# Political Change in the Modern World

The present-day layout of the world's political map is a product of humanities endless geopolitical accommodations and adjustments. A mosaic of more than 200 states and territories separated by boundaries makes the world looks like a jigsaw puzzle. **Human territoriality** refers to a country's (or more local community's) sense of property and attachment toward its territory, expressed by its determination to keep it inviolable and defended.

Territorial Morphology
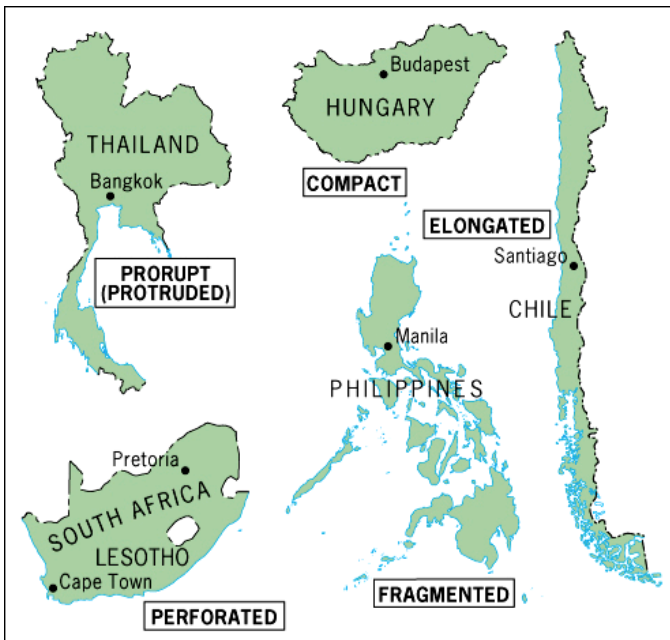
No state can exist without territory, although the United Nations does recognize the Kurds, Basques, Palestinians, and Cherokees as stateless nations. Within the states' territory lie the resources that make up the state. The territorial character of states has long interested geographers, who have focused on **territorial morphology** – or the shapes of states. The borders of a state that is **compact** are approximately equidistant from its geometric center, meaning it is relatively square-shaped or circular. While these states do tend to be smaller, they tend to also be more cohesive, with stronger **centripetal forces**, since travel is easier and there are no significant areas away from the heartland of the state. **Elongated** (or **attenuated**) states are at least twice as long as they are wide, such as Chile, Nepal, or the Gambia. Those living in the ends of the country may feel more isolated, leading to more **centrifugal forces** and devolutionary movements. Increased regionalism, sectionalism, or tribalism is more likely to occur in outlying sections of any state.

Fragmented countries, such as the Philippines or Indonesia, are in multiple pieces unattached from each other. An interesting type of territorial irregularity occurs where historic circumstances have led to the existence of small outliers of territory separated from the state by the territory of another state. These **exclaves** can often lie on coasts (e.g., Alaska, United States or Cabinda, Angola). Communication and transportation between the separated areas – which are often islands – may be cumbersome and detrimental to national identity.

A **perforated** country has an entire state completely inside its borders. The only two perforated states in the world are South Africa (by Lesotho) and Italy (by the Vatican City & San Marino). A country inside another country is an **enclave**. Enclaves are always **landlocked** countries, and any exports or imports must go through another country. Landlocked states are at a political and economic disadvantage, since they must always work to maintain good relations with their neighbors, sometimes putting their own interests aside. Also, tariffs and customs duties are often associated with transportation, raising the cost of products going into and out of landlocked states. As such, these countries are part of a UN group called the Geographically Disadvantaged States.

An **ethnic enclave** is a minority culture group concentrated inside a country that is dominated by different, larger nationality. This could be relatively small, as in the case of Little Havana in Miami, or it could occupy a large area, as in the case of Quebec in Canada. Nagorno-Karabakh (shown below) is an exclave of Armenia, lying totally within Azerbaijan. Nakhichevan is an exclave of Azerbaijan separated by Armenian territory. But this territory is not an enclave, as it has borders on Armenia to the north and Iran to the south.

A **prorupted** country, such as Thailand or India, has a **protrusion** extending from its main area. Proruptions were often drawn by colonizers to access raw materials through water transport, which may offer these states suitable access today. However, these outlying territories are often fiercely fought over, and are prime location for devolutionary pressures.

