



Photos Paint a Point of No Return over the Disputed South China Sea

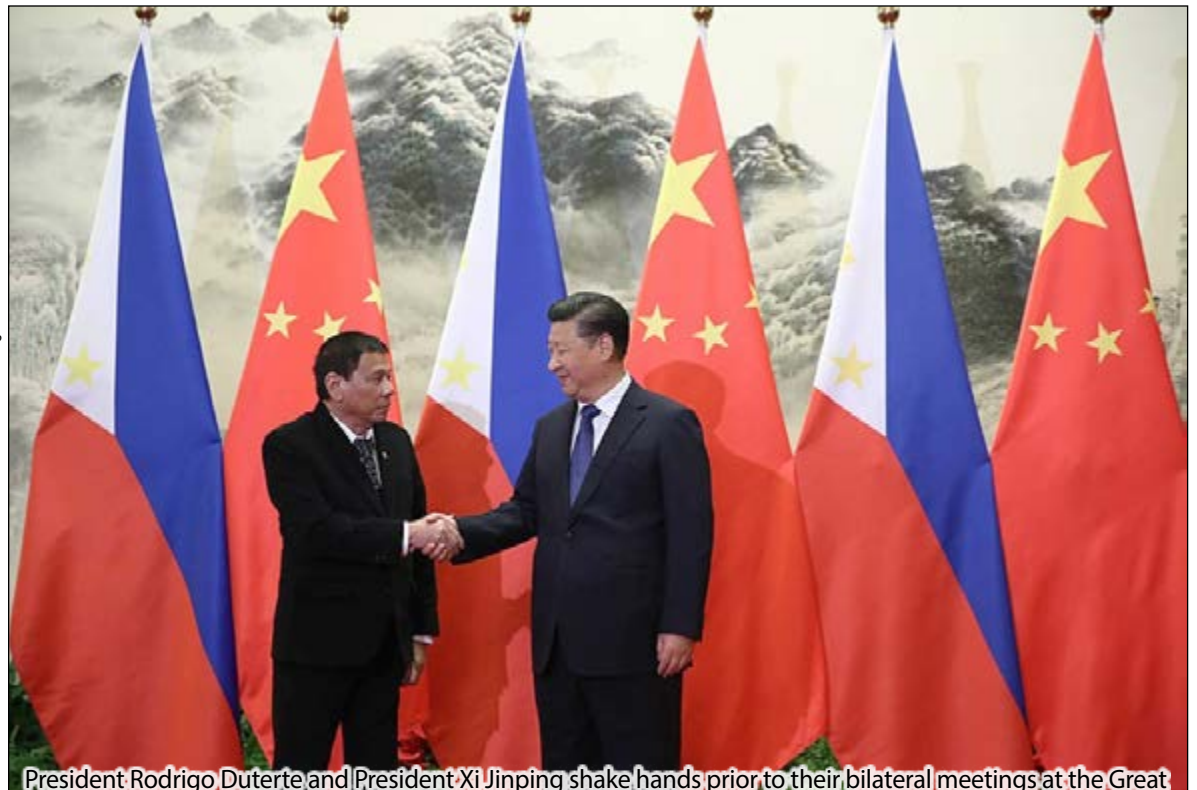
OE Watch Commentary: The Philippines has lost a lot of ground in its claims to the Spratly Islands. The following article excerpts highlight some of the political, military, and economic issues surrounding the situation. The Spratly Islands are among the most heavily disputed territories in the world, with China moving in and taking physical control over many of them through “unrestrained” construction of military facilities. According to the article, much of China’s military construction appears to be complete or nearly complete and the country has placed various military ships, including new generation frigates, coast guard, replenishment, and large cargo vessels among them.

One of the more salient points in the article is how Panganiban (Mischief Reef) lies within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea and was recognized in 2016 by the UN-backed permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague as belonging to the Philippines. However, this has not stopped China from building a runway, hangars, control tower and radomes, claiming the island for itself. Nor has a 2002 trade agreement between China and ASEAN, which stipulated that in any issues involving the South China Sea, concerned parties must follow restraint and not introduce any activity that could complicate the issue.

The article also points out that North Korea’s missile and atomic weapons tests over the past year had helped to draw international attention away from China’s activities in the South China Sea. Despite this, the author stresses that “the Philippines was not exactly unaware of the Chinese military buildup in the Spratlys.” Harry Roque, a presidential spokesperson in the Philippines, voiced little to no concern over China’s military buildup on the reefs. This should come as no surprise since, as the article points out, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who had formed a strategic relationship with China and who had come to power two weeks prior to the 2016 ruling, refused to take measures to protect Manila’s claims, “wooing China instead for loans and investments.”

According to the article, some of the implications for the Philippines, should it not be able to assert its claim, include the fear that China will never return the territory it grabbed. The country could also lose 80 percent of its EEZ in the South China Sea, which would jeopardize its energy security and source of food. **End OE Watch Commentary (Hurst)**

“If the Philippines does not assert its legal victory, it stands to lose 80 percent of its EEZ in the South China Sea, covering 381,000 square kilometers of maritime space....”



President Rodrigo Duterte and President Xi Jinping shake hands prior to their bilateral meetings at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Source: Philippine Government, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3APresident_Duterte_handshake_with_President_Xi.jpg, Public Domain.

Source: Frances Mangosing, “New Photos Show China is Nearly Done with its Militarization of South China Sea,” *Inquirer.net*, 5 February, 2018. <http://www.inquirer.net/specials/exclusive-china-militarization-south-china-sea>

The extent of development on the reefs show that China has gone ahead with building military outposts in the Spratlys despite a 2002 agreement with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) not to change any features in the sea.

At the same time, China has softened the impact of its military buildup with pledges of investments to the Philippines and talk of a framework for negotiating with Asean a code of conduct for the management of rival claims in the strategic waterway.

North Korea’s missile and atomic weapon tests also helped draw international attention away from China’s construction activities on the reefs, although recent pronouncements from Malacañang indicated the Philippines was not exactly unaware of the Chinese military buildup in the Spratlys.

“And the area we will lose is huge, as big as the land area of the Philippines, about 300,000 square kilometers,” Carpio said.

China will never return the territory it grabs... “We cannot go to the (International Court of Justice) because China has to agree and China will never agree to submit to arbitration.”

China has ignored The Hague tribunal’s July 2016 ruling that invalidated Beijing’s sweeping claim to the South China Sea and declared it violated Manila’s sovereign right to fish and explore for resources in its own EEZ. But President Duterte, who came to power two weeks before the ruling came down, has refused to assert the Philippine victory, wooing China instead for loans and investments.

If the Philippines does not assert its legal victory, it stands to lose 80 percent of its EEZ in the South China Sea, covering 381,000 square kilometers of maritime space, including the entire Recto Bank, or Reed Bank, and part of the Malampaya gas field off Palawan, as well as all of the fishery, oil and gas and mineral resources there...”