

Seen from the Philippines: Dealing with China's rise

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From a broader perspective, the tensions in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) are only secondarily due to our maritime territorial disputes with China. These tensions are primarily an offshoot of the worsening great power rivalry between the United States and China. That rivalry encompasses multiple issues and has its own dynamics. As a small nation caught in the middle of this complex conflict, we need to keep a firm view of our long-term interests, and where they lie at different points in time. We must be ready to defend these interests at all times, even as we must take care not to cause any provocation that may be exploited by either of the two major parties in this conflict.

This requires a balancing act that is delicate and uniquely ours to work out. We have been America's treaty ally in this part of the world since 1951, a consequence of having been its former colony. Japan invaded the Philippines at the start of World War II mainly because of the US military bases in the country. Six years after the end of that war, America made a commitment under the US-RP Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 to defend the Philippines against any future external aggression.

But more than this treaty, it is the "special relationship" between the two countries that, for better or worse, has drawn the Philippines closer than any country in the Asean into the orbit of American geostrategic power. The US has always regarded the Philippines as its principal outpost in Southeast Asia. In turn, our nation's leaders have acknowledged this by finding ways to accommodate the presence of US forces in the country even after the expiration of the US-RP Military Bases Agreement in 1991. Today, we remain not only the most Westernized society in the region but indeed also the most Americanized. Every public opinion poll has confirmed the durability of this pro-US inclination. All these have unfortunately made our neighbors, not just China, see us as a willing tool of American interests.

Aware of what this connection to the US does to the country's prospects in an increasingly multipolar world, Filipino nationalist voices have constantly raised the need to diversify our economic and political relations in the world by adopting a foreign policy that is independent of the imperatives of American global power. A key issue in this debate has been our attitude toward China's steady rise as a global economic and military power.

In 1975, the Philippines under Marcos Sr. decided it was the right time to establish diplomatic relations with neighboring "Red China" despite the latter's ill-concealed support for the local Maoist rebel groups. That opening, however, did not happen in a vacuum. It took place in the context of the developing rapprochement between the US and China, starting with the 1971 visit of Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon's national security adviser, followed by the pathbreaking visit of President Nixon himself the year after. It was not a coincidence that America's engagement with China was also happening at a time when Sino-Soviet relations had worsened to the point of imminent war

between the two socialist powers.

Thus, from being perceived as an exporter of revolution to the Third World, China became the darling of the West overnight. The US eagerly opened its universities to China's young people, where they could learn the latest technology and, it was hoped, also the values that might transform China into a full-fledged capitalist society and democracy. In return, China opened its doors to the largest companies in the world, luring them with its abundant supply of cheap, hardworking, and docile workers, and its permissive environmental laws. The ultimate agenda of the Chinese leadership was, of course, to accelerate the acquisition of modern technology that they could apply to speed up the modernization of their own economy and military.

Four decades of methodical and calibrated adoption of advanced Western technology and knowledge have brought China to where it is today—a highly developed economy that leads the rest of the world in just about every area of cutting-edge technology, under the watchful eye of a highly disciplined communist party. It is this China that is today challenging US supremacy in nearly all domains—economic, technological, military, etc. As China's leader Xi Jinping reminds his people, the era of submission to foreign domination is over. China has found and assumed its place in the modern world, and it is signaling that it will no longer countenance any threat to its national existence and interests.

It is not difficult to express admiration for China's amazing achievement and tenacity if we could momentarily close our eyes to the icy arrogance and cynical use of oppressive power that seem to accompany its phenomenal rise. One element of global influence that China appears to have neglected to cultivate is soft power—the ability to shape attitudes in the long term.

In its bid to assert its newfound capacities in different areas, China has exhibited the ways of a bully impatient for recognition—such as the ready use of brute force to secure submission when remunerative power does not work. The US does this, too, but it always tries hard to mask its aggression with ideals. China just expects to be feared.

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P.S.

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