

**Welcome Remarks**  
**by Ambassador Roberto R. Romulo**

On behalf of the Carlos P. Romulo Foundation, I would like to welcome you to this Forum on the South China Sea. The Forum is taking place amidst events that continue to unfold and injects urgency for dialogue.

Just recently, a commentary published in the Global Times - a newspaper under the Communist Party's *People's Daily* - said the South China Sea was the "ideal battlefield" for China to wage small-scale wars with rival claimants to territory in the area.

The article, titled "The Time to Teach Those Around the South China Sea A Lesson", was written by Long Tao, a strategic analyst with the China Energy Fund Committee, a non-government think tank. "We shouldn't waste the opportunity to launch some tiny-scale battles that could deter provocateurs from going further, he said. He added that punishing the "troublemakers" – the Philippines and Vietnam – should teach other Southeast Asian countries to behave. I hasten to add that no Chinese officials commented on this article so it cannot be taken as an official position. But that is not my point as you will soon see.

Running side by side with that commentary was an article by Sun Peisong, a director of the government-backed Lianyungang Development Research Institute in Jiangsu province. Sung criticized Long's view, saying any critical moves made by China in the South China Sea disputes would be used as an excuse by the US to take action to contain China's rising global influence.

Both articles were soon circulated by internet users. Almost 2,000 messages – and counting - supporting Long's view were reported. On the other hand, more than 1,000 internet users branded Sun a "traitor" in a more unrestrained manner.

This kind of debate and the intense emotion it generates is not unique to China. In Vietnam, monks have self-immolated and demonstrators have waved the PROC's flag painted over with a skull and cross-bone while shouting "Down with China".

Here in my own country, some national and local politicians have called China a bully and urged the government to fight back and demonstrate its sovereignty. They have called for the beefing up the government's presence in the territory and the granting oil exploration concessions in what is now called the West Philippine Sea.

Strategic and economic interests propel each claimant's position. That we all know. But there are other dynamics at play out there as well that influence actions and reactions by claimants which may not be as easy to rationalize and channel into peaceful discourse. Like the proverbial "genie in the bottle", nationalism is a factor that once let out, may not be so easy to put back in. It is what is driving the heated rhetoric and the general public's interest in some far off specks of land in a vast sea which they will probably never set their eyes on in their lifetime. And that is what may tilt governments – towards actions that are expedient domestically but which may not be rational and acceptable as a responsible member of the world community. So despite declarations of peaceful resolution, we cannot afford to keep the eye off the ball because of these dynamics.

I myself can associate with Mr. Sun. One of my businessman friends to whom I broached the idea of a Track II dialogue, dismissed the idea as fruitless and branded me a Neville Chamberlain for advocating what he calls a policy of appeasement.

But I am happy to say that I am not alone and woe to those who question their patriotism. There are as many voices of reason and circumspection out there as there are of jingoism and violence – within the general public and within officialdom. As you can see from our sponsors and the attendance here today, the business community is keenly aware of the significance of stability in the South China Sea. They realize its relevance not just to the economies in the region but those beyond as well. Conflict in the area

will not benefit anyone but the harm will be widespread. World commerce will be severely impaired surely. They appreciate the value of dialogue and welcome the declaration of all claimants for peaceful resolution.

So it is important that there be dialogues – official and non-official – to better inform the public to give governments breathing space from pressure from their domestic constituents, to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculations and provide avenues to cooperation and peaceful resolution. Official dialogues however need time to mature into effective mechanisms for resolving disputes. Non-official dialogues such as we are having help surface underlying reasons for each country's position and generate ideas for moving forward. Over time they may evolve into feasible options for policy makers to consider in formal talks. Governments are in a happy position to adopt recommendations or views they like, while rejecting others.

An appreciation of each party's strategic and economic interests is a key element to any resolution. These interests may not all be in congruence with each other but where they do, provides pathways for win-win solutions. Our hope as organizers of this Forum is for such discussions to take place to generate understanding and for ideas for moving forward to germinate. I would thus encourage speakers and participants to be frank but constructive at the same time.

This Forum would not have been made possible without the generous support of our sponsors. This is a purely private undertaking without government support save for the protocular assistance at the start of the forum. I would therefore like to thank the following for their generous support: The Philippine Star, San Miguel Corporation, The Zuellig Family, Philex Petroleum Corporation, Planters Development Bank, Aboitiz Foundation, Air Asia, Alsons Consolidated Resources, Ayala Corporation, Banco de Oro, Century Properties, Megaworld Corporation, Oriental Petroleum & Minerals Corporation, PHINMA Foundation, and Concepcion Industries. There are seven others who requested to remain anonymous. Their interest – and of the business community in

general - in subjects like this and support for such discussions gives me optimism that similar ventures in the future will have an audience.

I wish everyone a productive day.