

24 April, 2015

The Honorable John McCain:

We are a group of concerned Filipinos and Vietnamese who believe that the time has come for the ordinary people of Southeast Asia to speak up against the Chinese land occupation currently in progress in the Spratly island chain of the so-called “South China Sea,” known to the Vietnamese as the East Sea and to the Filipinos as the West Philippine Sea.

Images captured by satellite prove that People's Republic of China (PRC) has violated and continues to violate the 2002 “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC 2002), threatening the nations situated around this sea, damaging the natural ocean environment, and restricting the freedom of navigation of all countries. These crimes have been committed by China, a nation which is one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

1. Historical background

During the Cold War, China benefitted from the American policy of Containment, which attempted to isolate the growing economic and military power of the Soviet Union. Thanks largely to that policy, it is now the wealthiest and strongest country in Asia, but it has never been a good neighbor and is unworthy to be looked up to as the region's “big brother.” We know this from the lessons of history: Mongolia, Uyghur, Tibet, Yunnan, Vietnam and India have repeatedly been invaded by China on land, while Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia have been invaded by sea.

In recent decades, being the region’s strongest military power, China has consistently sought to impose its maritime claims above those of its less powerful neighbors:

- In January 1974, China tried to take control of the largest portion of the archipelago by force, seizing the Paracels from Vietnam and killing 74 Vietnamese soldiers.
- In March 1988, China attacked and massacred 64 UNARMED Vietnamese soldiers and engineers on the Johnson South Reef.

- In 1995, China attacked Filipino fisherman on the Mischief Reef.
- In 2002, ASEAN and China agreed a peaceful solution by signing the “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC 2002) in which all parties agreed to “exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features and to handle their differences in a constructive manner.”
- In December 2007, China broke this Declaration by establishing "Sansha city," the administrative name it has given to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, the Macclesfield Bank and several smaller islands which it claims to control.
- Since early 2014, through its construction of new “artificial islands” and military bases on seven reefs in the Spratly archipelago and several features in the Paracel archipelago, China broke DOC2002 again. These acts, along with the declaration of an "Air Defense Identification Zone" covering most of the Southeast Asia Sea, would pose a serious threat to the peace and stability of the region.
- In May 2014, the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation moved its Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil platform to undisputed waters in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Vietnam, close to the disputed Paracel Islands.

2. The current position

Images captured by satellite in March 2015 showed no indication that China was slowing its construction activity in this area.

- Fiery Cross Reef, located more than 1,000km from China’s coastline, is being developed as “a combined naval/air base far larger than any other in the Spratly Islands” which will “significantly reduce the time required for PLA/N aircraft and ships to reach the Malacca Straits in the event of a blockade of this major trade artery.”
- Structures being built on the Johnson South, Hughes, Gaven and Cuarteron reefs include reinforced sea walls, docking facilities, and what are believed to be radar towers and gun emplacements.
- Dredging and landfill is in progress at locations on the Subi and Eldad reefs.

3. The military threat

The new military bases on these islands will make it easier for China to take military action against Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries and other nations which make regular use of this key maritime area.

A letter dated 03/19/2015 from US Senators John McCain, Jack Reed and Bob Corker to Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter recently warned:

“Unilateral efforts to change the status quo through force, intimidation, or coercion threaten the peace and stability that have benefited all the nations of the Indo-Pacific region. China’s land reclamation and construction activities on multiple islands across the Spratly chain, and the potential command and control, surveillance, and military capabilities it could bring to bear from these new land features, are a direct challenge not only to the interests of the United States and the region, but to the entire international community.”

4. The environmental threat

China's activities not only create instability throughout the region, but also cause immense damage to the local ecosystem. Professor Richard Dodge of the Nova Southeastern University Oceanographic Center explained that the dumping of cement and landfill on live coral reefs to create artificial islands constituted “outright destruction” of the reefs and associated natural habitats.

“Coral reefs are extremely globally and locally valuable, both for the biodiversity and ecosystem they create, and also for the tremendous services they provide in terms of food supply, cultural heritage, erosion prevention, recreation, tourism, and habitat for a myriad of other organisms.”

5. Recommendations

We believe that the time has come to speak up against China’s reckless and aggressive actions. We support any initiative for a multi-country peace force that will restrain China from implementing reclamation and the construction of any type of infrastructure in these waters. In order that the people of

Southeast Asia and the wider international community can benefit from a rule-based multilateral international order and continue to live in a healthy environment, we recommend the following:

(i) We support the ideas set out in the above-mentioned letter from the US Senators McCain, Reed and Corker that the United States should consider the measures to stop China's maritime occupation activities.

(ii) China must by any and all means be persuaded to cease its maritime occupation activities, dismantle the bases it has set up and withdraw from the islands it has occupied illegally. To this end, we urge the US government to take the lead in creating an international United Front with Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, India and Australia, in order to prevent China from continuing its aggressive expansionist policies, which could easily lead to a World War in which the scale of casualties incurred could be catastrophic for humankind.

(iii) In discussions about the current dispute, the words "disputed island" should be replaced by "islands invaded by China" because China never owned these islands.

Over several millennia, the Maritime Road has contributed to the growth and development of many Southeast Asia nations. The sea in Southeast Asia still belongs to all of the nations that use it and we must fight to protect it against any individual country which seeks to exert its control through illegal means. Your prompt attention carries considerable weight and we hope that it will be an important step in the process of securing peace and free navigation in the Southeast Asia Sea.

Yours sincerely,

Filipinos:

Rodel Rodis, lawyer, San Francisco, President Global Filipino
Diaspora Council.

