



Geopolitical Dimensions of Russia's Control over the Peanut Hole in the Okhotsk Sea: Sovereignty and the Challenges of International Maritime Law

Muhammad Ridha Iswardhana

Department of International Relations, Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Abstract: This research explores Russia's geopolitical strategy in asserting control over the Peanut Hole in the Sea of Okhotsk, a strategically significant maritime area enclosed by Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The research addresses the tension between Russia's sovereignty claims and international maritime law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This research examines the legal complexities and geopolitical implications of Russia's policy to extend its jurisdiction beyond the 200-nautical-mile limit, asserting exclusive rights over seabed resources while the waters above remain classified as high seas. The analysis critically evaluates Russia's motivations, including economic interests in vital resources like fish, oil, and gas, and the broader implications for global maritime governance. The study concludes that Russia's actions, while legally contentious, reflect a strategic effort to enhance its economic resilience and military influence in the region. This case studies found the evolving challenges in reconciling national sovereignty with international legal frameworks, offering valuable insights into maritime resource management and geopolitical power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Maritime Law; Okhotsk Sea; Peanut Hole; Russia

1. Introduction

The Sea of Okhotsk presents a unique case in the context of international maritime law due to the existence of the "Peanut Hole," a high seas enclave surrounded by the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Russian Federation. This phenomenon makes the Sea of Okhotsk the only known maritime area in which a pocket of high seas is completely enclosed by the EEZ of a single coastal state (Haines, 2014). This spatial configuration challenges the foundational zonal logic of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which assumes a linear transition from coastal jurisdiction to the high seas. Unlike most maritime disputes that concern overlapping claims or boundary delimitation, the Peanut Hole raises a more fundamental question regarding the coherence of jurisdictional continuity within the law of the sea. The Peanut Hole therefore raises fundamental questions about how international law conceptualizes jurisdiction, governance, and legal continuity in enclosed maritime spaces that are formally beyond national jurisdiction yet functionally embedded within a coastal state's maritime environment.

Before 2014, foreign fishing vessels had the freedom to fish in the Peanut Hole, particularly for pollock, a fish species that migrates from Russia's EEZ. This situation exposed a critical regulatory gap between the freedom of the high seas and the conservation responsibilities of adjacent coastal states, as fishing activities in the Peanut Hole had direct ecological consequences for resources located within Russia's EEZ. The unregulated fishing by foreign fleets was damaging the marine ecosystem and causing considerable concern about the long-term viability of the fishing industry in the region, which plays a crucial role in Russia's economic welfare (Goltz, 2015). The depletion of migratory fish stocks highlighted a mismatch between legal compartmentalization under UNCLOS and the ecological interconnectedness of marine ecosystems, revealing the

Correspondence:

Name: Muhammad Ridha Iswardhana

Email: muhammad.ridha@uty.ac.id.

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limits of existing governance frameworks in addressing transboundary environmental impacts.

In response to these concerns, Russia submitted a claim to the United Nations in 2014, asserting that the seabed of the Peanut Hole constituted a natural prolongation of its continental shelf. This claim was reviewed by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), which ultimately endorsed Russia's submission. Consequently, Russia acquired sovereign rights over the seabed and subsoil resources of the Peanut Hole, while the water column above remained legally classified as high seas. This outcome produced a hybrid legal status, in which seabed jurisdiction and water-column freedoms coexist within the same maritime space (Goltz, 2019). Such a configuration exposes a conceptual ambiguity in UNCLOS regarding the separation between seabed rights and the governance of living marine resources in enclosed high seas areas.

Russia's successful claim before the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf further intensifies the scholarly significance of the case. The resulting hybrid legal status, seabed jurisdiction is national while the water column remains international that reveals an unresolved ambiguity within UNCLOS concerning the governance of living resources in enclosed high seas spaces. This configuration is not merely anomalous but theoretically consequential, as it complicates established distinctions between sovereign rights and global commons governance.

Moreover, the expansion of Russia's jurisdiction over the Peanut Hole also raised domestic considerations regarding its fishing industry. As a significant player in global fisheries, Russia must navigate the balance between protecting its marine resources and ensuring continued access for its fishing fleets to international waters. An expansive interpretation of coastal state rights in enclosed maritime spaces may invite reciprocal restrictions by other states, thereby complicating Russia's long-term fishing and maritime strategy. This illustrates the reciprocal and systemic consequences of jurisdictional expansion within the law of the sea.

