



South China Sea Dispute Poses Challenge for US

By: Scott Stearns – January 29, 2013

President Barack Obama begins his second term facing fresh tensions in the South China Sea as the Philippines takes its maritime dispute with China to the United Nations.

China's navy patrols the disputed waters. The Philippines rejects Chinese authority over the area.

"We want the arbitral tribunal to establish the rights of the Philippines to exclusively exploit the resources in our continental shelf in the West Philippine Sea," Philippine Assistant Foreign Affairs Secretary Gilbert Asuque explained.

China says Manila's move complicates the dispute.

"China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and adjacent waters," insisted Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hong Lei. "The root of the dispute is caused by the Philippines' illegal occupation of some of the Chinese areas."

Justin Logan at the Cato Institute says involving the United Nations runs counter to how China wants to handle the issue.

"The Chinese have been trying as much as possible to keep this bilateral between itself and all the disputed parties and to prevent it from being internationalized in a systematic way," noted Logan.

Even if the U.N. Law of the Sea tribunal rules in favor of Manila, Logan questions who would enforce the decision.

"If enforcing findings means a shooting war with China, you may see findings that go unenforced," Logan said. "It may be a bargaining chip that the Philippines say: 'Look, the balance is sort of tipping away from us. We can play this card and then have something that we can appear to give up if China makes a concession.'"

Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea were part of confirmation hearings for John Kerry, President Obama's choice as secretary of state. Republican Senator Marco Rubio questioned the administration's handling of the standoff.

"China is being increasingly aggressive about their territorial claims and their neighbors are looking to the United States and U.S. leadership as a counter balance," Rubio said.

Senator Kerry said China is reacting to more U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific.

"The Chinese take a look at that and say, 'What's the United States doing? Are they trying to circle us? What's going on?'" noted Kerry.

Given China's disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, Kerry says it is critical that Washington strengthen ties with Beijing.

"China is the other significant economy in the world and obviously has a voracious appetite for resources around the world, and we need to establish rules of the road that work for everybody," Kerry said.

China says it is working to resolve the rival claims through dialogue but opposes U.S. support of greater involvement by an alliance of South East Asian nations.