Arturo C. Boquiren, UP Baguio Professor, Philippines

Dale Jose Roseo C. Gozar, Building Architect/Engineer, Quezon City

Elvie Getaruelas, Pasol Alcoy Cebu, Writer

Vincent Manzano, Security Guard, Manila

Nherieda Cardona, Personal Tutor, Hongkong
Noralyn Lozada, OFW, Khalidiya Abu Dhabi UAE
Nestor Delos Reyes, Heavy Duty Diesel Mechanic, George Town
Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands
Raquel Razon-Amyouni, Businesswomam, Makati City.
Adonis Michael Ozoa, Nurse, Dumaguete City

Jonathan Balaos, Multimedia Artist, Mandaluyong City
Jacinto V. Rubillar V, Farmer, Davao City
Raymund Morales Bongalosa, Businessman/Mineral Trading, Quezon
city
Suzette Jurilla, Registered Nurse/Nurse Entrepreneur, Davao City,
Philippines
Richard Mel P Caplis, Student University of the Philippines Baguio,
Ilocos Sur.

Roger D. Posadas PhD, Former UP Diliman Chancellor, Founding
Dean Of UP Diliman College Of Science, Cluster Dean Of
Allied Health Services of Arellano University, Quezon City
Patrick Arellano, IT, Makati City
Ramon Arellano, Agriculture Systems Analyst, Makati City
Marlene Espejo, Logistics, Holland Drive Singapore
Rizal Victoria Budget Analyst Hohenstaufferallee Leimen Germany

Rex A. Mendoza, Criminology undergraduate, a Maritime Intel Agent,
Phil. Pillars of Justice Assoc. Inc. (Natl board of trustee, Natl
Executive Dir and Intl Coordinator) Sto. Tomas, Batangas
Ryan Padilla Sapinoso, Homebased Freelancer, Regina ville Trece
Martires City, Cavite
Mark Lester Javier, Customer Support at Sky Cable, Cainta Rizal
Richard Mel P. Caplis., Salamat po, Philippines

Vietnameses

Etienne Nguyen, President Federation of Asian American Voters
Texas State Board of Examiners of Professional Counselors, TX,

USA

Vinh Tuong, Researcher, CA, USA

Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Researcher, Washington D.C, USA

Nghia Bui, Engineer, TX, USA

Quynh Truong, Retired, CA, USA

Le Anh Tuan, Film producer, NY, USA

Nguyen Trong Hien, Ph D, California Institute of Tech. Pasadena, CA, USA

Le Xuan Khoa, President emeritus, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, Washington, DC, USA

Do Ann, Mechanical engineer, Melbourne, Australia

Ta Kim Tuyen, HR Manager, Sydney, Australia

Nguyen Duc Hiep, Environmental scientist, Sydney, Australia

Lu Thi Tuong Uyen, Psychosocial therapist, Drenthe, Netherlands

To Huy Cuong, IT engineer, Drenthe, Netherlands

Huynh Ba Hai, Journalist, Lillehammer, Norway

Le thi Hong Bich, Employee, Lillehammer, Norway

Mac Viet Hong, Warsaw, Poland

Nguyen Sy Tuyen, Kiev, Ukraine

Nguyen Duc Huy, Engineer, Kiev, Ukraine

Nguyen Minh Nam, Paris, France

Nguyen Thi Tu Huy, Paris, France

Pham Xuan Yem, Physicist, University Paris 6, France

Bui Dinh Dai, Paris, France

Nguyen Phuong Hoa, Bussy-St-Georges, France
Nguyen Tran Phung Vu, Bussy-St-Georges, France
Huynh Bang Nhan, Bussy-St-Georges, France
Luu thi Tuyet Mai, Employee, Rennes, France
Trang Pham, La Chapelle en Serval, France
Pham Duong Duc Tung, Serris, France
Pham van Thanh, Lifeguard, Former prisoner of conscience, Condé-
Sainte- Libiaire, France
Nguyen Thanh Viet, Architect assistant, Shrewsbury, United Kingdom

Nguyen Cuong, Praha, Czech Republic
Bui Viet Hoa, Helsinki, Finland
Nguyen Hoang Linh, Journalist, Budapest, Hungary

Pham Thanh Van, Germany
Nguyen Thuong Viet, Munich, Germany
Trang Czepat, Lübeck, Germany

Le Hai Van, Hyogo, Japan
Tran Van Tho, Professor, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

Trinh Duong Lieu, Toronto, Canada
Nguyen Duc Tuong, Physicist, Gatineau, Canada

Hoang Viet, Lawyer, Saigon, Vietnam
Le Dang Doanh, Ha Noi, Vietnam

Nguyen Hoang Anh, Professor, Hanoi, Vietnam
Thomas Nguyen, Saigon, Vietnam
Hung Pham Ngoc, Business executive, Saigon, Vietnam
Tran Thang, Self-employment, Phu Tho, Vietnam
Nguyen Ngoc Thach, Artist, Hanoi, Vietnam
Nguyen Truong Giang, IT engineer, Thanh Hoa, Vietnam
Pham Thanh Cao, Self-employment, Saigon, Vietnam
Dang Thi Hong Ly, Staff in Standard Chatered bank, Saigon, Vietnam
Tran Van Hoc, Civil engineer, Saigon, Vietnam
Nguyen Huy Luc, Civil engineer, Saigon, Vietnam
Amy Anh Nguyen, Veterinary, Saigon, Vietnam
Bui Tran Phuong, PhD, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Nguyen Ngoc, Writer, Hanoi, Vietnam
Chu Hao, Publisher, Hanoi, Vietnam
Dao Thu Hue Lecturer, Hanoi, Vietnam
Huynh Son Phuoc, Journalist, Hoi An, Vietnam
Le Ngoc Vang, Former Prisoner of Conscience, Vietnam
Marc A. Nguyen, English Teacher, ILA center, Saigon, Vietnam

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