The Peanut Hole therefore serves as a critical conceptual stress test for the UNCLOS regime. It foregrounds unresolved tensions between sovereignty and collective responsibility, legal formalism and functional necessity, and spatial jurisdiction and environmental reality. By foregrounding these tensions, the Sea of Okhotsk case offers critical insights into the limitations of UNCLOS in addressing high seas enclaves and underscores the need for more integrated and conceptually coherent approaches to maritime governance. The academic urgency of the Peanut Hole case lies in its exposure of a regulatory and conceptual gap between high seas freedoms and coastal state conservation responsibilities. This urgency of the Peanut Hole case lies in its exposure of a regulatory and conceptual gap between high seas freedoms and coastal state conservation responsibilities.

2. Materials and Methods

This study uses qualitative research methodology to facilitate a rigorous and interpretive examination of the research problem, allowing for a nuanced understanding of complex political and institutional dynamics. Qualitative methodology is deliberately selected to explore meanings, processes, and interactions embedded within policy practices and institutional arrangements, which are central to understanding the case under investigation. A case study strategy is applied to focus analytical attention on the specific contextual conditions, institutional configurations, and causal processes that shape the phenomenon, thereby prioritizing explanatory depth over descriptive generalization.

The qualitative approach facilitates the systematic use of multiple documentary data sources, including official policy documents, institutional reports, legal texts, and peer-reviewed academic literature. These sources are treated not as background material but as primary empirical data, allowing the study to capture the layered and context-sensitive nature of maritime governance and policy decision-making. Through structured literature review and analytical interpretation, the study produces a coherent and critically grounded analysis that moves beyond narrative description toward con-

ceptual explanation. In this regard, qualitative research provides a structured yet flexible framework for generating reliable interpretations and theoretically informed conclusions (Creswell, 2016).

Data collection is conducted through two principal procedures: first, a comprehensive review of relevant scholarly literature to identify and contextualize secondary data; second, a systematic examination of policy documents and institutional reports produced by authoritative national and international bodies. These materials constitute the core empirical basis of the research. The data are processed through a staged analytical procedure that integrates theoretical triangulation such as Maritime Geopolitical Theory and Maritime Law to strengthen interpretive validity. This sequential analytical process ensures that theoretical concepts are applied as interpretive lenses throughout the analysis, rather than as post hoc justifications. This methodological approach is designed to ensure that the study's conclusions are logically derived, empirically grounded, and analytically responsive to the research questions posed (Krisyantono, 2014).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result: *The History of the International Peanut Hole Dispute in the Sea of Okhotsk*

Russia's effort to assert authority over the maritime area known as the Peanut Hole in the Sea of Okhotsk has generated multifaceted legal and geopolitical consequences within the contemporary law of the sea. The Peanut Hole constitutes a maritime enclave of approximately 55,000 square kilometers that is geographically enclosed by Russia's EEZ yet, under the UNCLOS, has historically been classified as part of the high seas as seen in Figure 1 below. "Peanut Hole," which has been legally recognized as part of Russia's continental shelf. This strategic zone is vital for Russia's economic interests, especially due to the valuable marine resources it harbors. However, despite Russia's efforts to assert control, the situation in this region remains complicated by foreign activities, notably by intelligence-gathering ships, including those from Poland, that frequently transit through the area, often under the guise of ordinary passage but with suspected ulterior motives (Ushirogata, 2025). Although subsequent legal developments resulted in the recognition of the seabed as part of Russia's continental shelf, the area retains a hybrid legal status that continues to complicate governance and enforcement. This spatial anomaly renders the region strategically sensitive and institutionally ambiguous, exposing it to jurisdictional contestation and geopolitical friction (Volvenko, 2021). The central analytical concern of this study therefore lies in examining how Russia has sought to consolidate its claim over the Peanut Hole and the broader implications of this process for international maritime law and maritime geopolitics.

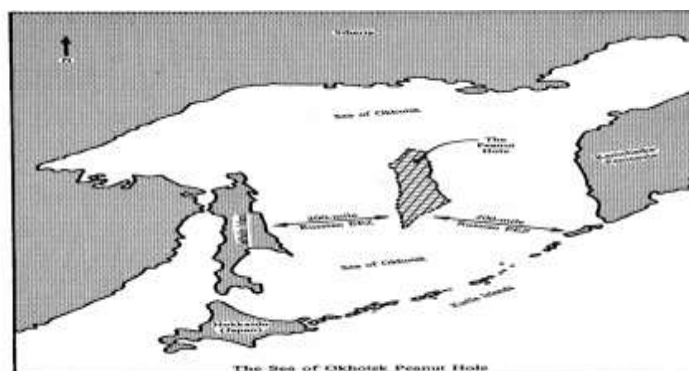


Figure 1. Map of the "Peanut Hole" in the Sea of Okhotsk showing the location of the high seas area (The Peanut Hole) completely surrounded by Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

Source: (Goltz, 2015).

