

'China-ASEAN ties too important to be strained by West Philippine Sea dispute'

By ALEXIS ROMERO

Security experts and former government officials have cited the need for more dialogues to resolve the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) dispute, which has been regarded as a potential source of conflict in the region.

Participants of last week's "Forum on South China Sea" in Makati stressed the vital role of diplomacy in maintaining stability and robust ties among Spratlys claimants.

And while the absence of major conflicts in the recent years has yielded optimism, there were concerns about the lack of a binding code of conduct among claimants, a condition that could trigger fresh squabbles.

"Diplomacy has a very important role in managing disputes with other countries. At the same time, I wish to signal that continued disputes on the South China Sea could lead to potential conflicts in the region," said former Foreign Affairs Secretary Domingo Siazon during the forum, which was organized by the Carlos P. Romulo Foundation.

Siazon, a former director of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, said the territorial dispute lingered even as the Southeast Asian countries and China had managed to improve their economic ties.

"It seems paradoxical that the Philippines, ASEAN and China have succeeded for the last 10 years to establish closer economic relations but remain unable to resolve the South China Sea dispute," he said.

"There are clear signs that the bigger economies in the Asian region need to improve the

management of their relations with each other."

Siazon said China is the Philippines' largest trading partner and an important member of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

According to Siazon, ASEAN was China's 4th largest trading partner. The regional bloc moved to third place in the first half of the year.

Citing a report by the Asian Development Bank, Siazon said about \$148 trillion or half of the world's gross domestic product would come from Asia by 2015. He said China alone would be the biggest economy by that time with a GDP of about \$63 trillion.

"There are of course caveats in this scenario like regional integration, good governance and continuing restructuring but perhaps most significant is the avoidance of a major conflict between the big economies," Siazon said.

"China and Philippine relations and China-ASEAN relations are too important to be frozen because of the dispute in the South China Sea," he added.

Siazon said ASEAN and China "should try to manage the disputes and go full speed ahead with our economic and political cooperation."

China, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan claim either part or the entire Spratly Islands, which is located in the West Philippine Sea.

The island group is said to be rich in mineral resources and has been the subject of a territorial dispute in the region.

Rommel Banlaoi, executive director of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism

Research and one of the forum participants, said diplomacy does not always lead to a settlement.

"Diplomacy is the most peaceful way to manage disputes but not a guarantee for dispute settlement. Diplomacy can only settle disputes if parties to the conflict are open for compromise," Banlaoi told The STAR.

"We need more dialogues to clear the air," he added.

Hasjim Djalal, director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Jakarta, warned that the prospects of conflict in the West Philippine Sea would continue to exist if the stakeholders do not manage their differences carefully.

"I hope that the dialogue procedure would continue. It should be noted, however, that cooperation on technical and scientific matters are relatively easier to achieve than solving political, territorial or jurisdictional issues," Djalal said.

Aside from the economic ties among claimants, also at stake is the freedom of navigation, the factor that prods non-littoral states to closely monitor the dispute.

"The right of free passage and freedom of navigation and the orderly and consensual exploitation of the resources of the South China Sea are matters of huge importance to all nations," said Frank Wisner, former US undersecretary of defense for policy.

Wisner, who also served as US Ambassador to the Philippines, said adherence to internationally-accepted norms is "a key factor in ensuring peace and shared development" of the West Philippine Sea.

"The United States looks to the nations of this area to find diplomatic solutions to differences. At the same time, it is committed to maintaining a robust military presence in Asia and will support its allies," he said.

However, Chen Shiqu, professor at China's Foreign Affairs University, believes external forces should not be involved in the West Philippine Sea issue.

"Internationalizing the South China Sea issue is undesirable as that will only further complicate the situation," Chen said.

According to Chen, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea cannot serve as a basis in asserting a territorial claim since it has no provisions on sovereignty.

Djalal said the spirit of cooperation has emerged in the West Philippine Sea as there has been no major armed conflict among the claimants since 1988.

Wisner, however, said the absence of binding code that would govern the conduct of claimant countries leaves room for misunderstandings.

"It is a matter of regret that the region's diplomacy has not moved vigorously and achieved a Code of Conduct to cover differences in the South China Sea," he said.

In 2002, China and Southeast Asian Nations signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in line with the efforts to resolve territorial disputes peacefully. However, specific and binding guidelines have yet to be approved.