



ASIA PACIFIC

Philippine Leader Sounds Alarm on China

By KEITH BRADSHER FEB. 4, 2014

MANILA — President Benigno S. Aquino III called on Tuesday for nations around the world to do more to support the Philippines in resisting China’s assertive claims to the seas near his country, drawing a comparison to the West’s failure to support Czechoslovakia against Hitler’s demands for Czech land in 1938.

Like Czechoslovakia, the Philippines faces demands to surrender territory piecemeal to a much stronger foreign power and needs more robust foreign support for the rule of international law if it is to resist, President Aquino said in a 90-minute interview in the wood-paneled music room of the presidential palace.

“If we say yes to something we believe is wrong now, what guarantee is there that the wrong will not be further exacerbated down the line?” he said. He later added, “At what point do you say, ‘Enough is enough’? Well, the world has to say it — remember that the Sudetenland was given in an attempt to appease Hitler to prevent World War II.”

Mr. Aquino’s remarks are among the strongest indications yet of alarm among Asian heads of state about China’s military buildup and territorial ambitions, and the second time in recent weeks that an Asian leader has volunteered a comparison to the prelude to world wars.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan caused a stir in Davos, Switzerland, when he noted last month that Britain and Germany went to war in 1914 even though they had close economic ties — much as China and Japan have now.

Japan has been locked in an increasingly tense standoff with China over uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, and even South Korea, which has been quieter about Chinese claims, expressed alarm last year when Beijing announced that it had the right to police the skies above a vast area of ocean, including areas claimed by Japan and South Korea.

While China's efforts to claim rocks, shoals and fishing grounds off the coast of the Philippines in the South China Sea have been less high-profile, the Chinese have moved faster there.

The Philippines already appears to have lost effective control of one of the best-known places of contention, a reef called Scarborough Shoal, after Philippine forces withdrew during a standoff with China in 2012. The Philippine forces left as part of an American-mediated deal in which both sides were to pull back while the dispute was negotiated. Chinese forces remained, however, and gained control.

In his nearly four years as president, Mr. Aquino, 53, has exceeded expectations in his country and the region for what he would be able to accomplish in a nation once known as the "sick man of Asia." He was a fairly low-key senator when he was propelled into the presidency in 2010 by a wave of national sympathy after his mother, former President Corazon C. Aquino, died the year before.

Political analysts say that his administration has fought and reduced the corruption that played a role in holding the Philippines back. In one practical measure of that change, the country has been able to pave more roads per 100 million pesos in spending (about \$2.2 million) than before — when funds were lost to corrupt officials and incompetence — finally addressing an impediment to commerce.

All of the major credit rating agencies now give the Philippines an investment grade rating, though the recent downturn in share prices and currencies here and in other emerging markets, on fears of further slowing of the Chinese economy, poses an immediate challenge.

In another accomplishment, Mr. Aquino's negotiators concluded a major peace agreement last month with the main resistance group on Mindanao, the heavily Muslim southern island. Still, the deal remains something of a gamble; it is based in good part on the Muslim group's

ability to hold in check smaller resistance groups, which criticized the pact almost immediately.

Despite those successes, Mr. Aquino was criticized for the country's slow initial response to last year's devastating typhoon. He said the storm was so powerful that it overwhelmed the Philippines' many preparations.

He has also been less aggressive on land reform — the Aquinos are among the country's biggest landowning families — and he has preferred to shift more of the government's social spending to poor villages instead. Walden Bello, although a congressman in the president's governing coalition, said he was one of many who believe that "the lack of real progress on land reform is a real reason why poverty rates have remained" at high levels.

Analysts say the almost feudal power of some entrenched families, including some with militias, is a further obstacle to growth. But Mr. Aquino said he was trying to convince the families that becoming less insular would foster greater prosperity.

Mr. Aquino is prevented by law from seeking re-election when his six-year term expires in 2016, raising uncertainty about whether his changes will continue.

In the wide-ranging interview on Tuesday, Mr. Aquino said he thought the Philippines and the United States were close to a long-delayed deal that would allow more American troops to rotate through the Philippines, enhancing his country's security. But the subject remains controversial among the political elite in the Philippines, with memories of the country's past as an American possession making them wary of closer military ties.

The United States is pushing for the deal to aid in its rebalance to Asia, where it hopes to retain a strong influence despite China's rise.

Speaking of the Philippines' own tensions with the Chinese, Mr. Aquino said his country would not renounce any of its possessions in the sea between it and China.

China contends that centuries-old maps show that it had an early claim to the South China Sea almost to Borneo. It is trying to use its

large and growing fleet to exercise effective control over reefs and islands in the sea, a strategy that could strengthen its legal position.

At the same time, China has strongly resisted applying the procedures and numerical formulas of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to the many reefs and islands that lie much closer to countries like the Philippines than to China. Officials in Beijing also oppose multilateral discussions, preferring bilateral talks with individual countries in Southeast Asia, an approach that allows Chinese leaders to apply greater pressure.

While China has been improving its military, Mr. Aquino noted that the last flight by a Philippine fighter jet was in 2005 and that the plane dated from before the Vietnam War. Most of the country's tiny naval and coast guard fleet dates from World War II.

The difficulties with China extend beyond the arguments over the South China Sea. The Hong Kong government, with enthusiastic backing from the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Beijing, plans to stop allowing 14-day visa-free visits by Filipino diplomats and officials starting Wednesday. The sanctions are part of a long-running demand by Hong Kong that the national government of the Philippines apologize over a violent episode in 2010 in which a hostage rescue attempt in Manila failed, leaving eight Hong Kong citizens dead.

In his first public response to the sanctions, Mr. Aquino said he had no plans to apologize, saying that doing so could create a legal liability and noting that China had not paid compensation to the families of Filipinos who have died in episodes there.

Mr. Aquino, who is not married, lives in a small cottage behind the presidential palace instead of in the luxurious palace itself. He said he tries to relax before going to sleep each night either by listening to music — often jazz — or pursuing his passion as an amateur historian, reading military journals, some about World War II.

While recently reading about the predicament of Czechoslovakia's leaders in the late 1930s, he said, he saw a parallel "in a sense" to his own problems now in facing challenges from China. Appeasement did not work in 1938, he noted; within six months of the surrender of the

Sudetenland, Germany occupied most of the rest of Czechoslovakia.

The Philippines, he said, is determined not to make similar concessions. “You may have the might,” he said of China, “but that does not necessarily make you right.”

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