Empirical analysis of policy documents and legal submissions demonstrates that Russia's attempt to assert control over the Peanut Hole was driven by a combination of ecological, economic, and strategic considerations. During the 1990s, intensive fishing by

foreign fleets targeting pollock stocks migrating between Russia's EEZ and the high seas enclave resulted in severe resource depletion. This pattern of overexploitation revealed a structural deficiency in international maritime governance, whereby the principle of freedom of the high seas permitted activities that directly undermined the conservation responsibilities and economic interests of an adjacent coastal state. Similar patterns of regulatory failure in high seas enclaves have been documented in earlier studies of transboundary fisheries, reinforcing the broader relevance of the Okhotsk case. Comparable regulatory failures have been identified in earlier studies of straddling and highly migratory fish stocks, situating the Okhotsk case within a broader empirical pattern rather than an isolated anomaly.

The data further indicate that Russia's legal strategy evolved from unilateral enforcement efforts toward institutional engagement within the UNCLOS framework. By submitting a claim to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in 2001, and subsequently updating it in 2013, Russia sought to reframe the Peanut Hole not merely as a fisheries issue but as a question of continental shelf entitlement. The CLCS decision in 2014, recognizing the seabed as a natural prolongation of Russia's continental shelf while maintaining high seas freedoms in the water column, marked a decisive legal turning point. This outcome reflects tensions widely noted in existing scholarship concerning the separation of seabed jurisdiction from the governance of living marine resources (United Nations, 2024). This outcome reflects a recurring tension identified in prior research between seabed jurisdiction and the governance of living marine resources.

Prior to 2014, the status of the Peanut Hole was a source of international debate and tension. According to international maritime law, this area was considered high seas, meaning it was open to fishing by all nations. However, starting in the early 1990s, large-scale exploitation of the area by foreign fishing fleets, including those from Poland, South Korea, China, Japan, Panama, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, led to massive overfishing, particularly of pollock. In 1992, one million metric tons of pollock were removed from the region. The strategic location of the Peanut Hole, situated in the middle of Russia's EEZ, made it difficult to regulate and prone to conflict. Russia sought to claim the area not only for its natural resources but also as a matter of legal maritime governance. This claim sparked debates over maritime boundaries, the rights to undersea resources, and the entitlement of coastal states to manage maritime areas, issues reminiscent of other global maritime disputes stemming from discrepancies between geographical boundaries and international legal frameworks (Grokikipedia, 2025).

The Polish ships' presence in the Sea of Okhotsk goes beyond simple maritime transit; they are suspected of engaging in military intelligence gathering, which raises serious security concerns for Russia. The presence of foreign vessels, particularly those suspected of intelligence-gathering activities, adds a security dimension that further differentiates the Peanut Hole dispute from purely economic fisheries conflicts. Policy assessments indicate that Russia increasingly conceptualizes the Sea of Okhotsk as a strategic maritime bastion integral to national defense and nuclear deterrence. This aligns with maritime geopolitical theory, which emphasizes the role of legal control and naval presence in consolidating maritime sovereignty and projecting power (Herd, 2021).

Russia's primary challenge lies not only in asserting its claim over the Sea of Okhotsk but in ensuring the region's security from external threats. The repeated presence of Polish intelligence vessels underscores broader security risks, as these ships are seen as geopolitical instruments challenging Russia's maritime control. Despite its legal status within Russia's EEZ, the region remains vulnerable to incursions, complicating Russia's security objectives. To address this, Russia must continuously adapt its defense strategies, increasing military presence, patrols, and surveillance operations to counteract intelligence-gathering activities and maintain control over this strategically important area (Monaco & Prouzet, 2015).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Russia's approach to the Peanut Hole reflects a layered strategy combining legal institutionalization, resource governance, and

maritime security. Rather than a narrow assertion of sovereignty, the case illustrates a pragmatic effort to reconcile international legal constraints with ecological protection and strategic stability. In doing so, the Peanut Hole dispute both confirms existing analyses of creeping jurisdiction and extends them by highlighting the distinctive challenges posed by high seas enclaves fully surrounded by a single state's EEZ (Haines, 2014).

