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Headline: Aquino proposes 2-track approach to sea disputes

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TOKYO—President Benigno Aquino III on Saturday called for a peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in Asia by pursuing action in accordance with international law.

Speaking at the 40th Asean-Japan Commemorative Summit here, Mr. Aquino also pushed for stronger action on climate change, noting that less industrialized nations “bear a disproportionate amount of suffering” from the effects of global warming.

The summit marks 40 years of ties between Japan and the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) whose support Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is courting in Japan’s increasingly tense territorial dispute with China.

The summit took place amid heightened tensions in the region provoked by China’s declaration of an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea covering uninhabited islands that Tokyo has administered for a long time but which Beijing claims as well.

All but one of the 10 Asean leaders attended the summit. Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra was kept at home by the political crisis gripping her government. A deputy minister represented her at the Tokyo summit.

Two-track approach

Mr. Aquino, who was among the leaders who spoke in the opening session, discussed a “two-track approach” to resolving the Philippines’ territorial dispute with China in the West Philippine Sea, the name Manila uses to refer to parts of the South China Sea within its 327-kilometer exclusive economic zone.

“To manage tensions, we are advocating the conclusion of a legally binding code of conduct as soon as possible,” he said, referring to the proposed code of conduct in the sea that Asean is trying to sign with China to prevent the territorial rows from erupting into conflicts.

“To resolve disputes, we are [also] advocating arbitration,” Mr. Aquino said.

Arbitration, he said, is an “internationally recognized forum for peaceful settlement of disputes.”

“In addition, arbitration promotes the rule of law and redounds to the benefit of all parties,” he said.

The Philippines has taken its territorial dispute with China in the West Philippine Sea to the United Nations for arbitration, angering Beijing, which claims nearly the entire South China Sea.

Aviation safety

The President also raised China's declaration of the East China Sea air zone, which, he said, had ramifications on international civil aviation safety and security.

He said Japan and Asean should be concerned over China's announcement that it would declare other air defense zones in the region.

"As we move to deepen our partnership, we must never forget that we can only maximize our opportunities for growth in a wider regional, international community in which all nations adhere to the rule of law and work to promote peace and stability," Mr. Aquino said.

Mr. Aquino concluded that adherence to the rule of law would underpin the stability of the region.

"It is therefore incumbent upon all of us to remain committed to the principles of international law and to continue to engage each other in a positive and productive manner as we tread the straight path to mutual prosperity and advancement in [the] Asia-Pacific [region]," he said.

Other Asean leaders also called for a legal approach to resolving the territorial disputes with China.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said his country supported "confidence-building measures that promote mutual trust and [supported] the full implementation of the Declaration on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea."

He supported Asean initiatives to promote official consultations that would bring about the adoption of the Code of Conduct "at the earliest opportunity."

"The East China Sea situation has become a concern and we appeal to all to exercise utmost restraint, engage in dialogue and adhere to international law," he said.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung called for the adoption of a "substantial and binding code of conduct, a process that should be carried out through peaceful negotiation and adherence to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea."

Dung supported the holding of discussions on maritime and aviation security.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said Asean "must strengthen" the rules-based approach, which "allows for transparency and predictability and promotes strategic trust."

Climate action

President Aquino thanked Japan and Asean for extending help to the people of central Philippines who had been displaced by Super typhoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan), which ploughed through the region on Nov. 8, killing at least 6,000 people with thousands of others missing and feared dead.

Mr. Aquino said "global climate change is a reality" and exhorted the leaders at the summit to exert greater efforts to combat climate change.

"Climate change... consequences do not discriminate against economic powerhouses or developing states," Mr. Aquino said.

The President called for the building of “more resilient communities” and the introduction of measures to deal with global warming.

“Haiyan is a reminder to all of us that just as we are determined to safeguard the interest and welfare of our peoples by improving our capacities to prepare for and respond to natural calamities, we must also commit ourselves to dismantling the conditions that enhance the effects of these disasters,” he said.

Green fund

“I respectfully submit that less industrial nations, such as mine, bear a disproportionate amount of suffering from the effects of climate change,” he said.

“We live on a single [planet]. And it is incumbent upon all of us, especially for the countries that have the capacity to contribute significantly to [efforts at mitigating] climate change, to come up with an equitable mechanism that every nation, every corporation and every individual will adhere to,” he said.

Mr. Aquino was referring to the proposed green fund that would be financed by developed countries, which continued to avoid committing themselves to it during climate talks, most recently in Warsaw last month.

“I have personally witnessed the degree of devastation brought by Haiyan. And it is my belief that we all have a crucial role to play in ensuring my nation, or any nation for this matter, does not once more suffer a tragedy of this scale,” he said.

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