Vietnamese authorities today than it is with the Philippines even if actions on the ground, when they take place, are marked by the same firmness, especially obvious since the major development over the last decade of the capabilities of the Chinese navy, its coast guard fleet and its deep-sea militia flotilla, which have given it a superiority on the sea.

Historically, it is worth remembering that 1979¹ saw the outbreak of an extremely violent land border conflict – known as the 3rd Indochinese War – which, despite its brevity, caused considerable losses on both sides.

Since 1979, a relative calm at the military level has been established between the two countries, but one must keep in mind the armed skirmishes in the Spratly Islands in 1988, an episode which once again almost went wrong. It will also be recalled for history that Vietnam had lost control of the Paracel Islands (Xisha) in 1974 (at the time under the control of South Vietnam), a year before the victory of North Vietnam. This area remains an area of major friction and sensitivity for Vietnam.

The on-going Vietnam-United States rapprochement is (closely) monitored by Chinese authorities.

The CCP never misses an opportunity to highlight the community of thought and destiny between the two fraternal parties and the two neighboring states, a communication theme which has grown in recent months.

Responding to the increasingly pressing demands for development of its population, Vietnam has however begun a process of rapprochement with the United States, a process which inevitably leads it to move away from too deep a strategic proximity with its cumbersome neighbor.

If it remains slow, the process of strategic political reorientation towards the United States is therefore undoubtedly designed to be here for the long-term, without reaching the level of proximity between the Philippines and the United States.

This rapprochement is motivated by the authorities' desire to develop the economy without increasing dependencies on China while benefiting (through the process of "near-shoring" or "China+1") from the withdrawal from China and the relocation of certain American and Taiwanese companies, and undoubtedly to protect itself in the longer term from renewed territorial ambitions of its neighbor.

In fact, the limits defined by the Chinese line of the “ten strokes” in the Vietnamese sector cut off almost the entire continental slope and deep Vietnamese seabed (fig. 3 and 5), areas which are potentially rich in oil resources as illustrated by the exploitations in place on the perimeter of the South China Sea (Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia).

Fundamentally, however, the two ruling parties in Vietnam and China share the same concepts of political governance.

¹ **The Sino-Vietnamese War was a border conflict between Vietnam and the People's Republic of China from February 17 to March 16, 1979 :**

- **Casus belli** : The occupation of Cambodia by the Vietnamese People's Army with the aim of putting an end to the bloody reign of the Khmer Rouge, who were supported by China.
- **End of the conflict** : Vietnamese tactical victory. China withdrew from occupied border towns, but Vietnam maintained occupation of Cambodia until 1989. Land border conflicts between China and Vietnam persisted until 1990 .
- This conflict is also part of the process of Sino-Soviet rupture, communist Vietnam being supported by the Soviet Union.

Like the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) draws its legitimacy from its ability to maintain social stability and increase the prosperity of its population.

In recent years, Vietnam has benefited from hefty growth rates (8% in 2022, the best in 25 years), thanks to the rise in foreign investments, growth in exports and manufacturing as well as a good level of household consumption.

Barely three months after Joe Biden's visit to Vietnam, Chinese President Xi visited Hanoi in December 2023, returning the visit that the VCP General Secretary made to Beijing in October 2022. He met his counterpart there Nguyen Phu Trong, reaffirming the community of destiny of the two nations and China's desire to increase the scope of the existing comprehensive strategic partnership agreement (which is at the same level as the one in place with the United States).

The subject of maritime territorial disputes, a sensitive subject, was conveniently put in the background during this visit, which concluded with a declaration of good intentions, and the priority placed on systematically seeking solutions of mutual benefit.

Conclusion:

It should be noted that the rise in the index from a low average base at 0.2 to 0.4 in the 2nd half of 2023 seems to correspond well to the renewed diplomatic activity and Sino-Vietnamese bilateral visits during this period, a renewed itself generated in immediate reaction to an American-Vietnamese rapprochement. The low level of "verbal" expression of these tensions is interpreted as being specific to the communication model chosen by mutual agreement by the two communist parties which lead the two nations and favor discreet dialogue over public confrontation.