The presence of foreign intelligence vessels in Russia's EEZ in the Sea of Okhotsk serves as a stark reminder of the challenges facing states with expansive maritime claims. For Russia, the issue goes beyond territorial sovereignty; it is about maintaining strategic control over vital economic resources and securing the region against external threats. The situation in the Sea of Okhotsk is a microcosm of broader geopolitical struggles, where the interplay between legal claims, economic interests, and security concerns is constantly evolving. As such, Russia's response will likely set important precedents for how states manage their maritime borders and deal with external interference in strategically sensitive areas (Preskar, 2024).

The acceptance of Russia's claim strengthened its *de facto* control over a region that had previously been considered high seas. Legally, recognition of the continental shelf does not automatically grant rights over the water column above it. However, in practice, Russia began to implement policies limiting foreign activities in the area, particularly regarding exploration and resource extraction. This development led to tensions with countries with fishing interests in the North Pacific and sparked debates about the boundary between formal legality and effective maritime power (Nambi, 2025). The exploitation of the high seas, particularly pollock stocks, was detrimental to Russia as these fish populations are part of a shared stock that migrates between Russian waters and the high seas. This dynamic created a direct threat to the sustainability of fish stocks in Russian waters, which are vital for the economy of Russia's Far East.

In response to the overfishing crisis, Russia attempted to impose a fishing moratorium in the Sea of Okhotsk, but this effort was disregarded by other nations, which continued to send their fleets into the area. The international community, through the United Nations, initiated negotiations that eventually resulted in the Draft Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. This agreement aimed to regulate the management of transboundary fish stocks and required compatibility between policies governing EEZs and high seas, providing mechanisms for enforcement and dispute resolution. The negotiation process was lengthy and complicated, involving delicate discussions between coastal states and distant-water fishing nations, highlighting the complexity of managing shared marine resources.

Finally, in 2014, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf officially recognized the seabed and land beneath the Peanut Hole as part of Russia's continental shelf (United Nations, 2024). This recognition granted Russia sovereign rights over the seabed resources in the area, although the water column above it remains classified as high seas. This decision effectively solidified Russia's control over the exploitation of resources in the Peanut Hole and ended the era of unregulated exploitation by other nations. This change in status also had significant implications for the management of transboundary fish stocks in the Sea of Okhotsk. Russia now had stronger legal grounds to regulate fishing in the seabed area, although the management of the water column above it still had to comply with international maritime law principles. The Peanut Hole case stands as an important precedent in the history of international marine resource management and the evolution of modern maritime law, illustrating the complex interplay between national interests, international legal principles, and the need for collaborative governance of transboundary marine resources.

3.2 The Development of the Dispute and the Actors Involved

Issues emerged when fishing vessels from countries such as Poland, South Korea, China, Japan, and others frequently entered the Peanut Hole area to catch fish. These nations justified their actions by claiming that Peanut Hole was international waters, and therefore, they were entitled to fish there under the principle of freedom of the seas as outlined in international maritime law, particularly the United Nations Convention on

the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Tanaka, 2023). In contrast, Russia imposed a fishing moratorium in this region starting in the early 1990s to protect the pollock stock (Blank, 2017). Additionally, Russia ramped up naval and coast guard patrols to monitor the area and prevent illegal fishing. In 2014, Russia also submitted a claim to the United Nations for an extended continental shelf, which was subsequently recognized, granting Russia rights to the seabed and subsoil beneath the Peanut Hole. However, this claim did not extend to the water column above, which remained classified as international waters, allowing foreign vessels to continue operating there.

The conflict became even more complicated when an incident of espionage occurred involving Polish fishing vessels attempting to gather secret information on Russia's patrol schedules and surveillance operations. This was done to avoid detection while engaging in illegal fishing activities. This highlighted that the competition in the Peanut Hole was not just about economics and legal rights but also involved maritime security and intelligence. Russia views this area as a "maritime fortress" critical to its national interests, and therefore, it has been striving to maintain control and surveillance over the region.

