

Basis for cautious optimism?

By TIMOTHY ONG

In a recent issue, the influential American magazine Foreign Policy asked a number of well-known commentators to make large predictions on the future. Of the nine predictions, most seemed far removed from our lives. One however was directly relevant to the Philippines and the other maritime state of East Asia.

The writer, Robert Kaplan, a member of the Defense Policy Board of the United States Defense Department predicted that "The South China Sea is the Future of Conflict".

Because of its geography as the main trade access to the booming economies of East Asia, its history of multiple and complex territorial claims, its geology of immense wealth in hydrocarbon resources, the South China Sea is increasingly the main arena of conflict and competition between a rising China on the one hand and the USA and other maritime states of the region on the other.

When I accepted former Philippines Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo's invitation to take part in the Carlos P Romulo Foundation's Forum on the South China Sea, I expected to have this bleak outlook confirmed.

Certainly there was little basis for optimism. China's 'nine dotted lines' claim although vaguely defined was ambitious in its reach. Joined together the dotted lines cover almost the entire South China Sea. Even something as innocuous as strengthening the 'Declaration on Conduct' between China and ASEAN to manage conflicting claims in the South China Sea had been almost impossible to agree upon with China showing no interest in anything binding.

At the conclusion of the forum, I was struck by two clear but

disconnected themes that sit uneasily with each other.

On the one hand, there was broad agreement that the issues underlying the conflicting claims are complex and intractable and inextricably linked to national and strategic interests.

On the other hand, there was broad agreement that the conflicting claims must be managed peacefully without disrupting Asia Pacific regionalism and economic integration.

These two themes are supported by developments within the Asia Pacific. The rise in tensions arising from conflicting claims, the build up in arms and increasing nationalist posturing has gone hand in hand with rapidly growing economic links between China, the Philippines and the other maritime states of the South China Sea. Almost bewildering to the western eye, the parties to the conflicting claims have continued to embrace each other while squabbling. In short, nothing so far has come in the way of doing business.

What explains growing tensions on the one hand and business as usual on the other? The cynic in the Philippines and elsewhere in ASEAN will be tempted to see this as appeasement or at any rate accommodation of China's growing might. As a Vietnamese delegate at the Forum observed, China's invitation for to put aside sovereignty issues and focus on joint development is a little like "What is mine is mine; what is yours is mine and we are willing to share".

My take is less cynical. My view is that ASEAN's willingness to separate the difficult issues of sovereignty from the practical ones of resource management; to emphasize common interests and de-emphasize differences; to focus on managing conflict rather than securing complete solutions reflects a necessary pragmatism.

It was this pragmatism that led to the Thai-Malaysian Development Area, a mutually beneficial framework for managing their conflicting claims in the Gulf of Thailand and to the successful management of a number of territorial disputes within the region. As a distinguished Indonesian participant and one of ASEAN's leading experts on the Law of the Sea, urged: "Start with the less sensitive issues and focus on common ground".

This ASEAN pragmatism reminds me of the distinction the scholar James P. Carse made between two types of "games", finite and infinite. Finite games are played with the goal of winning. Infinite games on the other hand, do not have a knowable beginning or ending. They are played with the goal of continuing play.

Listening to the diverse views from participants across the Asia Pacific at the forum, observing the inflexibility of final positions and the pragmatism of next steps, I concluded that the continuing skirmishes around the conflicting claims of the South China Sea, diplomatic, military and otherwise should be viewed and assessed as an infinite game. The aim is not to win; the aim is to keep playing.

With this thought at the conclusion of the forum, I began to feel that there is some basis for a cautious optimism on the South China Sea.

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