

A State Department Press Guidance dated February 11, 1999, stated that "The United States closely monitors activities in the South China Sea and follows developments regarding China's military modernization..." On the question of whether the United States would come to the defence of the Philippines in the event of a conflict over the competing claims, the State Department said, "The United States honours its treaty commitments. However, we are not in a position to comment on possible US government action in the case of a hypothetical scenario."

In response to Rohrabacher's initiatives, China accused the United States of meddling in an issue that did not concern it.

The first meeting of the Philippine-China experts level working group on CBMs therefore did not have an auspicious start. President Estrada had also just returned from New York, where he had met briefly with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan in another attempt to internationalize the Spratlys dispute.²⁵ Just before the CBM meeting took place in Manila on March 22, 1999, higher-level Chinese officials apparently visited Mischief Reef. Photos taken by the Philippine Air Force of Mischief Reef showed huge red banners hoisted on the newly renovated garrisons which read "A warm welcome to the leaders on their arrival for inspection and guidance." Meanwhile, the Chinese protested the continued low-altitude reconnaissance flights that the Philippine Air Force made over Mischief Reef.

When the CBM meeting convened in Manila, there appeared to be no formal proposal from the Chinese side about any concept of "joint use." Assistant Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who headed the CBM delegation from China, moreover said during a press conference that the use of the term "joint use" by the Philippine side had been "inaccurate."²⁶ Rather than helping to narrow differences as had been hoped, the meeting did not result in any progress and may even have widened the gap when China was perceived to have withdrawn the compromise offer of joint use.

According to Philippine press reports, during the meeting, the Philippine side had wanted a written commitment by China that the structures on the reef were for civilian use, which China resisted. Meanwhile, China had demanded that the Philippines stop the arrest and detention of its fishermen, as well as refrain from conducting low-altitude flights over Mischief Reef, neither of which were accepted by the Philippine side.²⁷ The Joint Statement following the meeting reflected the points of difference and showed the lack of new agreement.

In light of the sorry state of relations, President Estrada postponed a state visit to China that

²⁵ "Erap asks UN to help settle row on Spratly isles," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 19 March 1999, pp. 1, 21.

²⁶ "China denies offering joint use of its structures in Mischief reef," *Philippine Star*, 24 March 1995. Also, "China accuses RP of mischief," *Today*, 24 March 1999, p. 1.

²⁷ *Joint Statement of Philippine-China Experts Group Meeting on Confidence Building Measures*, 22-23 March 1999 and reports from various Manila newspapers.