Table 1. Economic Value of Natural Resources in the Peanut Hole Region, Sea of Okhotsk

| Resource Type | Estimated Volume | Estimated Economic Value (USD) | Data Source |
|----------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Alaska Pollock | ±2.4 million tons | ±\$1.1 billion/year | (FAO, 2023) |
| Crude Oil | ±1.2 billion barrels | ±\$90 billion (2023 price) | (USGS Report, 2022) |
| Natural Gas | ±700 billion m ³ | ±\$50 billion | (IEA, 2023) |

Based on the table above, the economic value of key natural resources found in the Peanut Hole region of the Sea of Okhotsk, an area surrounded by Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone but legally considered High Seas under international maritime law. The region's resources, including Alaska Pollock, crude oil, and natural gas, contribute significantly to the economic value of the area. Alaska Pollock, with an estimated volume of 2.4 million tons per year, generates around \$1.1 billion annually, supporting Russia's fishing industry. The region also holds approximately 1.2 billion barrels of crude oil, valued at \$90 billion, making it an important asset for Russia's energy sector. Additionally, the estimated 700 billion cubic meters of natural gas are worth around \$50 billion, further cementing the area's strategic importance. These resources not only drive Russia's domestic economy but also play a crucial role in global markets, particularly in energy exports to Asia, underscoring the geopolitical significance of the Sea of Okhotsk and the challenges related to its management and control.

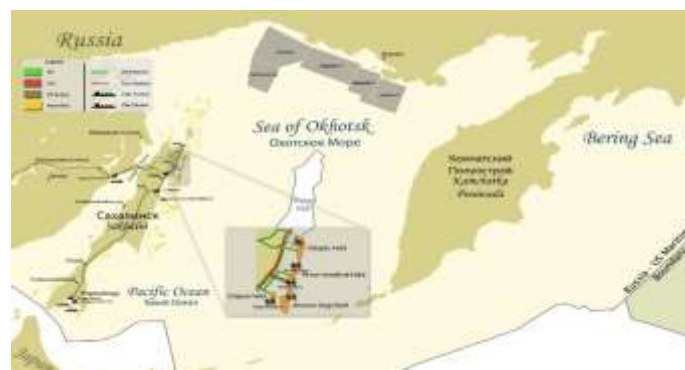


Figure 2. Map of the Peanut Hole area in the Sea of Okhotsk and the distribution of natural resources around it
 Source: (RFI, 2016).

Russia recognizes that the natural resources in the sea, both living and non-living, such as oil and gas, serve as strategic instruments to strengthen economic resilience. By

successfully securing recognition of the continental shelf beneath the Peanut Hole, Russia obtained exclusive rights for exploration and exploitation of the seabed resources in this area (Preskar, 2024). Control over marine resources not only signifies dominance over the local economy but also serves as a tool to enhance bargaining power in regional and global diplomacy. A nation capable of safeguarding its national resources is better equipped to compete in an increasingly competitive global order. This strategy highlights that maritime geopolitics is not just about mapping territories but also about how a country protects its strategic assets in the sea (Ushirogata, 2025).

The importance of maritime zones like the Peanut Hole can be understood from several perspectives. First, in terms of natural resources, this area is vital for providing fish, which is a crucial food source and economic asset for many nations. Second, from the perspective of sovereignty and national security, Russia considers the Peanut Hole a strategically important region that must be protected from foreign threats. Third, from the standpoint of international maritime law, this conflict illustrates how rules like UNCLOS regulate the rights and responsibilities of nations in maritime areas, but still leave room for tension between sovereign rights and the principle of freedom of the seas. Lastly, the region has become a geopolitical battleground where nations compete to strengthen their positions by controlling the waters (M. R. Iswardhana, 2024).

To address these challenges, Russia has utilized advanced surveillance technologies such as Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), aerial patrols, satellite imagery, and coordination among maritime security agencies. Despite these efforts, distant-water fishing nations (DWFNs) continue to pose a serious threat to Russia's maritime security by ignoring Russia's fishing moratorium and asserting their right to access the Peanut Hole under the principle of freedom of the seas, particularly as fish stocks in their waters have dwindled. The large-scale fishing activities in the region threaten the marine ecosystem and jeopardize the sustainability of fish resources, which is critical to Russia's fishing economy.

The situation surrounding the Peanut Hole illustrates the complex dynamics between international law, national sovereignty, and the management of shared marine resources. The dispute over ownership and use of the Peanut Hole highlights the challenges of reconciling national interests with international legal frameworks, reflecting broader geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region. Russia's efforts to assert control over the area raise significant questions about balancing the rights of coastal states with the global commons. This situation exemplifies how legal, economic, and security concerns converge in the global maritime arena, underscoring the need for cooperative mechanisms to address such challenges.

