

Speaking with one voice in the West Philippine Sea

By Jose Antonio Custodio

The first attempt to seriously confront the existentialist threat from China began during the administration of President Benigno Simeon Aquino III. Previous administrations, from Fidel Ramos Jr. all the way to that of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's, sought either to pay lip service to resistance through terribly underfunded or even unfunded military modernization programs, useless confidence building measures with China that amounted to a lot of diplomatic cocktail receptions that did not persuade the Chinese to give up on their outrageous territorial claims, and even accommodating Chinese pressure and influence especially during the Arroyo years.

The Philippines was given a rude awakening in 2012 as to what the Chinese threat was all about when it seized and held on to Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) even after negotiations that were brokered by the Americans between the Filipinos and Chinese sides resulted in an agreement of mutual withdrawal. The Chinese refused to vacate the shoal and basically trashed the agreement. Stung by that, the PNoy administration pursued a legal case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. A comprehensive plan was put in motion to push back against China that encompassed the legal side, diplomatic side, the military modernization side, the peace process, and economic revitalization.

A communications plan was then established to ensure that the PNoy administration was to speak with one voice on any issue pertaining to the West Philippine Sea and related matters. The spokesman from the Department of Foreign Affairs was given that task although at specific times other spokespeople or even Secretaries could speak about China as long as it was part of their Department or Agency mandate. It was not necessarily perfectly executed but it greatly reduced competing narratives from emerging in the PNoy administration. This was a lesson that was learned from the Bajo de Masinloc crisis wherein two competing accounts clashed with each other, one coming from the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the other from the Office of Senator Antonio Trillanes IV. Furthermore, with the DFA being assigned the task of being the lead agency in the issuance of statements, it was also felt by others that measures to push back against China that did not involve diplomacy such as physically reoccupying Bajo de Masinloc were ignored by that department. So in the end, the country did win in the arbitration court in 2016, whereas ten years later, in 2026, China still controls Bajo de Masinloc.

Following the PNoy administration, efforts against China were suppressed by the pro-Beijing position of the Duterte administration which did its best to instill an atmosphere of defeatism and cowardice among the Filipino people. It would take another six years before the Philippines went

back towards the path of facing and pushing back against China. In the meantime, the Duterte administration just made things worse when it opened the gates to more Chinese infiltration into our politics, economy, and even society, not because Rodrigo Duterte believed in peace. It was a utilitarian opportunistic approach as he used the Chinese to strengthen his control and influence over the Filipinos while he treacherously advanced their agenda in the Philippines.

The election of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. as president saw a recalibration away from a pro-Beijing stand to one resisting Chinese aggression. In a way it is similar to what the PNoy administration had done previously albeit in a more difficult environment than what existed in 2010 to 2016. Marcos inherited a weakened economy that was pummeled by the pandemic and the corruption prevalent during the Duterte administration whereas the PNoy administration created a strong economy that was eventually wasted and plundered by Duterte. That substantial pivot away from China would not have happened had there been no falling out between the Marcos and Duterte camp that was brought about by an unsuccessful attempt by the latter to impose its will on the former.

With the Duterte camp out of the way in decision making processes in the BBM administration, Marcos Jr. was now free to implement programs for the West Philippine Sea that had been frozen or stalled by Duterte. However it appeared that six years of the pernicious pro-China policies of Duterte had the effect of releasing a tidal wave of pent up feelings and emotions among those who had continued to advocate for the West Philippine Sea during the suppressive Duterte era. From being framed by Duterte as villains, pro West Philippine Sea advocates were once again treated with the respect, dignity, and provided with the support that they needed. This then caused a cacophony of voices from various departments, agencies, and sectors involved in WPS concerns. Some even ended up bickering with each other.

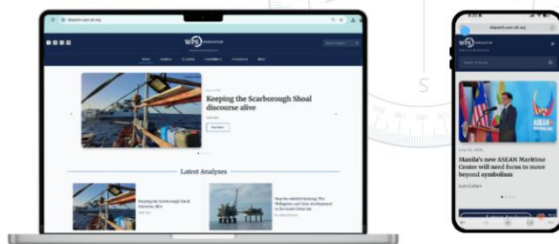
It is obvious that from a government standpoint that it should speak with a single voice in this issue. The thing is what entity is best equipped to undertake it? The obvious choice is the Department of Foreign Affairs which is what was done during the PNoy administration. However as pointed out earlier, during that administration there were already problems about the ability of that department to rein in other actions that it deemed too risky, the result of which is that opportunities to reoccupy Bajo de Masinloc were ignored due to an unreasonable fear that it would jeopardize the case in the arbitration court. That would repeat now especially since the DFA today has been criticized for being secretive and quite timid in its approaches to the West Philippine Sea. It had allowed the Chinese diplomatic mission in the Philippines to insult leading Filipino leaders with seldom a protest from DFA. Its timidity against the Chinese and its overt efforts to placate China has been stated by critics as undermining the Philippine claim in the WPS. Worse, the DFA publicly lashed out at critics of its timid policies by releasing a combative press statement against one of them.

It is possible to still come up with a single government spokesperson as long as whatever position said official publicly declares is a product of coordination among other departments and agencies and not solely just that of the DFA. This is difficult to accomplish because the DFA has a tendency to lord it over not just in diplomatic concerns but even matters pertaining to national defense and external security because it erroneously thinks it is the country's first line of defense and not our outposts, vessels, aircraft and personnel in the West Philippine Sea. However that too was brought about by the lack of assertiveness of past Secretaries of National Defense who tended to defer to the DFA even in matters of foreign aggressive actions. The solution then is for those in the West Philippine Sea advocacy, whether in or out of government to remain assertive in advancing their interests and positions especially if the opposition from other government entities becomes unreasonably accommodating to Beijing. Only then will Philippine national interests be protected and not subjected to the weakness of those who still stubbornly pursue appeasement with China in the West Philippine Sea.

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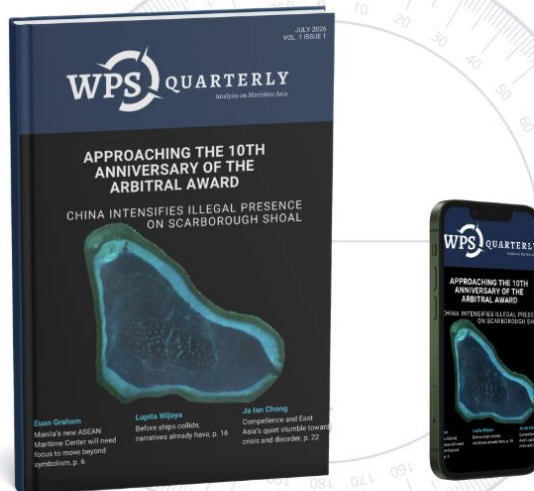
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