Boundaries

The territories of individual states are separated by international boundaries that mark the limits of national jurisdiction. Boundaries may appear on maps as straight lines or twist and turn to conform to physical or hydrologic features. A **boundary** between states is actually a vertical plane that cuts through the rocks below (called the subsoil in legal papers) and the airspace above — defined by the atmosphere above a states land area as marked by its boundaries, as well as what lies at higher altitude. Today, borders even extend into outer space.

Boundaries evolve through three possible stages. First, a legal document or treaty is drawn up to specify actual points in the landscape. This typifies the **definition** process. Next, cartographers put the boundary on the map in a process called **delimitation**. If either or both of the states so desire, the boundary is actually marked on the ground with a wall, fence, posts, etc. That final stage is the **demarcation** of the boundary, and is usually very expensive. Most boundaries around the world are not demarcated. After the border is established, the state must administer it, which can be dealt with in a number of ways.

Types of Boundaries

Political geographers use the term **geometric boundary** to identify straight-line boundaries or arcs such as that between the United States and Canada wet of the Great Lakes. The colonial powers of Europe made extensive use of such boundaries in Africa, the region with the most landlocked countries. Certain boundaries conform to physiographic features in the landscape (e.g., rivers (Rio Grande: US/Mexico; Pyrenees: Spain/France). These are referred to as **physical-political**, or sometimes **natural-political** boundaries. **Cultural-political** boundaries are those that mark breaks in the human landscape. For example, when the communist planners laid out their grand designs for the USSR, they tried to create a patchwork of nationalities. The boundary between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan was one result of this.

Origin-Based Classification

Another way to view boundaries has to do with their evolution or genesis. The boundary between Malaysia and Indonesia [A] on the island of Borneo is an **antecedent** boundary type. Most of this boundary passes through sparsely inhabited tropical rainforest, and the natural break preceded the "national" break in population. A second category evolved as the cultural landscape of an area took shape. These **subsequent** boundaries are exemplified by the border between Vietnam and China [B], the result of a long-term process of adjustment and modification. Some boundaries are forcibly drawn across a unified cultural landscape. Such a **superimposed** boundary exists in the center of the island of New Guinea and separates Indonesia's West Papua from the country of Papua New Guinea [C]. One only has to look at the continent of Africa to realize it is inundated with borders superimposed by the European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The fourth genetic boundary type is the **relict** (or **relic**) boundary – a border that has ceased to function, but whose imprints are still evident on the cultural landscape. The boundary between former North and South Vietnam [D] is a classic example. Another example would be the relict boundary between East and West Berlin. After billions of dollars and marks invested over the years, the eastern sector still lags behind in development as compared to the west.

GENETIC POLITICAL BOUNDARY TYPES

(A) ANTECEDENT

(B) SUBSEQUENT

(C) SUPERIMPOSED

(D) RELICT

Describing Boundary Disputes

When boundaries were established, the resources below the surface were much less well known than they are today. Many mineral deposits extend from one country to another, provoking arguments about ownership and use. This includes everything from coal deposits and petroleum reserves to groundwater supplies (aquifers). Since aircraft had not yet been invented, little attention was paid to the control of the air above — an issue that is of considerably greater importance today. The control of airline traffic over states' territory may someday be extended to satellite orbits and air circulates from one airspace to another carrying pollutants of one state across the vertical plane to another state. These issues may cause problems, and these disputes come in four flavors: definitional, locational, operational, and allocational.

Definitional boundary disputes focus on the legal language of a boundary agreement. For example, the median line of a river may mark the boundary. This would prove to be difficult to establish if the valley was asymmetrical, since the water levels may vary depending on the time of year.

Locational boundary disputes center on the delimitation and possibly the demarcation of the border. The definition is not in dispute, the interpretation is. Sometimes the language of the agreement allows mapmakers to delimit boundaries in various ways. For example, the colonial powers specified the international borders of Africa very carefully, but did not strictly define internal administrative borders. Problems arose when independent states arose out of those internal divisions.

Operational boundary disputes involve neighbors who differ over the way the boundary should function (migration, smuggling). In areas where nomadic lifestyles still prevail, the movement of people and their livestock across international borders can cause problems. One particular conflict deals with the border between Mexico and the United States. The Mexican government would like to see restrictions placed on immigration eased while there exists disputes even among American senators and congressmen concerning the flow of labor from the south.