3.3 Draft Agreement on Straddling Stocks and Recognition of the Continental Shelf by the United Nations

The Russian Federation strategically tried to claim over the maritime of the Peanut Hole in the Sea of Okhotsk. These claim as a development that has sparked complex dynamics within international maritime law and global geopolitical discourse. The Peanut Hole is a maritime zone of approximately 55,000 square kilometers, geographically surrounded by Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), but legally classified as part of the high seas under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This geographical anomaly, where the Peanut Hole is enclosed within Russia's EEZ but legally remains part of the high seas, has made it a strategically significant and highly contentious area, fraught with jurisdictional ambiguities and potential for conflict (Tanaka, 2023). The core issue examined in this research revolves around Russia's efforts to solidify its claim over this maritime area, and how these efforts have impacted international law and global maritime geopolitics (M. R. Iswardhana, 2022).

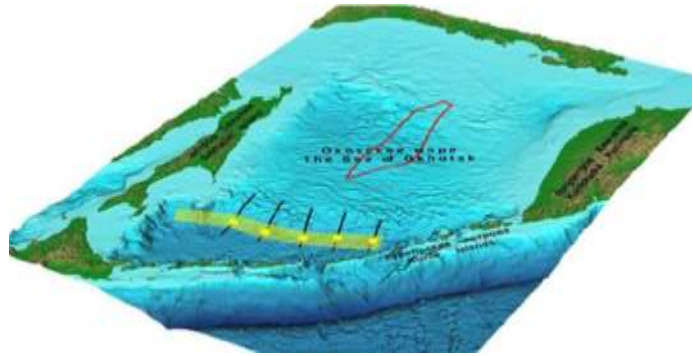


Figure 3. Continental Slope Base and FOS Points in the Sea of Okhotsk
 Source: (Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, 2015).

Tensions escalated in the 1990s when the Peanut Hole was increasingly exploited by foreign nations, particularly foreign fishing vessels that engaged in cross-boundary fishing activities, targeting pollock whose migratory habitat shifted between Russia's EEZ and the high seas of the Peanut Hole. The absence of stringent regulations in the high seas allowed for over-exploitation of these marine resources. For Russia, this exploitation resulted in significant economic losses and environmental concerns, driving the need for stricter regulations. In response, Russia pursued a legal and diplomatic strategy by officially submitting a claim for the continental shelf beneath the Peanut Hole to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in 2001, a claim that was updated in 2013. As seen in Figure 3, the claim was based on geological evidence arguing that the seabed in this region was a natural extension of Russia's continental shelf. After a lengthy scientific and legal evaluation process, the CLCS approved Russia's claim in 2014, granting Russia sovereign rights over the seabed, although the water column above remained categorized as international waters (Goltz, 2019).

Before 2014, the status of the Peanut Hole remained a source of international debate and tension. According to international maritime law, the area was considered part of the high seas, allowing all countries free access for fishing activities. However, by the early 1990s, large-scale exploitation by fishing fleets from countries such as Poland, South Korea, China, Japan, Panama, Bulgaria, and Ukraine led to overfishing of pollock. In 1992 alone, one million metric tons of pollock were extracted from the region. This extensive exploitation, occurring in an area surrounded by Russia's EEZ, created significant regulatory challenges and escalated tensions over sovereignty and resource control. Russia's attempt to claim the Peanut Hole was driven not only by its valuable natural resources but also by its desire to align its territorial claims with international maritime legal frameworks. The claim raised important questions regarding maritime boundary limits, resource rights, and the rights of coastal states to manage their adjacent waters. This scenario mirrors other global maritime disputes, where geographic boundaries and international legal standards clash, thereby posing a challenge to regional security and stability (Shuntov et al., 2019).

The acceptance of Russia's claim over the continental shelf in the Peanut Hole strengthened its *de facto* control over a region previously considered part of the high seas. While this recognition did not grant Russia rights over the water column above the seabed, Russia began imposing policies that restricted foreign vessel activities, particularly in resource exploration and extraction. This raised tensions with countries with fishing interests in the North Pacific, leading to debates over the gap between legal recognition and the actual exercise of maritime power. Overfishing in the high seas, especially of pollock, which migrates between the Sea of Okhotsk and the high seas, threatened the sustainability of this important fishery, vital to Russia's Far East economy. Despite attempts to implement a fishing moratorium, Russia's efforts were ignored by other nations continuing their fishing operations in the region.

To resolve these issues, the United Nations initiated international negotiations, leading to the Draft Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. This agreement aimed to regulate transboundary fish stocks and harmonize management policies between EEZs and the high seas, including enforcement and dispute resolution mechanisms. In 2014, the CLCS formally recognized the seabed beneath the Peanut Hole as part of Russia's continental shelf, granting Russia sovereign rights over its resources and ending the era of unrestricted exploitation by other countries, while the water column remains governed by international law.