ANNEX: South China Sea - Toponymic and contextual explanations

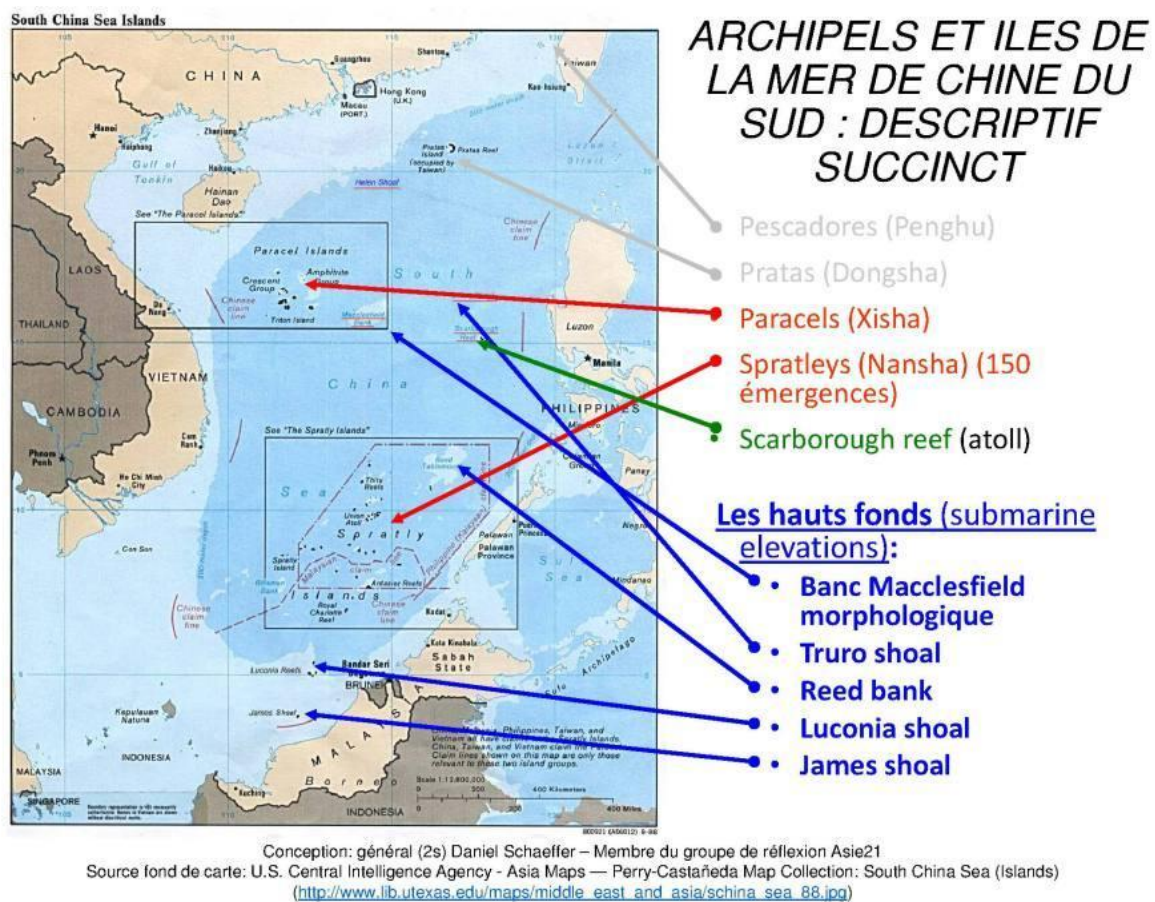


Fig. 3: simplified bathymetry of the South China Sea and main regional toponymic designations

The South China Sea, also called the South China Sea, is a sea bordering the Pacific Ocean. It covers an area of approximately 3,500,000 km² and is surrounded by several states (fig.3 and 5, schematic map of the seabed and territorial claims in the South China Sea):

The disputed islands and archipelagos include:

- the Spratly Islands: claimed in whole or in part by the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia
- the Paracel Islands: Also at the heart of the territorial conflict
- Pratas Island, Scarborough Reef and Macclesfield Bank
- the "Second Thomas" atoll (fig. 4)



Fig.4: Location of the Second Thomas Atoll off the Philippines' island of Palawan

These islands are of volcano-coral origin and, although originally uninhabited, some are now militarily occupied. An intense land reclamation activity followed by militarization has been undertaken by China over the last two decades while at the same time the latter asked its neighbors not to carry out such operations.