Allocational boundary disputes exist over rights to natural resources (gas, oil, water). The Netherlands and Germany have issues over rights to natural gas, while Iraq and Kuwait have had issues over oil. One of the key issues preventing the establishment of an independent Palestine is the fact that vital sources of fresh water for Israel are found in the West Bank. In fact, many experts predict that future conflicts are likely to arise out of the desire to access and protect fresh water sources as population pressure increases.

Examples of Boundary Disputes

The end of the Cold War in 1991 also brought an end of an age of ideology, in which the world was influenced by the geopolitical clash between the capitalist US, and the communist USSR. Modern theorists hypothesize what may affect the world the most today, and into the future. Several influences include the effects of economics, nationalities, religions, resources, as well as international agreements and organizations. However, territories, and the relative locations of those territories will remain of paramount importance.

The meaning of the term **"frontier"** has been debated, however, it generally connotes an area where borders are shifting and weak, and where peoples of different cultures or nationalities lay claim to the same area. Frontiers tend to come in the forms of territorial "cushions" like swamplands, impenetrable forests, wide deserts, mountain ranges, or river basins. The Amazon Basin (bordering between Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela) is a good example. A boundary dispute in the Amazon between Brazil and Ecuador wasn't resolved until 1998, when GPS technology finally helped bring the dispute to a close. Antarctica (with territory claimed by seven countries) is another example of a frontier that may prove to be more contested in the future. If valuable resources – such as oil and natural gas - can be exploited, the sometimes-overlapping claims could become hotly contested. Other important and highly contested frontiers, the world's oceans, cause massive confusion and disputes.

Buffer zones and states have also existed that lie between two other states but remain neutral in the conflict between them. Mongolia has historically acted as a territorial cushion that kept the rivals of Russia and China apart. Even though they were both communist during the time of the Cold War, each followed their own ideological path, leading to tensions. Even today, armies are still placed on the borders of the two countries. Other buffer zones have included demilitarized zones, such as the Rhineland between France and Germany in the years before World War II, and the Korean DMZ between North and South Korea ever since 1953. The Korean

DMZ runs along the 38th parallel, is approximately 2.5 miles wide, and despite its name, is the most heavily militarized border in the world.

Many disputes exist along **shatterbelts**, regions caught between stronger colliding external cultural-political forces. These regions are conflict-prone, and may become splintered or fragmented over time. After the Soviet Union split into several new states, so did former Yugoslavia beginning in 1991. This led to the Bosnian Crisis (1992-'95) in which violence broke out, and militant Serbs were accused of **ethnic cleansing**, killing or wounding over 300,000 people. The Dayton Accords established peace in 1995, and legitimized several new borders in the former-Yugoslavian region. This type of fragmentation or division of a region into smaller areas or states that are often hostile or non-cooperative with one another is appropriately known as **balkanization**. Other examples of shatterbelts have included Israel (and Palestine) and Kashmir (mostly between India and Pakistan).


Russia's geopolitical ambitions have led to the rise of modern shatterbelts. After the Soviet Union dissolved, Russia kept Chechnya in the North Caucasus – an ethnically Muslim region. Russia saw Chechnya as a natural geographic entity (physically within a historically Russian mountain range) and as an important hub in Russia's oil infrastructure. Two destructive wars broke out (for Chechnya), and some militant Chechens even resorted to terrorist activity. Nonetheless, this region still remains part of Russia, however, through negotiations it has almost complete self-autonomy. Russia also claimed the Crimea as its legitimate territory in 2014 after a majority voted to join the Russian Federation after a referendum. This was also an example of **irredentism**, the desire to acquire some region included in another country by reason of cultural, historical, ethnic, racial, or other ties.

Types of States

For boundaries to be established, administered, and enforced, there must be states with legal authority to carry out these processes. While there is no true academic consensus as to what defines a state, most possess at least *four attributes*. States are human institutions, and therefore, have permanent and distinct populations. These people must also reside permanently in a fixed place with clear boundaries. A government must exert authority over those borders, carrying on its functions, and establishing laws, policies, and national objectives. Finally, a state must have internal and external sovereignty, recognized by the international community. This concept dates back to the Peace of Westphalia after the Thirty Years' War in 1648, establishing that the state is the final authority within its borders, and is free from external limits or foreign control.