The change in the legal status of the Peanut Hole has significantly impacted the management of straddling fish stocks in the Sea of Okhotsk. Russia now holds a stronger legal foundation for regulating fishing activities in the seabed area of the Peanut Hole, although management of the water column above still adheres to international maritime law. This case has become a critical precedent in marine resource management, demonstrating the balance between national interests, international law principles, and the need for cooperative management of transboundary marine resources. The conflict over the Peanut Hole's status, lasting from 1991 to 2014, highlights the importance of international cooperation and the role of international maritime law in resolving cross-border disputes, emphasizing sustainability and fairness for all involved parties.

From the perspective of international maritime law, the issue is complex. While UNCLOS grants coastal states exclusive rights to manage resources on their continental shelves beyond the 200-nautical-mile limit, these rights are confined to the seabed and do not extend to the water column, which remains classified as high seas, subject to the principle of freedom of navigation. This creates a tension between coastal state rights and the open access principle. Geopolitically, Russia's actions in the Sea of Okhotsk are part of a broader strategy to assert control over a region rich in resources, military value, and strategic shipping routes. By securing legal recognition of the Peanut Hole, Russia has not only strengthened its legal position but also enhanced its military and diplomatic presence, reflecting its growing influence in Northeast Asia.

3.4 Discussion: Maritime Geopolitical Theory and Maritime Law Explains Russia's Strategy to Control the Okhotsk Peanut Hole

In maritime geopolitical theory, the control of strategic maritime territories plays a crucial role in safeguarding a nation's sovereignty and preventing military penetration or threats from other states (Priyanto et al., 2025). Maritime geopolitics is often carried out through the concept of "Creeping Jurisdiction," particularly in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. UNCLOS serves as the principal international legal instrument governing the boundaries of maritime territories for coastal states, including the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending up to 200 nautical miles from a state's baseline. This convention grants coastal states exclusive rights to explore and exploit both living and non-living natural resources within their EEZs, while also regulating the rights of other nations regarding navigation and the laying of underwater cables (United Nations, 2024).

Additionally, UNCLOS addresses the concept of the continental shelf, which allows coastal states to claim maritime areas beyond the 200 nautical mile limit if they can demonstrate the geological extension of their land territory. These claims must be submitted and approved by the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) based on scientific and technical evidence. The phenomenon of creeping jurisdiction refers to the gradual expansion of a coastal state's jurisdiction over maritime areas that were previously considered international waters. This practice creates complex geopolitical dynamics, as neighboring states or other stakeholders may challenge such claims, potentially leading to territorial disputes and challenges to international maritime law (M. R. Iswardhana, 2023).

Creeping jurisdiction, where coastal states extend their control over maritime areas, can cause tensions with neighboring states that view such claims as violations of their rights or interests. This creates challenges for international maritime law, particularly in dispute resolution and ensuring fair, transparent maritime boundaries. While UNCLOS

grants coastal states the right to manage resources on their continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles, this right is limited to the seabed and does not extend to the waters above, which remain classified as high seas, subject to the principle of freedom of the seas (United Nations, 2024). This creates tension between the coastal state's rights and the principle of open access, complicating modern maritime governance. Geopolitically, Russia's actions in the Sea of Okhotsk, such as asserting legal control over the Peanut Hole, highlight its broader strategy to strengthen its influence in Northeast Asia. This region is strategically significant, both militarily and economically, with valuable resources and important shipping routes. By securing legal recognition of the Peanut Hole, Russia has bolstered its legal, military, and diplomatic presence, increased naval patrols and asserting symbolic sovereignty. The issue of global justice also arises, with critics arguing that countries with limited resources struggle to meet the technical standards required for such claims (Reuters, 2024).

Geographically, the Sea of Okhotsk is a semi-enclosed sea completely surrounded by Russian territory, including the Kamchatka Peninsula, Sakhalin Island, and the Kuril Islands (Peanut Hole, 2014). Russia has long considered this region as an integral part of its national maritime defense system. However, the existence of the Peanut Hole, a high seas area in the middle of the Sea of Okhotsk, creates a "gap" in that defense (Muraviev, 2023). Foreign vessels, including those from Poland, not only engage in fishing activities but are also suspected of involvement in intelligence operations and underwater surveillance. This raises significant security concerns, as the area is also a route and operational base for Russia's nuclear submarines (Eidnes et al., 2019; Ushirogata, 2025). Control over the Peanut Hole has thus evolved from being an economic issue to a matter of strategic security.

