

Islands and Territories: How Do We Shape Our Sovereignty?

CRISELDA YABES

A small archipelago at the very bottom of Japan, Okinawa is geographically closer to home, the Philippines, my country that has got the world watching for playing the pendulum in geopolitical policies. We share similarities of the past: the Second World War that broke us. And of the present and recent history, there is the ever-looming presence of America and its formidable influence.

Okinawa reminded me of my childhood in Sulu, also a tiny archipelago way down south of the Philippines, hanging there like a loose thread near our Malay neighbors. We have, I've discovered to my delight, similar food like the *goya*, which we call *ampalaya*, and the bubble-like seaweed that comes with the fishermen's catch and that which the bars in Okinawa serve as "green caviar" for appetizers.

The fate of being the marginalized islands must have been a curse that we have in common as well. Whereas Okinawa was once the glory of Ryukyu, we too had our kingdom the Astana, which had fallen to pieces since the end of the sultanate during the American colonial period in the early 1900s and was recently recreated atop a military camp for the local folks to come on the weekends for picnics.

In Sulu the waters surrounding the island chain had spelled power, playing against the colonial might from the 18th until the late 19th century. Water was a dominant feature that made the sultanate great, achieving a state before seven thousand islands, big and small, formed itself into a country, the Philippines.

The waters had become dangerous. The new Philippine republic looked inward, its policies insular. Water we began to detest and fear. It was the water that divided us; we cared so little for it for so long, until we have now found ourselves caught in the middle of this mess in the South China Sea where there are rocks whose names we can't even memorize.

Water separated us from the rest of our neighbors in Southeast Asia. Our culture turned our horizon westward, further away across the Pacific, to the destiny of our colonial link with the United States. Today the waters have suddenly narrowed the gap in the fight for supremacy between China to our left and America to our right. The rocks in the South China Sea suddenly had the value of gold, each one weighing the cost of sovereignty.

Though we didn't ask for it, our location—which before was one of being the odd man out, the waves lapping at our shores with a reverie for independence—has put us in a bind. We had not built any new lighthouses to safeguard our territory, and yet we had become the beacon for the international rule of law by a twist of fate.

This may well be a lesson for the Philippines poor on political will, with Congress slow and stingy on the budget even after the United States has long ago left its two major overseas bases that were the basket for military aid. For many senior officers of the Philippine armed forces, they sensed acrimony from politicians wary of their influence in a parochial power play. Although a modernization law was passed, very little headway came out of it.

The former armed forces chief, General Emmanuel Bautista said, “Modernization was a political decision and it had to be done. What was the point of passing the law?” Where now the world will be looking upon the Philippines in the arena of geopolitics, the burden will be on the new government to push forward the country’s national interest.

China had encroached on our waters, ruined the corals and seabed just to build artificial islands they claim to be theirs for military maneuverings. They had bigger boats to push their way around. They mocked us of our Yankee preference and gave us an ultimatum: them or America. To the Chinese, we were troublemaker in the region where other ASEAN partners were willing to do business instead with the new economic superpower.

The Philippines did the unthinkable. Heavy deliberations went into the lodging of the case in The Hague in 2013. Cabinet members and other senior leaders and politicians made the roundtable discussions, unanimously voting to take the matter to the international tribunal, asking the judges to define maritime territories summed up in 15 claims over the rocks, reefs, atolls, almost all of which was won by the Philippines.

The military has had to bend once again to its partnership with America, forged by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. EDCA, as it is called by its acronym, was the highlight of U.S. President Barack Obama’s state visit to the Philippines in April 2014. The document had to be hammered out quickly for the signing, seen as an upgrade from the previous Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that was in place specifically for the fight against terrorism in the Mindanao South.

Under the new agreement, American forces will be allowed to build new military installations that will eventually be given to the Philippines and to have their maneuvering space in key naval areas for external security purposes as well as for disaster response as it did in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013. (Two of America’s largest overseas bases in the Philippines left in 1992 after the Senate decided there was no need for them, as the Cold War was over and a new leaf was turning).