The European state model was a **unitary state** and its administrative framework was highly centralized, ensuring the central government's authority over all parts of the state. France, for example, was divided into more than 90 *départements*, whose representatives came to Paris less to express regional concerns than to implement governmental decisions back home. Unitary states are common throughout Europe, Africa, the Middle East, as well as East and Southeast Asia.
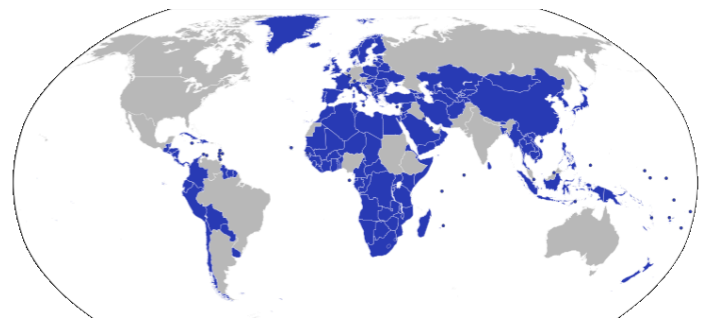
European notions of the state diffused to much of the rest of the world, but in the New World and former colonies elsewhere these notions did not always work well. When the American colonies freed themselves of European dominance, they found that conditions in their newly independent countries did not lend themselves to unitary government, and such situations led to the emergence of a **confederation**, or a loose grouping of states for a common purpose. This system granted the states too much power, and maintained an unworkably weak central government that was unable to tax or raise an army. In 1789, the United States adopted a new constitution establishing a **federal state**. Federalism accommodated regional interests by vesting primary

power in provinces, States, or other regional units over all matters except those explicitly given to the national governments. Large, and often multinational states, operate best under federalism since regional interests may be better met within their semi-autonomous territories. The Australian geographer K.W. Robinson described federations as "the most geographically expressive of all political systems... federation enables unity and diversity to coexist." Canada, Brazil, Nigeria, Australia and India are all examples of federal governments existing today.
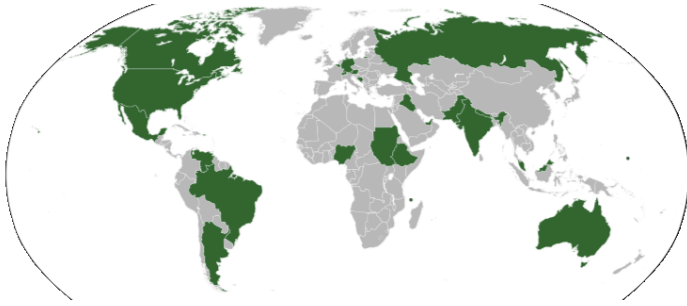
Cores and Capitals

A well-developed primary core area and a mature capital city are essential components of a well-integrated state. The **core** refers to the center, heart, or focus. The core of a nation-state is constituted by the national heartland—the largest population cluster, the most productive region, the area with the greatest centrality and accessibility, probably containing the capital city as well. Some states possess more than one core area, and such **multi core states** confront particular problems. If the primary core is dominant, as in the United States, such problems may be slight but in a country like Nigeria, where three core areas—none truly dominant— mark ethnically and culturally diverse parts of the state, serious problems arise.

Nigeria is a multicore state; its northern core area lies in the Muslim realm, while the southern core areas lie in Christian influenced Africa.

The core area is the heart of the state; the **capital city** is the brain. This is the political nerve center of the country, its national headquarters and seat of government, and the center of national life. The primacy of the capital is yet another manifestation of the European state model, one that has diffused worldwide. In general, the capital city is the pride of the state, and its layout, prominent architectural landmarks, public art, and often its religious structures reflect the society's values and priorities. It is the focus of the state as a political region.

In some countries the capital city is by far the largest and most economically influential city in the state. Mexico City, Jakarta (Indonesia), and Paris (France) all fit this category. Cities of this nature are **primate cities**, which are substantially larger than any other city in the country, the most expressive of the national culture, and often the capital.