In the context of maritime geopolitical theory, power projection is demonstrated by a country's ability to exhibit its military presence at sea, signaling that the area is under its influence or domination (M. R. R. Iswardhana, 2021). Russia has not only reinforced its administrative and legal control over the Peanut Hole but also actively asserted its military presence. These measures include the construction of nuclear submarine fleets, modernization of maritime defense missile systems, and joint military exercises with China in the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean. This strategy also serves as a form of resistance to the influence of the United States and NATO, which Moscow views as primary threats.

Russia has intensified its maritime patrols and closely monitored foreign vessels. The country treats the Peanut Hole as if it were part of its internal waters, especially since its claim to the continental shelf was accepted. Control of maritime territory has become crucial in preventing foreign penetration and maintaining sovereignty over the sea in the most strategic sense. In the updated maritime doctrine of 2022, Russia explicitly designates the Sea of Okhotsk as one of its national interest zones that must be protected firmly (Ushirogata, 2025). This demonstrates that, within maritime geopolitical theory, national security is not solely determined by land-based power but also by a nation's ability to control maritime areas deemed vital (Eidnes et al., 2019).

The military presence serves two functions: defensive and offensive. Defensively, Russia protects its strategic zones from foreign surveillance and threats. Offensively, Russia sends a message that the Sea of Okhotsk is an exclusive zone that cannot be infringed upon. This is a tangible example of using maritime power as a tool of diplomacy and politics. Through a combination of military strength and legal legitimacy, Russia strengthens its geopolitical position in the Northeast Asia region and balances power with Western countries. Maritime power projection is not just about physical presence; it also reflects a nation's political will to maintain its influence in a strategic region.

The recognition of Russia's continental shelf claim under the Peanut Hole by the CLCS offers significant advantages for the country, as it strengthens Russia's legal position in the region. This legal victory allows Russia to exploit and manage the vast resources in the area, such as fish, gas, and minerals, which are crucial to supporting its national economy. The strategic location of the Sea of Okhotsk also plays a key role in

enhancing Russia's geopolitical influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, Russia can project its maritime power and expand its influence through naval capabilities, further solidifying its position as a key player in the region's security and economic affairs.

However, the lengthy process of obtaining the CLCS recognition and the potential risk of denial, as seen in the previous 2001 claim, reveals a significant weakness in Russia's approach. The complexities and delays associated with securing such claims expose Russia to potential geopolitical setbacks, especially when navigating through the intricate legal and scientific procedures. The legal framework also poses challenges, as foreign vessels continue to operate in the waters above the Peanut Hole, which undermines Russia's complete control over the area, making it harder to manage the resources and territorial integrity effectively.

The presence of foreign vessels, particularly those from countries like Poland, has become a key threat to Russia's control over the Sea of Okhotsk. These vessels are not only infringing on Russia's declared jurisdiction but may also be involved in intelligence activities, such as surveillance or data collection, which could undermine Russia's national security interests. The continued presence of foreign ships could escalate tensions, particularly as the area is also a strategic military route for Russian nuclear submarines. This dynamic creates a complex security challenge, as the potential for intelligence gathering and military reconnaissance increases, threatening both Russia's economic interests and its territorial sovereignty.

4. Conclusions

The Peanut Hole dispute in the Sea of Okhotsk demonstrates maritime sovereignty and maritime security are shaped by the interaction between national strategic priorities, evolving interpretations of coastal state rights, and the structural constraints of international maritime law. Russia's submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf constituted a calculated institutional strategy to reconfigure a legally ambiguous high seas enclave into a space of enhanced sovereign authority. By mobilizing scientific and geological evidence within the procedural framework of UNCLOS, Russia demonstrated the extent to which legal mechanisms are inseparable from geopolitical strategy in contemporary maritime governance.

The recognition of Russia's continental shelf rights in the Sea of Okhotsk extends beyond a formal legal outcome, reinforcing its capacity to exercise effective control over a maritime area of substantial economic and military significance. At the same time, this development exposes persistent tensions between coastal state jurisdiction and the principle of freedom of the seas, particularly in maritime spaces that simultaneously function as security zones and resource frontiers. Russia's approach reflects a broader pattern of maritime securitization, integrating legal claims, resource governance, and military capabilities, as institutionalized in its 2022 maritime doctrine.

However, these findings are limited by the case-specific focus on Russia, reliance on documentary sources, and absence of comparative analysis, requiring caution when extending conclusions to broader global maritime contexts.

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