



## Mischief Reef: A Double Betrayal by Ralph A. Cossa

Manila: "Betrayed!" That's the word I have been hearing most from people both within and outside the national security community in Manila. Betrayed twice, once by China and then again by the Philippines' ASEAN colleagues.

The specific action generating these comments, of course, is the ongoing Chinese "renovation" activities on Mischief Reef in the disputed Spratly Islands. In 1995, the Chinese created quite a stir when they unilaterally extended their reach into the disputed territories by constructing what they called "fisherman's structures" on Mischief Reef, a tiny half-submerged atoll that lies well within the Philippines' 200 mile exclusive economic zone (and over 1,000 miles from the Chinese mainland).

In the wake of that action, and after a strong unified protest by all the ASEAN states, Beijing and Manila agreed to a "code of conduct" to avoid new provocations or potentially destabilizing actions. China also pledged to abide by the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea which called for mutual restraint. Anyone who has seen the photos of the recent Chinese activity can clearly see that the so-called renovations are a violation of both promises. A series of hardened structures have been constructed, complete with military communications facilities, and guarded by Chinese naval ships and anti-aircraft artillery. The facilities represent a clear, unambiguous change in the previously agreed status quo.

While most Filipinos feel betrayed by the Chinese, they were not totally surprised; after all, this is not the first time that China has broken its promises. What did surprise, and has profoundly disappointed them is the second betrayal – the failure of their ASEAN colleagues to take a strong stand against China's dangerously provocative action. Unlike 1995, when a strong statement was issued by ASEAN (followed by an equally strong statement by the U.S.), this time ASEAN has chosen to bury its head in the sand. The recent ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Hanoi ended not with a bang but with a whimper.

Philippine President Estrada went to the Hanoi Summit armed with convincing documentation (including photos) to demonstrate that significant Chinese expansion, including increased militarization, was underway. He fully expected that the closing statement would condemn such unilateral destabilizing actions, even if China was not mentioned by name. But little was said publicly on the issue. Several of the ASEAN leaders raised the subject privately with Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao during the follow-on meetings with other Asian leaders (including Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung), but Hu reportedly blew them off with scant explanation.

If the Chinese decision to expand their facilities at Mischief Reef was intended as a test both of the resolve and diplomatic skills of the new Philippine administration and of ASEAN unity in the wake of ASEAN's recent expansion and internal tensions caused by the Asian financial crisis and other domestic turmoil -- and I believe it was -- then both Manila and ASEAN failed miserably. The message to China is that further expansion will not be seriously protested, much less contested. This is a recipe for potential disaster.

My own assessment of potential triggers of conflict in the South China Sea (published earlier this year by the Pacific Forum CSIS) cautioned that certain actions by Spratly Island claimants could easily plunge the region into a conflict that no one wanted, and that would serve no one's interests. High on this list of potential triggers was "creeping occupation," the type of unilateral action once again being conducted by China to expand its foothold on Mischief Reef.

Other identified actions that could trigger broader conflict included the seizure of fishing boats or other commercial vessels within claimed boundaries. Showdowns between military ships patrolling in disputed areas could easily evolve into gunfire exchanges, which could further escalate into naval engagements. A Philippine attempt to "keep the invaders out" or a Chinese attempt to enforce its "sovereign right" to repair its structures falls into this category.

Growing out of the above trigger is the ever-present possibility of accidents or miscalculations. Efforts by one state to enforce "rights" which others (rightly or wrongly) may not recognize can also result in rival navies stumbling into conflict. In short, China's ongoing actions and potential Philippine reactions (or overreaction) are an accident waiting to happen. ASEAN's failure to confront the problem increases the prospects for further miscalculation.

One Philippine congressman, Roilo Golez, out of frustration over ASEAN's and his own government's inaction, is calling for a thorough review of the Philippines pro-Beijing "one China" policy, noting that Taipei continues to be a true friend (and financial supporter) of Manila even as Beijing continues to stab the Philippines in the back. At last count, 80 of his colleagues had voiced support for his resolution. De-recognizing China at this point is probably too strong a step. But a serious debate on the subject would at least call Beijing's attention to the potential serious consequences of its actions, something ASEAN has thus far been unwilling or unable to do.

*Ralph A. Cossa is Executive Director of the Pacific Forum CSIS. He is the author of Security Implications of Conflict in the South China Sea: Exploring Triggers of Conflict, available upon request from Pacific Forum.*