

Washington is inciting disputes between Beijing and Manila for its own gain

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The prospect for a negotiated settlement between China and the Philippines over some Nansha islands and islets appears possible with the change of government in Manila. The term of president Benigno Aquino III who rejected bilateral talks with Beijing ended on June 30. He has been replaced by Rodrigo Duterte in the Malacañan Palace. The new government has made overtures about holding bilateral talks with Beijing.

Relations became strained under the Aquino III administration. It restarted the territorial dispute and welcomed the revitalization of the US military presence in Southeast Asia.

In 2011, Aquino decided to start referring to the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea to emphasize the country's claims, and later wrote this change into law. Straining ties further, his administration initiated legal action against China through the Permanent Court of Arbitration on October 29, 2015.

On July 5, 2016, just one week before the ruling, Duterte offered to hold talks with China. While he will surely use the Permanent Court of Arbitration award as leverage in bilateral talks, Duterte appears to be keen on a settlement.

While campaigning for the presidency, Duterte's discourse on China sent mixed signals. It shifted between antagonistic and conciliatory. This was a tactic to gain the support of Filipinos with nationalist attitudes and those that want peace and trade with China.

At the international level, Duterte may have sent mixed signals to satisfy both the US and China. His antagonistic remarks pleased Washington while his conciliatory remarks signaled that he was willing to hold talks with Beijing. Interestingly, Duterte was the only key politician in the 2016 Philippine general elections who publicly admitted that he went to talk about the Spratly Islands with the US Embassy in Manila.

After Duterte won the election, his tone altered. He became much more cordial to China. Beijing wants cooperation and trade, not war or conflict with the Philippines and other member states of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its aim is to expand the Silk Road, both on land and sea, and to buttress regional integration and prosperity.

Like Duterte, the Chinese government has signaled that it is ready to hold direct negotiations with Manila.

Meanwhile, China has been insisting on the principle that disputes could be shelved as both sides could engage in joint projects to develop resources in the region.

What is at stake in the disputed zone are not only large amounts of hydrocarbon energy, fishing, and one of the most important maritime corridors and trade routes in the world. Chinese trade and energy supplies would be disrupted if maritime movement is halted in the South China Sea, which is why the US military is heavily focused on having a presence in the area.

Washington sees Beijing as a strategic rival. It is intentionally ratcheting tensions up in the South China Sea to justify its military presence there. Using coercive diplomacy, economic warfare and a strategy of tension, the US is trying to consign China to the position of a junior partner.

Ironically, while it is demonizing China as a regional threat, Washington is sending contradictory messages to its regional allies. The US has been vilifying Beijing while it simultaneously orders the military to hold military exercises with the Chinese.

Regional leaders should take notice of the US modus operandi.

US leaders are not willing to directly confront China. Instead they are using countries like the Philippines as pawns, leverage, and negotiating chips to either bargain with or obstruct an increasingly assertive and economically prosperous China.

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