

The Barbie Movie: banned because of boundaries

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07/14/2023



The green dashes show the nine-dash line in the South China Sea.

Anna Johnson - China has asserted a claim over most of the South China Sea since 1947. These historical claims are not accepted by the international community. China depicts these claims by drawing a nine-dash line including the territories it claims. In 2016 an international court in The Hague ruled that the nine-dash line and the territorial claims had no legal basis. China has rejected this ruling. Despite international acceptance that the boundary is illegitimate, the nine-dash line is still a powerful messaging tool. It is especially useful for China if the line is used in Western media. Such usage suggests a clear nod by the West to Chinese influence in the region; it also reflects the power of the Chinese media market.

We typically think of a boundary as a line on a map, though they exist whether we see them or not. These lines show agreements with other countries over the extent of one state's sovereignty or ability to rule. The security of these boundaries relies on the state's relationship with its neighbors. In the case of the nine-dash line, it is just a line on a map. It does not reflect a commonly accepted area of sovereignty. But China continues to use it, and the line gains legitimacy through popular use, especially by Hollywood. The "Barbie" movie includes a map showing

Barbie's idea of the "world map." This map depicts a child-like depiction of each continent with almost no accurate geographic details. Off the Eastern coast of Asia, however, there is a dashed line extending from where China would be on this map. Vietnam's National Film Evaluation Council says this is the nine-dash line. That's why they've decided to ban "Barbie" from being released in Vietnam. The Philippines has expressed similar concerns. They say they're also considering banning the movie because of territorial concerns.

A Western movie studio's use of a map with what looks like the nine-dash line is a win for China's ideological power. When audiences around the world see the map, they are inclined to believe it is an accurate expression of the world, despite its childish origins and incorrect geography. The inclusion of the line in a major Hollywood movie legitimizes it, giving some credence to the idea that China's territorial claim over the area is valid. Vietnam's argument is that even as a child-like recreation, the map is based on one where the nine-dash line is included as a legitimate territorial claim. When its use is normalized in media portrayals, audiences around the world will be more likely to accept the nine-dash line as a legitimate claim to real territories.