

Philippine Front-Runner Duterte Floats New Tactic in South China Sea Dispute

Davao City mayor's proposal is at odds with U.S.'s multilateral response on maritime disputes

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The front-runner in the Philippines presidential election is adding a twist to the fractious international dispute over the South China Sea, offering to negotiate directly with Beijing.

Rodrigo Duterte, the pugnacious mayor of Davao City who's been compared with Donald Trump, has said if elected he is willing to talk with Beijing and is open to discussing joint exploration of resources in the South China Sea. His suggested approach is at odds with the current Philippine administration and the U. S. which has advocated a multinational response to China's assertive enforcement of territorial claims around one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

The candidate isn't backing down on the Philippines' own claims in the region. While campaigning this week ahead of Monday's election, Mr. Duterte pledged to ride a jet-ski to plant a Philippine flag on a disputed atoll now controlled by Beijing.

He has said that for talks to go ahead, Beijing must first acknowledge Manila's sovereignty claims and allow Philippine fishermen to operate in surrounding waters—conditions that many analysts said China is unlikely to accept.

Even so, his consistent advocacy of a different strategy adds a layer of discord to a tense regional issue. Beijing has been reclaiming land to build out islands under its control and outfit them with airstrips. The U.S. has been sending planes and ships into the area to assert the right to freedom of navigation. Meanwhile, an international tribunal in The Hague is due to deliver a ruling this summer on a case challenging Beijing's claims that was brought by Manila.

Mr. Duterte said, if elected, he would be open to talks with Beijing whatever the ruling but hasn't said how he would respond to Chinese provocations. Chinese survey ships have been sighted around Scarborough Shoal, the atoll essentially seized by Beijing from Philippine control in 2012, a possible prelude to land reclamation.

On the campaign trail Sunday and in an earlier interview, Mr. Duterte has said he would hold direct talks with Beijing on the South China Sea if current multilateral efforts didn't bear fruit within two years. He said he might ask China to help build railway projects in the Philippines.

“I will bide my time,” he told The Wall Street Journal in an interview in January. “But if nothing is moving after 2 to 3 years, I will say this cannot go on. There are no talks going on because the U.S. and its allies want multilateral talks, and China wants bilateral talks. I would say to China that I am ready to talk.”

He added: "You want to talk? OK. You want joint exploration? OK. You don't claim it, and we won't claim it."

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman sidestepped a question about Mr. Duterte's remarks when asked Wednesday. "We hope the new Philippine government can properly deal with the South China Sea dispute and improve bilateral relations with concrete actions," the spokesman, Hong Lei, said at a media briefing.

A State Department official said the U.S. "has consistently expressed support for nations to exercise peaceful means to resolve territorial or maritime disputes without the use or threat of force, intimidation or coercion."

Ian Storey, an expert on the South China Sea at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, said that whoever won the election would need to try to mend relations with Beijing and such efforts would likely be supported by the U.S.

A bigger concern, he said, would be if the new Philippine president "flip-flopped on the issue by, for instance, shelving the arbitration ruling and agreeing to joint development of resources on terms favorable to China."

The Philippines' departing president, Benigno Aquino III, rejected bilateral negotiations with Beijing and instead sought international support including stronger military ties with Washington and Tokyo and filed the unprecedented legal challenge to China's claims in The Hague in 2013.

Beijing has said it won't accept the ruling. In recent weeks China has been urging other countries in Asia, and as far afield as Africa and Eastern Europe, to make public statements advocating bilateral negotiations over the South China Sea.

China has long favored bilateral talks, calculating that it is easier to cut deals with the individual claimants the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan which are dwarfed by Beijing militarily and economically.

The U.S., meanwhile, has been redeploying military forces to the Philippines in recent weeks while encouraging allies and partners to criticize China's island-building and urge Beijing to respect the outcome of The Hague tribunal.

Mr. Duterte has opened up a 10-point lead over his rivals for the presidency, according to recent polls, though political analysts in Manila say many voters haven't decided who to back, making the final result hard to call. There is only one round of voting in Philippine elections, and in a close-fought election such as this victory could be secured with less than 30% of the vote. Confirmation of the result may take days or weeks, but the new president is expected to take office June 30.

While some analysts dismiss Mr. Duterte's remarks on the South China Sea as sound-bite campaigning, others are less certain, and they say his position is causing concern among some foreign diplomats.

The comments "mark a major departure from the position of the incumbent administration," said Richard Heydarian, a political scientist at De La Salle University in Manila who described the comments as "very significant."

Although Mr. Duterte's position on the South China Sea was unpopular in the Philippines, it isn't affecting his polling numbers, and, if elected, he could treat The Hague verdict as an "expert opinion advisory" and legacy of the last administration, Mr. Heydarian said.