The Philippines won a hard, daunting fight against China in the International Court of Permanent Arbitration in July 2016, rebuking China for the harm to the fishermen’s lives it has caused in the Scarborough Shoal and the ecological damage done to the coral reef environment in the Spratlys. On the question of exclusive economic zone that encompasses 200 nautical miles from landmass, the Philippines won on strategic reefs—the Second Thomas Shoal, Mischief Reef, and the Reed Bank.

The only concession given to China was the Scarborough Shoal where the court said it was allowed to fish (as could other countries) because of historical tradition. But this is where most analysts say China might build a reclamation site over the rock; if that is to happen, it would mean having a “dagger to our heart,” so close to Luzon, seat of the capital and major military bases, including the two former U.S. bases in Clark and Subic.

That victory was short-lived, as we all know by now, our leverage for negotiations lost, the equidistance between China and America shrunken to a size that only a loser would understand. All because of a man who once boasted he would get on a jet ski and plant our flag on the Scarborough Shoal to goad the Chinese, only to see him kowtowing at their tails during his state visit in mid-September, giving them a diplomatic bonanza against the United States.

President Rodrigo Duterte, the new president inaugurated barely two weeks before The Hague’s ruling, shifted the waters around and mistook China for a “democracy” (yes he said that in an Al Jazeera interview) and embraced Russia as well, as if it would be them—a coalition of China-Philippines-Russia—against the world. This has turned policies upside down, taking it against America for criticizing his brutal anti-drug war at home.

And what have we got to say? A survey showed Filipinos have 76% trust in the United States and a mere 22% in China, and that has been consistent since early polls in the 1990s. The luck we had over the court’s decision, however, has slipped out of our hands. Whatever show President Duterte was trying to put on as the guest of the Communist Party of China, whatever explanation his team was trying to dish out, it is just not right at the expense of the country.

He may eventually get on a jet ski but that might well mean cruising around the “blue lake” that China has designed for its nine-dash line, and we, the Philippine archipelago might be the outpost against the west, a parking lot for the People’s Liberation Army. Our sovereignty is at stake, more than ever.

I remember a man in Taketomi pointing out on the map that we are so often on the typhoons’ path, and though we get the ire of it, it was part of nature’s cycle. That is a vision for optimism, that perhaps not all is lost. The old doctrine of politically cutting up the globe between the east and the west is seeing a revision in conflicts in the world around us; and here in Asia there might now be a need for a “Middle Power.”

Will Japan take on that role? Wedged between the tension in North Korea and China, is this a place suited for Japan to counter Chinese unilateralism? President Duterte visited Tokyo a week after his Beijing trip, seeking friendship and setting aside the harsh memories from Japanese occupation during World War II, and reiterating to the Japanese his supposed

aim for an “independent” foreign policy drifting away from America. And Japan showed it was an ally the Philippines could count on.

The posturing of China and also of Russia comes from the humiliation of the past, the failures of their own experiments. Japan too, as the Oxford scholar Tariq Ramadan noted in his widely applauded talk at the International House of Japan in September, is trying to “protect the future by relying on the dreams of the past.”

Japan doesn't have to keep looking back; it can take the “middle power” and somehow find a way to restore a sense of order in this region, a sense of humanity that could define what being an Asian means. Not the way China sees what Asia should be.

If I were to catch for breath from the speed with which the Philippines president has tried to break and scatter alliances, I would say this might be the time for America to finally step back from the water around us. My country has been so irresponsible with defense and security strategy for quite a long while that we may finally learn our lesson from shooing away the United States several times over.

Okinawa may still be dreaming what we have already achieved: In 1992 we kicked out the U.S. military bases, but we are like fickle co-dependent lovers. Leave. Come back. Please stay again. No, leave, but wait, you don't really have to leave. We can't make up our minds, and in the process, we are losing chances of being a nation, of giving strength to our sovereignty.

