



Relations between the Philippines and China after the Arbitration Ruling

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July 13, 2016

At long last, on July 12 the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague released the decision of the five-member International Arbitral Tribunal formed to hear the case filed by the Philippines against China on the South China Sea disputes. In addition to the moral victory that the Philippines enjoyed when it filed the case in January 2013, Manila now has the legal victory to support its maritime entitlements in the South China Sea; particularly in the maritime domain it calls the West Philippine Sea.

But what will be the direction of relations between the two countries after the arbitration? What will be the Philippines' next move now that it has a legal victory?

In his first cabinet meeting on June 30, immediately after his inauguration, President Rodrigo Duterte had already instructed his officials not to “taunt” or “flaunt” the arbitral ruling. New foreign affairs secretary Perfecto Yasay followed the presidential instruction when he made only a brief diplomatic statement, calling for restraint and sobriety, when the Philippine government received the ruling.

Evidently, the Philippine government does not want the ruling to be used as a reason for the escalation of security tensions in the South China Sea. It

acknowledges the enormous enforcement challenge given China's rejection and nonacceptance of the ruling. Though some Filipino protesters have strongly demanded that China leave the West Philippine Sea, the Philippine government has been more circumspect in its reaction in order to not agitate China, which is currently suffering from the humiliation caused by the ruling.

Immediately after receiving the ruling, President Duterte called an emergency meeting of the Cabinet Cluster on Security, Justice and Peace to identify the Philippines' next move. There is a general understanding in the Duterte administration of the strong need to repair damaged political ties with China.

Contrary to former president Benigno Aquino III, President Duterte has opened his channels of communication with Chinese president Xi Jinping in order to rebuild confidence between the two sides

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and usher in a new era in Philippines-China relations. In a very rare gesture, President Xi twice personally congratulated President Duterte on winning the presidency and assured the Philippines of China's goodwill as a close neighbor.

President Duterte is now counting on China's goodwill. Indeed, China needs to be reminded of this promise as it weighs its next actions in the South China Sea. The arbitral ruling should guide China on how to behave more responsibly in the South China Sea. ∞

Banner image source: Chinese structures on stilts at Mischief Reef in 1995. © ROMEO GACAD/AFP/Getty Images

This analysis was originally published on the maritimeawarenessproject.org website.



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