The challenges are multiple, ranging from the control of strategic positions in the middle of international maritime routes, to the control of potentially oil-producing territories or fishing areas.

Sovereignty claims are therefore complex and have been made confusing by the lack of a permanent military or historical civilian presence, a situation which nowadays makes the question of defining regional territorial sovereignties complex.

Note that each country has its own name for this maritime area: China calls it the "South China Sea", Vietnam the "East Sea", and the Philippines the "West Philippine Sea".

Tensions are endemic there, with sovereignty over these areas remaining a subject of international dispute whose resolution does not seem possible in the short or medium term given the acquired military positions and the aggressive declarations of the neighboring state apparatuses as well as the non-compliance by China with the zoning rules defined by United Nations Declaration of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS fig. 5 and 6).

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China and Taiwan Malaysia Vietnam Brunei Philippines

Fig.5: Interferences and superposition of claim zones of riparian countries.

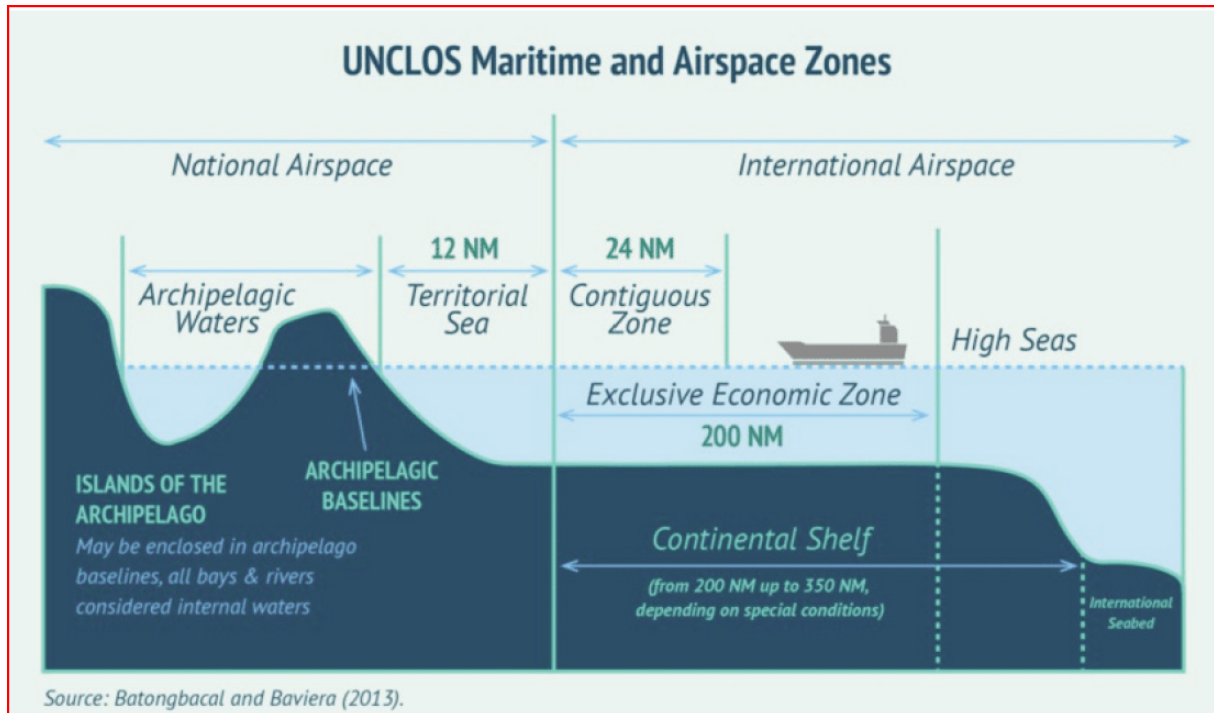


Fig.6: Definition of maritime and air sovereignty zones according to UNCLOS