Philippines-China Relations: Beyond the Territorial Disputes

by Andrea Chloe A. Wong

Relations between the Philippines and China, which span several centuries, have been predominantly warm and cordial. But in recent years, both countries have experienced fiery issues that have resulted in their “cooling off,” hitting a low point since the establishment of their diplomatic relations in June 1975.

Philippines-China relations have lately been dominated by the territorial disputes in the West Philippine Sea, which has escalated since the naval standoff over the Scarborough Shoal in April 2012 and aggravated by issues of Chinese illegal occupation, unlawful establishment of infrastructures, and incidents of incursions and encroachment within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Bilateral ties took a downturn when the Philippine government filed an arbitration case against China under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in January 2013 challenging the legality of China’s nine-dash line claim over the contested waters.

Although the territorial disputes have been in the spotlight for years, these should not hinder the two countries from maintaining cooperation in other areas. Given the wide-ranging and comprehensive ties between the Philippines and China, other aspects in the relations, such as those mentioned in this paper, should prompt them to cooperate for their mutual benefit.

Bilateral trade. Trade between the Philippines and China is not only stable, but also growing. According to the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), total trade reached USD 14.6 billion in 2013, which is a considerable increase from the years 2011 and 2012 and rising trade statistics indicate that economic and political areas in the bilateral relations can be compartmentalized for mutual benefit.

The Philippines, however, may have to face stricter implementation of rules and regulations by Chinese authorities in its trade dealings and commercial transactions. This was evident when China imposed stringent food and safety standards and requirements leading to the ban on Philippine banana imports in 2012 upon the discovery of millibugs in several containers of bananas shipped to China. Moreover, with the possibility of the recurrence of a similar or related incident remaining high, both the Philippine and Chinese governments may likewise be tempted to enforce stricter rules in other areas such as visa applications. Such actions could prove counterproductive and would only result in fueling bilateral tensions.

Tourism promotion. China continues to be an important source of tourists for the Philippines. According to the Philippine Department of Tourism (DOT), over 400,000 Chinese visited the country in 2013. Greater Chinese tourist arrivals look promising as the DOT intensifies tourism promotion in China. As a result of the “It’s More Fun in the Philippines” campaign, the Philippines has become a choice destination for Chinese tourists.

Sports and cultural exchange. The use of soft power – in the form of sports and cultural diplomacy – is deemed necessary in neutralizing the display of hard power by the Philippines and China and in leveling a traditionally asymmetrical relationship between the two countries. Sports and cultural activities have come to contribute increasingly in fostering understanding among Filipinos and Chinese. Former NBA star Yao Ming visited the Philippines for an exhibition game between Philippine and Chinese basketball teams in May 2013. Meanwhile, the Philippine Consulate in Shanghai hosted the “Flavors of the Philippines” in September 2013, a cultural event highlighting Filipino food, traditional music, and folk dance. The continuous organization of sports and cultural initiatives can serve to strengthen people-to-people ties.

Media and public opinion. Governments play important role in generating strong national support and in enhancing bilateral ties by improving domestic and international perceptions. For instance, the Department of Foreign Affairs organized the “Chinese Media Familiarization Tour” of the Philippines in August 2013. The event invited members of the Chinese media and acquainted them with Philippine history, politics, and foreign policy with the aim of enabling them to produce more accurate and balanced news.
about the country. Such an endeavor narrows the large gap in mutual perceptions between the two countries and their citizens. 

Media exchanges and similar activities can be used to prevent political issues from spilling over to people-to-people relations. The Chinese government can call on its state-controlled media while the Philippine government can encourage its free press to emphasize other positive aspects of the bilateral relations and subsequently counterbalance hostile public perceptions and prevent public tensions from heating up. Ultimately, an enlightened and informed nation—rather than an antagonistically aroused public—can create a more cordial atmosphere for bilateral exchange.

Prospects for positive partnership

The predominance of political and security issues belie the vastness and multidimensional nature of Philippines-China relations. There are many opportunities for collaboration, cooperation, and exchanges that both countries can explore, if not reinforce. Ultimately, the goal is to prevent longstanding disputes from affecting existing and potential cooperative endeavors, especially in light of growing economic interdependence and deep cultural affinity between the two nations. Moreover, it behooves both the Philippine and Chinese governments to encourage more people-to-people exchanges and pave the way for greater public interaction. These efforts can serve as a strategic investment, one that would earn public goodwill enough to contain or defuse skepticism and enmity at the state level.

It is critical for the Philippines and China to prevent bilateral issues from straining the atmosphere for cooperation, and this means going beyond the tense and unconstructive cycle of “action-reaction” – the frequent provocation in contested maritime areas resulting in vehemence and hostile protests. Overcoming contentious differences requires significant effort from both countries, which does not necessarily mean completely casting maritime conflicts and territorial issues aside, but simply taking them off the center* in order to create more opportunities to focus on other positive and productive areas of the relations.

Since it merely takes a hostile incident at sea to effect a reversion to mutual suspicion and mistrust, the Philippines and China must remember the enduring value of maintaining functional cooperation to sustain bilateral relations beyond the disputes. For the Philippines, China is a vital economic partner that it must constantly deal with to gain financial benefits for the sake of its national development. For China, the Philippines is an important nation that it must get along with to gain the trust and respect of other nations. Moreover, it behooves both the Philippine and Chinese governments to encourage people exchanges and pave the way for greater public interaction. These efforts can serve as a strategic investment, one that would earn public goodwill enough to contain or defuse skepticism and enmity at the state level.

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While protecting territorial sovereignty is paramount, a country must also work with other countries for other benefits and mutual gains. It is thus indispensable for the Philippines and China as neighbors to engage each other despite having diverging geopolitical and security concerns. Furthermore, such concerns ought to motivate the two countries to exercise restraint in dealing with salient issues and to develop greater, long-term bilateral cooperation.


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