

Duterte is China's voice in ASEAN?

POSTSCRIPT - Federico D. Pascual Jr. (The Philippine Star)

President Duterte could have served national interest just by staying in bed – for “power naps” or whatever – and not saying a word about Chinese expansionism while he was in Singapore last week for the 33rd summit meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Except for the President's absence from several summit events, everything was going on smoothly – until he showed up and started talking about China's occupation of maritime areas being claimed by the Philippines and other ASEAN members.

The disputes are at the core of a Code of Conduct that the ten-member association has been drafting as guidelines for amicably resolving conflicting claims in the South China Sea, some 88 percent of which Beijing has claimed arbitrarily as its own.

Duterte has said he would “try (his) best” to lead ASEAN and China into signing the COC during the Philippines' term that ends in 2021 as coordinator for relations between Beijing and its neighbors.

On the second day of the Nov. 11-15 summit, Duterte surprised many when he said China should tell claimant-countries “what route shall we take” to resolve issues. His remarks sounded like he as coordinator was giving China the lead role in laying down the rules.

China has built up some islets, reefs and such protrusions in the SCS and converted them into military outposts. Some of them are within the exclusive economic zone of the

Philippines whose sovereign rights were affirmed in 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague.

As China continued to occupy and militarize these artificial islets in the Philippine EEZ, not a whimper of protest was heard from Duterte. He had just pivoted to the left toward Beijing apparently hoping to secure the massive investments, loans and aid dangled before him.

Emerging from his napping, Duterte said in a press interview at the summit site that he was against military drills in the South China Sea (such as one planned shortly with the United States among the participants) as, he said, that might provoke China:

“China is already in possession. It’s now in their hands. So why do we have to create frictions, strong military activity that will prompt response from China? I do not mind everybody going to war except that the Philippines is just beside the islands.”

Besides, he wants everything under control when his friend China President Xi Jinping comes visiting Nov. 20-21.

The President’s officially recognizing China’s possession of the disputed maritime areas and his falling for Beijing’s suggestion that war is the only way to recover the artificial islands may have weakened the position of the Philippines and other dispossessed ASEAN members.

China can cite Duterte’s public statement in future discussions and exploit its value as an admission against (Philippines) interest. No clarification can repair the damage.

Acting Chief Justice Antonio Carpio, meanwhile, also disputed statements that China is in possession of the South China Sea:

“China is in physical possession of the entire Paracels, seven geologic features in the Spratlys, and Scarborough shoal. These geologic features, and their territorial seas, constitute less than eight percent of the total area of the South China Sea. Factually, China is not in possession of the South China Sea.”

He said that about 25 percent of SCS covers high seas, which no state can possess under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea because they “belong to all mankind.” Under UNCLOS, there is freedom of navigation and overflight in the high seas for all nations.

- **How sweet to do nothing, then rest**

“HOW beautiful it is to do nothing, and then rest afterward.” That translation of a Spanish proverb came to mind upon our hearing that President Duterte skipped six scheduled events at the ASEAN summit in Singapore because he had to take power naps.

Elsewhere, that would be sleeping on the job which could mean dismissal. No wonder his absence and the “power nap” excuse given were met with critical comments in media.

The ASEAN summit held Nov. 11-15 and the side meetings with leaders of other countries did not just pop up like blind dates. Such events are planned well in advance in detail by technical staff and ministerial officials.

The flight to Singapore is just 3-1/2 hours. The city-nation is on the same time zone as Manila so the ride should not tire a normal 73-year-old traveler. (Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 93 years old, said he attended all the ASEAN events “because it’s my duty.”)

All the President's official statements had been prepared, ready to be read. All President Duterte had to do was show up on time, maintain a positive disposition, act, speak and dress presidential.

Probably the hard part for someone whose forte is regaling with jokes homesick overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) is the serious discussion with other heads of state/government and the press interviews, but doing one's homework should minimize that problem.

With that, it is hard to understand why the President had to stay in bed rather than attend a good part of the ASEAN events. We are disturbed by two possibilities: He was not well, or the mayor was worried about being thrown into serious discussions with other national leaders.

On Wednesday, Duterte missed the ASEAN summits with Australia and South Korea, a working lunch with the Singaporean host and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Summit. He also skipped the gala dinner hosted by Singapore, this year's ASEAN chairman.

Duterte managed to attend the ASEAN meetings with China, Russia, and Japan. He also had bilateral talks with Singapore's Lee and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.