

...(T)he one factor that restrains China's military hawks is the realization that the Philippines is bound to the United States by a Mutual Defense Treaty..."³⁴

This explicit linkage of the Philippines-United States defence relationship to the need to counter China's moves in the Spratlys was made not only by the Senate President but on other occasions by other high-level officials. China has explicitly stated its opposition to such a posture, calling it "dangerous." Nevertheless, a second round of the experts' level working group on confidence building was held in Beijing in October under an improved atmosphere.

MULTILATERAL CBMs

Apart from the bilateral CBMs, the confidence building process between the Philippines and China is being undertaken at the multilateral level, principally through ASEAN-China interactions.

The South China Sea disputes are generally observed to be the single biggest irritant in ASEAN-China ties, but relations between the two sides are otherwise perceived to have undergone qualitative improvements, particularly since their cooperation on the resolution of the Vietnam-Cambodia problem.

The Chinese Premier Li Peng, in a visit to Bangkok in 1989, proposed four strategic principles for Sino-ASEAN relations. These were: (1) peaceful coexistence despite differences in social and political systems; (2) anti-hegemonism (i.e. China will not seek to be a hegemonist power nor will it interfere in the domestic affairs of ASEAN countries); (3) further development of economic relations; and (4) continuing support of regional cooperation and initiatives from ASEAN.³⁵

Since then, there have been several significant milestones in China-ASEAN relations.

In 1991, China was invited by ASEAN to become a "consultative partner" of the Association. In 1994, it became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, which is an ASEAN-initiated regional security dialogue mechanism. In 1995, China and ASEAN established a separate political consultative forum at vice-foreign minister's level to discuss political-security issues affecting the region and their relations. This annual meeting has progressed quickly in terms of the depth and candidness of the discussions, placing on its agenda even the sensitive issue of the South China Sea disputes.

³⁴ Senate President Pro Tempore Blas F. Ople. "The VFA: Paradigm Shifts in the Security and Freedom of Nations". Full text of the speech delivered on the floor of the Senate sponsoring the concurrence of the Senate in the RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement on 03 May 1999. *Sanggunian* 1(9), May 1999.

³⁵ Hao Yufan and Huan Guofang, eds., *The Chinese View of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), p. 221.