



Business



China and the West Philippine Sea

FILIPINO WORLD VIEW By [Roberto R. Romulo](#) (The Philippine Star) Updated August 10, 2012 12:00 AM [Comments](#)

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Regular and even occasional readers of my column know that I have written about the South China/West Philippine SEA (SCS/WPS) issue to *ad nauseum* level and so I have been quiet about it for some time. But two recent articles bear commenting on and so I dare once again to tread on this issue which has caused me, among others, the loss of friends who feel as passionately about this but from a radically opposed view point.

One of the articles is former Singapore Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani's excellent piece on his perception of China's recent diplomatic missteps as undermining the geopolitical savvy they have displayed on their way to becoming the second most powerful country in the world, if not militarily now then economically. The other is written by a friend and former cabinet colleague, Raffy Alunan. He eloquently makes a call to arms in reaction to China's recent show of assertiveness over the SCS/WPS, particularly in the Scarborough Shoals/Panatang Shoals, long considered a traditional fishing ground for Filipino fishermen.

'If Deng Xiaoping were alive, he would be deeply concerned'

Mahbubani chronicles China's recent show of assertiveness in dealing with its perceived critics and with those it has territorial disputes as a departure from its so-called "peaceful rise" policy which placed priority on economic growth in carrying out its foreign relations. He mentions the forceful handling of its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands and the diplomatic snub of South Korea and India over perceived slights. But he said all of these mistakes pale in comparison with what China did to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in July. Under Chinese pressure, ASEAN's current chair, Cambodia, did not want the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting communiqué to refer to bilateral disputes in the South China Sea resulting in failure to agree to a joint communiqué for the first time in 45 years.

He said that this short-term victory may prove to be pyrrhic to China if as a result "it may have lost 20 years of painstakingly accumulated goodwill, the result of efforts such as the ASEAN-China free-trade agreement signed in November 2002." More importantly, he says that "China's previous leaders had calculated that a strong and unified ASEAN provided a valuable buffer against any possible US containment strategy. Now, by dividing ASEAN, China has provided America with its best possible geopolitical opportunity in the region. If Deng Xiaoping were alive, he would be deeply concerned."

'China's geopolitical blunder'

Mahbubani cites another geopolitical blunder in China's insistence on the nine-dotted line as the basis for their claim of "indisputable sovereignty" over the SCS which has put them somewhat metaphorically between "a rock and a hard place". While the nine-dotted line is likely to be untenable under international law, the Chinese public has been conditioned over generations that the South China Sea belongs to China and any retreat from this position would be considered fatal to the current leadership. Clearly a compromise is required but China no longer has the kind of strong leadership provided by Deng and his predecessor, Mao Zedong, who can get away with it. He says "the challenge for the world now is that China has become politically pluralistic: no leader is strong enough to make wise unilateral concessions." This is a critical point which I have been consistently flagging in previous columns which I have said if not recognized can lead to miscalculation and therefore to severe, including violent escalation.

'Rally around the flag'

Which brings me to Raffy Alunan's fine article calling on us to rally around the flag to prepare ourselves for the possibility of a conflict with China. In the event this happens, he expects China will employ [sic] "unrestricted warfare - militarily (conventional, unconventional, weapons of mass destruction); economically; cyberwarfare; sabotage of strategic infrastructure (information,

financial, energy, telecommunications, etc); exploitation of socio-cultural-economic stresses to divide societies further; etc, etc.” He warns that “we have been given a preview of what it will do to us when it halted the flow of tourists and stopped banana imports for a while a few months ago over the Panatag issue.” Raffy then goes on to prescribe what we need to do to strengthen ourselves economically, politically, diplomatically and militarily. He admits that the administration is well aware of what needs to be done and needs support. I do not disagree but I think in fact, previous administrations were also well aware of what needed to be done but failed to come to grips with the enormity of the challenge. This administration is certainly on the right track and doing its darndest but I am afraid this is a challenge that will continue beyond our lifetime. These are challenges we have to address anyway even without the SCS/WPS in the equation.

But I digress. The relevant point here is the call to arms – aligning ourselves firmly with the US and its allies in the region and arming ourselves to the teeth (or at least what \$2 billion annually will buy you as Raffy calculates) – and this is a matter of great concern. I am sure that Raffy, who impressed me from his Cabinet days, as perceptive and analytical, did not mean to eschew a diplomatic solution. But the fact that this was not mentioned may give rise to a perception that there is no other way. He must mean that yes we should still do so, but from a position of strength. The trouble with this concept is that getting ourselves in that position will take generations to achieve – and certainly China will not wait for us to get to that stage.

If there is ever a good time to assert its sovereignty, now would be as good as any from China’s perspective. Some Chinese commentators have in fact suggested that it is time to teach the Philippines (and Vietnam) a lesson in humility. With sufficient provocation, they might just do that with unpredictable consequences for everyone. Why can this not be a realistic scenario?

‘China’s leadership by consensus’

China’s leadership post-Jiang Zhe Min (whose legitimacy was established by his being chosen by the last of the long marcher Deng Xiaoping and other party elders) has become more pluralistic. It is now a leadership by consensus with presumptive leader Xi Jinping as the first among equals. Xi is considered a member of the so-called “princelings” as opposed to the Communist Youth Party who count the current President Hu Jintao and presumptive Premier Li Keqiang in their numbers. We should understand that the new Chinese leadership in general, and Xi Jinping in particular, will be confronted by many pressing challenges, including the transformation of China’s driver of economic growth from export-led growth to one more driven by domestic consumption and innovation. There are other potentially destabilizing factors such as the property bubble, environmental damage, economic inequality, resource constraints, and rising labor costs. Public perception and political decisions in China cannot be controlled as before because social media now plays a very important role in driving it. Public opinion has become a factor because information can no longer be as easily manipulated as in the past.

At a time when the leadership is in transition and there are factions vying for supremacy, it would be disastrous for his cause if presumptive leader Xi Jinping appears too soft not only now but in the years when he is still consolidating his power. And the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is the wild card here, often with its own agenda. On the other hand, there is also a downside to us being perceived by China as being too much on the side of the US. China’s acquiescing to US pressure will also be seen as a sign of weakness. You can bet that China’s leaders will make great effort not to be viewed as such. If, as feared, China’s painful transformation from a high growth economy to a modest one occurs and there is social dislocation, the idea of some violent confrontation away from home, to take attention away from this development and rally the public, becomes even more attractive. Right now international opinion and preoccupation with domestic problems is probably all that is keeping things simmering but not boiling over.

I have no magic solution to this issue other than to preach patience, perseverance, recognize the importance of “face” and appreciate what is going on in China. Flexibility is also called for – in our position and in our mode of negotiation. We should be careful not to paint ourselves into a corner much as China has done with its nine-dotted line argument. We must not discount the offer of joint development and leaving the sovereignty issue aside outright. The use of commercial arrangements as a device to go around politically sensitive issues should be explored. Finally, we should speak with one voice but we must also use alternate channels of communicating with the Chinese side. This means that plurilateral fora should not be the sole means of negotiating with China.