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LIKE China's ambassador to Manila, we welcome the situation in the West Philippine Sea that now allows Filipinos to fish in and around contested waters without being harassed by foreign coast guard ships and larger fishing vessels. Ambassador Huang Xilian even went on to say that China was open to expanding maritime cooperation with the Philippines.

Of course, Filipinos would be happier if there were no Chinese presence in the disputed area. But this geopolitical problem is anything but simple. As many know, China clings to its nine-dash line policy that claims 90 percent of the South China Sea. Or as President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. explained it, China claims territories that belong to the Philippines.

To be precise, though, many other neighboring countries also claim territories that belong to the Philippines, including Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. Despite their involvement, China avoids multilateral discussions about those issues, preferring instead to hold bilateral talks. Clearly, no easy or permanent solution is visible over the horizon. And like it or not, the Chinese presence is likely to stay.

Still, the Philippines should pounce on opportunities whenever it can. The relative calm mentioned by China's envoy may just be temporary, since the typhoon season makes fishing more perilous. In any case, the time seems ripe to negotiate a fisheries agreement with China, as well as with other neighboring countries with similar claims.

For the Philippines, helping its fishermen is important because they are among the poorest of the poor Filipinos. And as mentioned in previous editorials, there is a security dimension related to this topic. Those who turn to piracy and other illegal activities, like smuggling, include fishermen who were harassed or kept out of their traditional fishing grounds in the South China Sea, which locals call the West Philippine Sea.

A fisheries pact, even if it is with just China initially, could help prevent tensions from flaring up again later. Furthermore, institutionalizing such an understanding would allow the Philippines and China to focus more on other important aspects of their bilateral ties, like boosting trade and investments. This would likely hold true for now, even without a final resolution to the disputed territories issue.

Conservation and protection

If the Philippines can negotiate such an agreement, the negotiations should include measures to protect and preserve maritime biodiversity in the South China Sea, particularly the coral reefs. They provide the habitat and spawning ground for a variety of marine life. And for small and young fish, the reefs offer protection from predators. In fact, the South China Sea is known for its rich marine biodiversity, which is precisely why fishermen from countries in the region flock to that area.

Unfortunately, the construction of military outposts by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, and others in the South China Sea has been harmful to the natural resources there. The dredging done to create new islands is particularly destructive. Those human activities, along with climate change, could lead to an environmental catastrophe for many in this region.

"Years of overfishing by all the seas' neighbors is threatening food security for increasingly well-off populations looking for alternative sources of protein and imperiling the livelihoods of thousands of fishers," The Diplomat magazine reported earlier this year. "The sea's intricate network of coral reefs, where fish shelter and find food, and mariners find protection against storms, has borne extraordinary devastation in recent years. Climate change and warming ocean temperatures are driving some fish species in the South China Sea further north."

Well within the Philippines itself, only 2 percent of the coral reefs remain healthy, according to the Haribon Foundation. Worse, destructive and illegal methods, such as dynamite fishing, continue despite the best efforts of authorities to prohibit them. Plastics and other wastes pollute local and international waters around here and elsewhere. These are perhaps some of the reasons locals venture farther out to open waters to fish.

Clearly, protecting and conserving natural resources in the South China Sea affect many countries in this region. Despite their competing claims, perhaps China, the Philippines and others should collaborate on their common interests.