Forward Capitals

Some newly independent states decided to relocate their capital cities, at enormous expense. These **forward capitals** are usually relocated due to economic, political, and/or strategic reasons. Berlin once served as a forward capital for East Germany during the Cold War. The United States has moved its capital several times. From New York City, to Philadelphia, to the more southern federal territory of Washington D.C., the U.S. capital was moved to help unify the nation.

Some states have moved their capitals from a geographically peripheral location to a more central one. Nigeria's capital used to be overcrowded Lagos, but they moved the seat of government (capital) to Abuja in 1991, away from the coast and closer to the geographic center. This was done to attract more people and business into the interior, and to a more neutral location. In the same way, Brasilia, a city that was planned and designed from the ground up, became the capital in 1960. It was located closer to the interior of the country to help develop that area, whereas most of the economic progress had been focused on São Paolo and Rio de Janeiro.

Moving a capital city may focus a society's attention on a national objective. In Pakistan's case, the transfer of the capital from Karachi to Islamabad in 1966 to the far north was part of a plan to move the capital away from the potentially dangerous location along the Indian Ocean. It also served to orient the nation toward its historic focus in the interior, and to give them a sense of greater legitimacy to contested

land in Kashmir, in which India has also laid claims. And South Korea has declared their intent to move the capital city of Seoul southward to Gongju in the years ahead. The move is intended to reduce Seoul's overcrowding and economic dominance over the rest of South Korea; perhaps not coincidentally, it would also move the government and administration out of range of North Korean artillery fire.

Internal Political Boundaries and Arrangements

"All politics is local," it is often said, and in truth a voter's most direct and important contact with government is at the local level. **Electoral geography** seeks to understand how the spatial configuration of electoral districts and voting patterns that emerge in particular elections reflect and influence social and political affairs.

Territories within states are usually subdivided into smaller areas such as counties, cities, school districts, and voting precincts. As a result, local government agencies and **municipalities – local self-government -** may have overlapping functions, and several agencies may have jurisdiction over the same geographical areas. Maps of voting patterns often produce surprises that can be explained by other maps. Church affiliation, income level, ethnic background, education level, and many other social factors are studied to learn why voters voted the way they did.

Perhaps the most practical area of electoral geography deals with representation. When there are a certain fixed number of seats for representatives in an elected legislature (such as the 435 congressional seats in the U.S. House of Representatives), there must be a fixed number of electoral districts from which those representatives are elected. It is up to each State to draw a map of congressional districts from which representatives will be elected.

Reapportionment occurs after every census because the population shifts. After the 2010 census, some Sun Belt States gained seats (Georgia, South Carolina, Florida), whereas some Rust Belt States lost seats (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan). In the US, once reapportionment is complete, States engage in **redistricting**, often by trying to maintain relatively equal populations that are somewhat compact and contiguous. After the 1990 census, the US government instructed all States with substantial minority populations to construct so-called **majority-minority districts** (within which a minority would

have the majority of the voters). Since people and ethnic groups are not evenly distributed across the country, our pluralistic society requires the construction of some oddly shaped districts in order to adhere to the majority-minority rule.

In 1812, Governor Elbridge Gerry (pronounced with a hard G) of Massachusetts signed a district into law that it gave his party an advantage. It was so oddly shaped that it was said it resembled a salamander. A colleague immortalized it by naming it a **gerrymander**. Ever since, this term has come to signify redistricting for advantage.
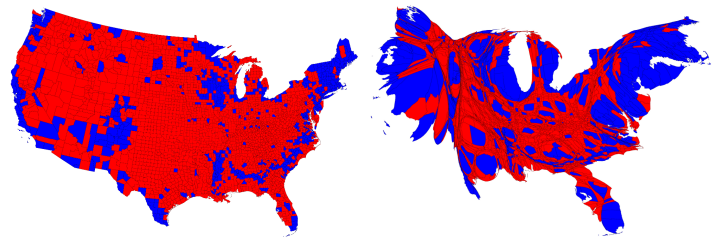
The spatial organization of voting districts is a fundamentally geographic phenomenon. Electoral maps are widely used not just to show who has won and lost elections, but patterns of support for different candidates and issues. The 2012 U.S. presidential election displayed a distinct regional and cultural pattern. The maps show districts that went for Romney (republican) in red, and for Obama (democrat) in blue. It is obvious that red covers more land area (left map), but if you represent the districts in terms of population (right map) you can plainly see a different pattern. The blue districts tend to coincide with the more populous urban districts as opposed to red.

