

Column for Business Mirror
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The Entrepreneur

The economic side of the Spratly issue

The renewed tension involving the Spratly Islands, particularly the Chinese incursions into the islands and reefs that lie within the Philippine territories, highlighted our flawed foreign policy stance. I called it a policy of fear.

In the past few years, I noticed how our Department of Foreign Affairs has been too subservient when a giant like China expresses its displeasure toward us.

That policy of fear is a taboo in establishing and maintaining relationships among countries that look at each other as equal, sovereign states.

Contrary to fears that projecting an independent and sovereign stance will be considered as a provocative move, I believe China and other countries will respect us more, for the simple reason that they, too, expect other countries to respect them as independent and sovereign nations.

Some years back, I recall, too, we kicked the Americans out of the military bases in Subic and Clark, which used to provide us with a defense shield against external threats. That was fine, but we should have filled up the vacuum that was created with the departure of the American forces. We should have taken up the responsibility and the burden of building our own defense force.

However, the proceeds from the privatization of the bases were not used to modernize the Armed Forces of the Philippines. I'm not saying let's go to war or build up a military that is capable of waging war, but I believe that any self-respecting nation should have even a small, token defense force. And this should not be directed just at the current dispute over the Spratly Islands, but for our long-term national interests.

Building up our defense force is one step toward developing international respect for the Philippines as an independent and sovereign nation. The second step, with regards to the Spratlys, is to coordinate with the other countries affected by China's incursions like Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

The Philippines can initiate a top-level meeting with these countries, not to declare war with China, but to declare that we do not condone the incursions in the disputed islands and reefs. That way, China will know that we're not alone.

As an initial reaction, I understand the government's move to call the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea. The Chinese name it Nansha while the Vietnamese refer to it as the East Sea. But, for the sake of peace in the region, I agree with the proposal to call it instead the Southeast Asian Sea. But this change of name should be a collective decision by all the countries surrounding that sea.

I don't see the Philippines going to war or even China waging war with us or with the other countries claiming the Spratlys. In fact, China has never been known as a conqueror. Throughout history, the Chinese have been known as traders. They look at us as a market for their products, and we should look at them the same way.

Having said all this, and taking into account the various and often contrasting views over the Spratlys issue, I believe that all of us Filipinos should take a united stand and speak with one voice in support of our President's stance on the issue.

You might ask why I am talking about foreign policy or geopolitics in a column that is supposed to discuss business and the economy. My reason: Everything boils down to the economy!

We must focus on growing our economy because in the end, a nation that has a strong economy will have a more credible independent stance in the global arena.

A strong economy creates advantages that come together – it provides resources to build up and maintain and adequate armed forces, improves our competitiveness in a global market that is increasingly being dominated by China and gain for us the respect of our Asian neighbors.

Link:

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