We didn't build lighthouses. We didn't buy ships and planes. Congress had promised to look after the country's defense in the absence of Uncle Sam's gifts but it turned out to be an empty promise.

Much of our internal wars began in the Mindanao South where the post-colonial Muslim conflict went on for decades starting in the 1970s. The military then was a powerful tool of a dictatorship, which was overthrown 30 years ago. External defense remained far from the picture as the new democratic government was besieged by coup attempts, as well as it was trying to stay on a survival mode.

The Army received the brunt of the fighting, and that's where a big cut of the national budget went, aside from salaries and pensions. As the country later saw a respite from coup attempts, the long dispute in the South China Sea caught up with us. China had on the sly built structures on the Mischief Reef, which was closest to our western flank of Palawan province.

This was roughly when a modernization program was being put in place, but politics again got in the way of laying the groundwork for a shift to external defense. The modernization law ran for 15 years and was renewed in 2010. By that time, only a small fraction, about 32 billion pesos, was allotted from an estimated budget of 331 billion pesos that was needed to upgrade. Procurement laws stifled it, the bidding process made it susceptible to corruption, and Congress was unwilling to be generous.

Around the early decade of 2000, the Defense Department came up with an exhaustive Defense Reform Program following a joint recommendation with the U.S. military. The Armed Forces of the Philippines was crippled with corruption and was only half capable. The defense budget constituted less than 1% of GDP, ranking the country fourteenth in the region.

There was much excitement, I remember, when the Coast Watch System was taking shape with the help of the United States and Australia. It was to be undertaken in two or three phases, plotting 18 stations on coasts around the country, mostly in the southern regions, from the provinces of Sulu, Zamboanga, Davao, Sarangani, to Palawan. The system was expected to run on a budget of more than a billion pesos, in fulfillment of a longtime dream of the Navy to be at least a decent vanguard in maritime security.

We had an ambition for a Coast Watch System but even that had floundered, the prospect of it picking up again when Japan offered patrol vessels for maritime control. More importantly, the Coast Guard is coming out of its shadow from the Navy, their officers sent to Japan for a yearlong study and training on international maritime laws.

Along with others from Southeast Asian country, they spend the first half at the prestigious National Government Institute for Policy Studies and the second half at the Coast Guard Academy in the shipping dockyard of Kure, just outside of Hiroshima. My visits to Kure as well as to the National Defense Academy outside of Tokyo showed the schools were aligned with Philippine curriculum and objectives.

Our naval flagships, acquired just in recent years, are refurbished Coast Guard cutters from America. Compared to the Chinese ships constantly on patrol in the South China Sea, they appear helpless. The Philippines' coast guard sub-station on Thitu in the Spratly chain can only but watch the Chinese ships poaching around the reefs. But slowly, the Philippines has been taking significant steps bringing in logistical vessels and training jets and cargo planes.

On hindsight, if we had not been so caught up with ourselves, we could have allowed the waters to bind us, from one island to the next. Only then could we have seen a horizon, seeing that we were not too small a nation bobbling between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. We could have appreciated our neighbors and them us.

When I go around my country, the shapes of the islands so familiar to me, I look out for the old lighthouses for the sake of nostalgia, for what could have been. I know so well the colors of the water from the coasts north to south, east and west. We had built boats then during the era of the sultanates, the fast and the fury ones; Sulu was a superpower in its own right until the white men brought in the steamships.

In the fight today for our exclusive rights under the international law of the seas, China has belittled us. But in the eyes of the world, we won. For one shining moment, we won. The new president of the Philippines squandered that victory, passing off the

international tribunal's decision as a piece of document, to China's delight—more than five hundred pages of it blown to the wind.

I would like to fold each of those pages into origami pieces as what I have seen of the paper cranes made by President Obama, displayed at the Peace Museum in Hiroshima, and to let them fly out over the seas. Because it is said that they can make wishes come true.