"Above" and "Below" the State Boundaries

Political boundaries of significance exist both 'above' and 'below' the state. For **'above' the state**, boundaries such as the former Iron Curtain, the current boundary between NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and non-NATO states, or the European Union are good examples. For **'below' the state,** we have already looked at voting districts.

To fully understand the world in which we live in we must consider the hierarchy of political-territorial organization, from municipalities and special districts, to counties, States, and provinces, to the state itself. It is important to consider the ways the political organization of space influences the distribution of power and opportunity. Some territorial arrangements may not fit within the usual hierarchy of political-territorial governance-such as

Indian Reservations in the United States. Looking at the political world at different scales helps us understand the multiple forces affecting states.

Law of the Sea

Political boundaries certainly do not stop at the point where land ends, and the waters begin. **Littoral states** – those that possess coastlines – have asserted sovereignty over varying degrees of the adjacent waters throughout history. Modern national claims to the oceans and major lakes originated in Europe many centuries ago. Some suggested the width of the offshore zone should be determined by the distance a shore-based cannon could fire a cannonball.

In 1945, before the newly formed United Nations could deal with this issue, President Truman specified that the U.S. would claim jurisdiction over the continental shelf and its resources. The **Truman Proclamation** also reconfirmed that the high seas above the continental shelf would remain open. Argentina, in 1946, claimed not only its wide continental shelf, but also the waters lying above it. Many other claims were made and were contested by other countries.

The first United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS I) convened in 1958 and failed to completely resolve the issues of international waters. It wasn't until UNCLOS III, beginning in 1973 and ending in 1982, that 157 countries signed an agreement (the U.S. was one of four that didn't sign).

Territorial sea allows states to extend their borders up to 12 nautical miles (14 statute miles) off their coasts. State sovereignty extends over this zone; however, ships of other countries have the right of passage through these seas to keep them open for transit. A **contiguous zone** extends 12 nautical miles (nmi) further out, in which a state can continue to enforce laws limited to customs, taxation, immigration and pollution if any infringement occurs within their borders. **Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)** extend states' economic rights up to 200 nmi. The coastal state has the right to control exploration and exploitation of all natural resources in this area – fish, minerals, oil, etc. The United States' EEZ is the largest in the world, and even encompasses more square miles than all fifty states combined!

Another provision stated the mineral resources below the **high seas** constituted a "common heritage of human kind," and their exploitation is subject to UN management. The purpose of this provision was
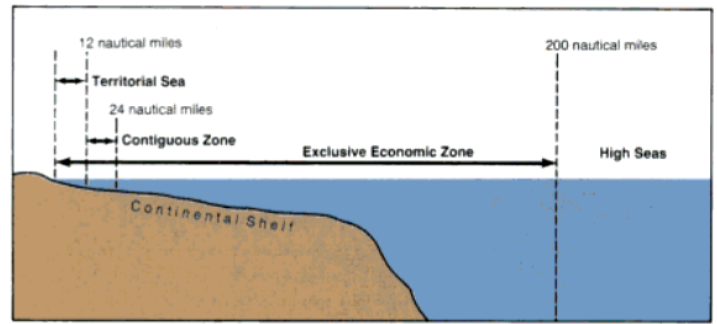
to enable states without any coasts to derive some benefit from the Earth's maritime resources. Several states even claim national jurisdiction over **"extended continental shelves"** beyond their EEZs and into the high seas. Over 40 countries have submitted claims to the UN, including all states with territories lying within the Arctic Circle, with the lone exception being the United States.

But what happens when countries lie within another country's territorial sea or EEZ? In such instances (e.g., Caribbean, North, Baltic, and Mediterranean Seas) the **median-line principle** takes effect. States on opposite coasts divide the waters evenly between them. The South China Sea, in particular, is a problematic maritime region. On the map below, the different colored lines represent different countries' claims. A key geographic problem deals with the Spratly Islands, which are potentially rich in oil and natural gas, especially with respect to EEZs. They are also productive with respect to fishing and shipping lane access. China along with five other states dispute territorial claims to these islands. Nonetheless, the Law of the Sea generally has been an effective and peaceful means to establish internationally recognized territorial claims. Problems such as the Spratly Islands dispute tend to be the exception, not the rule.