

CAN NATURAL FEATURES *EVER*BECOME ARTIFICIAL?

Dr Reece Lewis

Lewis R74@cardiff.ac.uk



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 (I) 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 NOTBE 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?



- 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]



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



- 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?



- 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]



- Case study: The South China Sea Arbitration (2016)
 - The Tribunal's treatment of Mischief Reef
 - But can it <u>also</u> 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.



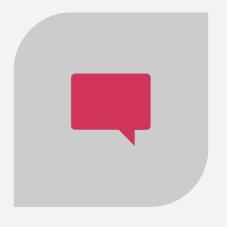
IMPLICATIONS

- 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?







Dr Reece Lewis

Lecturer in Law, Cardiff University

LewisR74@Cardiff.ac.uk