What is Geopolitics? A Case Study in the South China Sea

Tyler Whitney

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The South China is a large, hotly contested area of water surrounded by Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and southern China. The possibility of war, or something close to it, in the South China Sea shows how geopolitics is the struggle over the control of geographical entities, (specifically in this case, territory), and using them to get what you want. Using this article, let’s learn how geopolitics helps us understand why countries are even bothering to compete for the South China Sea in the first place.

China, like any country, wants to be more secure and more prosperous. Since certain parts of the world can provide both resources and strategic advantages, having (and getting) territory is a sure way to obtain more wealth and more security. For example, the South China Sea offers China control of a busy sea lane, oil reserves, fishing, and a convenient space to build islands to use as military bases. International courts have ruled against China’s claim to this entire territory, but that hasn’t kept the government from asserting ownership over it and taking control. In this January 2018 Reuters article, you can read about how the Chinese navy claimed to chase the USS Hopper, on a routine patrol, away from the contested territory, even though the ship didn’t actually trespass according to international standards. It turns out this was a geopolitical action. By appearing as if they chased a US ship out of the territory, China hopes that it looks like an admission by the US that the territory, and all its benefits, belongs to China. What appears to be an incident between two warships is actually China’s struggle over control of a piece of territory to get what it wants. This local dust-up is happening in an international dimension, so because of geopolitics, these seemingly small, isolated incidents may have an impact on the entire world.

The engine of geopolitics is power, or the tools that countries and other international actors use to compete for and hold territory. China uses material power to control the South China Sea, such as warships and occupying man-made islands, but the way the warships interact, (chasing each other), is an example of relational power. Trying to gain power by controlling territory requires material power like warships, and success or failure depends upon how the one set of warships interact with another.