# The real message of China sanctions

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On the surface, Beijing’s sanctions on former senator Francis Tolentino appear to be just petty retaliation for old slights. That it comes on the heels of Tolentino’s defeat in the May midterm elections hints at a bit of schadenfreude, as well—as though China was twisting the knife on one of its fiercest critics in Manila.

But to dismiss the sanctions as mere spite is to underestimate, gravely, how China operates against its perceived adversaries. A deeper look suggests something more sinister: a warning to all Filipino leaders who dare assert the country’s sovereign rights.

Recall that, in two separate incidents in 2019, the Chinese government barred former ombudsman Conchita Carpio Morales and the late foreign secretary Albert del Rosario from entering Hong Kong, months after the pair elevated a complaint in the International Criminal Court against Beijing’s coercive actions in the West Philippine Sea.

That move came only three years after an arbitral court struck down China’s expansive claims and artificial island-building in the contested waters, on July 12, 2016, a seminal ruling whose ninth anniversary the country will mark on Saturday.

But with Tolentino, China’s government took it a step further by announcing the former senator’s ban from the mainland and its territories, unlike the other two who were spared the diplomatic blow.

## Not sufficiently outraged

By singling out Tolentino, who authored two landmark maritime laws and exposed an alleged Chinese embassy-funded troll network, Beijing has turned a geopolitical dispute into a personal rebuke. No, it was not just about punishing Tolentino but about branding the act of legislating laws of national interest and defending sovereignty as “egregious conduct.”

Now, what matters just as much as Beijing’s action is how Manila has chosen to respond.

Palace Press Officer Claire Castro has insisted that “true Filipinos” will never be silenced by China. “They can never prohibit us from defending our country and our maritime rights,” she said in Filipino.

As for the Tolentino sanctions, the administration has opted to “defer” to the Department of Foreign Affairs, avoiding the one action that would have signaled its serious objection—summoning the Chinese ambassador.

Asked about this last week, Castro hinted that the Palace was not sufficiently outraged as to take such an action on Tolentino’s behalf. This reticence is unfortunate as it only serves to embolden future interference by our unfriendly neighbor. More so, it goes against President Marcos’ declaration in his first State of the Nation Address never to “abandon even a square inch of territory,” a promise that implicitly extended toward the defense of our people.

## Lazaro’s leadership

Such is the challenge that falls squarely on the shoulders of newly installed Foreign Secretary Maria Theresa Lazaro. Touted as a “steady hand” with a strong record in diplomacy, Lazaro finds herself at the forefront of an increasingly one-sided relationship.

But there’s hope. Her appointment has earned praise even from Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian, who is no doubt hoping for continuity in a bilateral framework that has rewarded restraint from Manila while tolerating aggression from Beijing.

If Lazaro’s leadership is to have any real direction, however, she must draw a clear line toward the assertion of the nation’s sovereign rights.

Over the years, China has flexed its might against Filipino officials and the democratic institutions that uphold the country’s maritime claims. From water cannon attacks in the West Philippine Sea to cyber warfare and troll disinformation, Beijing’s incursions have taken both physical and psychological forms.

## Dangerous indifference

Tolentino’s exposé of a 2023 deal between the Chinese embassy and a local PR firm to deploy “keyboard warriors” was a revelation that should have triggered national anger. Instead, he reaped the consequence of his actions with a belated travel ban from China and a muted response from the government he served.

The message behind China’s sanctions on Tolentino could not be clearer: Speak up for Philippine sovereignty and face punishment. But if defending our sovereign rights earns a former senator a stinging reproach from Beijing, then the least our government can do is prove he was right to speak up—by giving its unequivocal support even at the risk of offending China.

But the government’s apparent indifference is dangerous not only to itself but to all other Filipinos who fearlessly assert the nation’s maritime claims in disputed waters. Until the government demonstrates its will to protect these “anti-China” critics, the President’s pledge to defend the nation’s territory and people will ring false.

There is much riding on our new foreign secretary and her adeptness at navigating these geopolitical currents. Ultimately, this is a test for Lazaro to walk a tightrope between diplomatic caution and patriotic courage.