

FOSTERING TRUST AND DIALOGUE TO MANAGE US- CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION

BY ANDREA CAYMO

Andrea Caymo (PH) is the Vice Consul and Economic Officer of the Philippine Consulate General in Honolulu.

Early this month, the US Department of Defense released its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. In the said document, the DOD stressed the primacy of the Indo-Pacific Region in terms of priority level and citing inter-state strategic competition with China's as the chief concern for US national security. This view about China is shared by the analysts and strategists, at least on the US side, who attended the recently-concluded 11th US-China Strategic Dialogue held at Lahaina, Maui on 17-18 June 2019.

For outside observers, this perspective is understandable. On the military front, China has undergone massive military modernization, upgraded its nuclear capability, fortified its assets in the artificial islands in the South China Sea it occupied to the point where some experts believe that these man-made facilities can now be capable of serving as offensive and defensive bases for China in the Pacific, heightening security risk for the US and its allies who view China's military rise as threatening. The Chinese government has also used its economic clout to gain political advantage, providing loans to least developed and developing countries to build their infrastructure, primarily through "the Belt and the Road" Initiative, and using predatory economic practices to coerce these nations to

support China's interests, to the detriment of the US and other nations.

The explicit articulation of the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China in official documents is a major concern expressed by the representatives from the Chinese side during the Dialogue. The change of perception about China being a "strategic competitor" instead of a partner for cooperation has led to the worsening of the relationship between the two countries. China has always forwarded, and it is a view that is consistently articulated by Chinese practitioners in Tracks I, II, and III, its policy of peaceful development where it does not seek absolute security for itself, but common sustainable comprehensive security for all.

The problem with this claim, however, goes back to a point that is repeatedly brought about during the Dialogue, that of the inability of China to provide reasonable assurance in face of facts to the contrary. The Chinese side always insist on the purity of its intention and the US side remaining unconvinced, just as what we have seen during the Dialogue. Chinese representatives kept on harboring that it does not intend to use its nuclear force against the US, for example. It begs the question then if it is not meant for the US, then whose actor/s are they targeted on. Because of the US commitment with its allies in the Region, China's nuclear program is of particular interest.

China, on the other hand, is increasingly concerned with the US's use and deployment of more low-yield nuclear weapons, a strategy noted in the 2018 US Nuclear Policy Review. They fear that because low-yield missiles create lower collateral damage and are equipped with better navigation system and mobility, the risk of such weapon being activated is higher compared with high-yield bombs. Deployment of these missiles therefore exacerbate the security situation in the Region.

This element of distrust is exacerbated by asymmetric information, wherein both sides are second guessing each other in the absence of

formal dialogues at the high-level to discuss pertinent issues, especially in relation to military and nuclear capabilities and strategy. In the absence of complete information, the tendency for both sides is to prepare for the worst case scenario, which might lead each party to assume that the other is carrying more arsenal than it has in reality. Arms build-up is the natural recourse, which further breeds insecurity not only between the two countries, but also within the region and outside of it.

The importance of maintaining communications and transparency, especially at the high-level, is very important to help resolve information asymmetry and arms build-up. Both sides, however, are currently at an official deadlock, with only Track 1.5-2 levels like Pacific Forum providing platforms for dialogues. While these kinds of talks create an avenue to exchange views and sides, it cannot displace Track I in terms of informing and directing policies and interventions at the State-level.

The reasons behind the non-existence of official talks, especially now at a time when such dialogues are necessary and when situation is not at its worst, have to be addressed. The representatives from the Chinese side during the recently-concluded US-China Strategic Dialogue offered some areas that the US can work on. First is in the matter of agenda. The Chinese representatives noted the tendency of the Americans to include other sensitive topics, sometimes at the last minute, that derail talks from happening in the first place. There is also the issue of venue and visa issues, which prevents or limits the participation of some experts due to travel bans or sanctions imposed on some vital organizations to the talk. Another sticking issue is the prevailing perception on the Chinese side that the US is not sincere in its offer for talks. An example that was cited during the Dialogue is when the US invited China to be part of the New START, knowing full hand that statistics wise, it cannot be an effective party to such agreements.

When in talks with the Chinese, one almost cannot escape hearing references to great

Chinese thinkers. To understand the Chinese psyche is something that every negotiator should also consider. China has always aspired to realize the “Chinese Dream” - a grand process of national resurgence that will return China to the position of global centrality it enjoyed before it suffered from a “century of humiliation” at the hands of the West and Japan. It views Asia as its Region and will always try to assert itself as the main regional power in Asia.

It will be very difficult for the US to force its ideology on China given “historical hurts” and current regional ambitions. The best recourse is therefore to endeavor to open up official dialogues and mitigate the problem of asymmetric information. This will help prevent militarization of the Region and minimize the likelihood of “accidents” that can de-escalate the current situation into a full-blown crisis and confrontation. It is in the interest not only of the two countries for such talks to exist, but also the rest of the players, big and small, whose very existence might be placed in jeopardy because of competition between the US and China, who both ironically, claim to be the main arbiter of peace and security in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

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