

# CAN NATURAL FEATURES *EVER* BECOME ARTIFICIAL?

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# THE QUESTION

- The legal framework:
  - Article 13(1) LOSC: “A low-tide elevation is a **naturally formed area of land** which is surrounded by and above water at low tide but submerged at high tide ...“
  - Article 121 (1) LOSC: “An island is a **naturally formed area of land**, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide.”



# THE QUESTION

- Judge Shigeru Oda's separate opinion in *Qatar v Bahrain* [2001] ICJ Rep 40
  - “Modern technology might make it possible to develop small islands and low-tide elevations as bases for structures, such as recreational or industrial facilities. Although the 1982 UN Convention does contain some relevant provisions (e.g. Arts 60 and 80), I consider that whether this type of construction would be *permitted* under international law and, if it were, what the *legal status* of such structures would be, are really matters reserved for future discussion.” [para 9]
  - So, can a previously naturally formed feature ever become an artificial one?

# INTERPRETATION (1): NATURAL FEATURES *CAN* BECOME ARTIFICIAL ONES

- “Artificial Islands”
  - Possess all of the Article 121(1) LOSC characteristics, except the naturally-formed requirement.
  - And, low-tide elevations, reefs, seabed, islets and rocks (etc.) *may*, through artificial modification, become artificial islands.

# INTERPRETATION (1): NATURAL FEATURES *CAN* BECOME ARTIFICIAL ONES

- The jurisprudence
  - E.g. *South China Sea Arbitration* 2016, see in relation to Mischief Reef [para 1037].
    - ‘China’s activities ... have since evolved into the creation of an *artificial island*. China has elevated what was originally a reef platform that submerged at high tide into an island that is permanently exposed. Such an island is undoubtedly “*artificial*” for the purposes of Article 60’.

# INTERPRETATION (2): THIS CONNECTION MAY *NOT* BE SO EASILY MADE

- Nowhere in the LOSC is the connection between the non-naturally formed requirement and artificial islands, explicitly made.
- A distinction between newly made artificial islands and modified formally natural features becoming artificial islands?
- A hybrid nature?
- Can it be both a natural and artificial feature for different legal questions?

# LEGAL STATUS OF ARTIFICIALLY MODIFIED, PREVIOUSLY NATURAL FEATURES

- Case study: *The South China Sea Arbitration* (2016)
  - ‘The inclusion of the term “naturally formed” in the definition of both a low-tide elevation and an island indicates that the status of a feature is to be evaluated on the basis of its natural condition. As a matter of law, human modification cannot change the seabed into a low-tide elevation or a low-tide elevation into an island. A low-tide elevation will remain a low-tide elevation under the Convention, regardless of the scale of the island or installation built atop it.’ [para 305]

# LEGAL STATUS OF ARTIFICIALLY MODIFIED, PREVIOUSLY NATURAL FEATURES

- Case study: *The South China Sea Arbitration* (2016)
  - Temporal dimension:
    - To Article 121(1) LOSC determinations
    - To Article 121(3) LOSC determinations



# LEGAL STATUS OF ARTIFICIALLY MODIFIED, PREVIOUSLY NATURAL FEATURES

- Case study: *The South China Sea Arbitration* (2016)
  - What is to be legally valid? In other words, to what may any legal significance be attached?
  - And, what legal consequences flow from such recognition?
  - If only naturally-formed parts of the features are given sole legal salience, what role could *any* artificial modification have?

# LEGAL STATUS OF ARTIFICIALLY MODIFIED, PREVIOUSLY NATURAL FEATURES

- Case study: *The South China Sea Arbitration* (2016)
  - The Tribunal’s treatment of Mischief Reef
    - “The Tribunal concludes that Mischief Reef is a low-tide elevation”. [para 378]



# LEGAL STATUS OF ARTIFICIALLY MODIFIED, PREVIOUSLY NATURAL FEATURES

- Case study: *The South China Sea Arbitration* (2016)
  - The Tribunal's treatment of Mischief Reef
    - But can it also be an artificial island?



# IMPLICATIONS

- Regime I:
  - Newly made non-naturally formed features captured by the recognised legal regime applicable to artificial islands. LOSC Arts 60, 80 etc.
  - Artificially modified coastline including artificially created islands off the coast captured by customary right to defend, reclaim and expand existing coastline.



# IMPLICATIONS

- Regime 2:
  - Artificially modified naturally pre-existing features:
  - Either
    - Recognised as artificial construct (islands, installations, structures)
    - Or
    - Recognised only as they *previously* existed (South China Sea Arbitration)

# IMPLICATIONS

- Ambiguous and hybrid legal nature of modified features
- Requires clear regulation about the legal confines and consequences of modifying pre-existing features
- Ought there be two regimes in the law of the sea regulating the issue of human modification differently?





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