The Philippines presented before the Arbitral Tribunal the merits and other remaining issues of jurisdiction and admissibility on the case that it initiated against China regarding the West Philippine Sea / South China Sea. The hearings were held from 24 to 30 November 2015 at the Peace Palace, the headquarters of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague, The Netherlands.

The hearings followed the 29 October 2015 release of the Arbitral Tribunal’s decision on the jurisdiction issue, in which the five judges unanimously affirmed that the Tribunal was properly constituted and that non-participation by China does not deprive it of jurisdiction over the case.

Solicitor-General Florin Hilbay, who heads the Philippine delegation, introduced the country’s case. The Philippine legal team headed by Mr. Paul Reichler explained why China’s “nine-dashed line” and claims to historic rights to waters of the South China Sea have no basis under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). They also pointed out that the features used by China as basis to generate claims to exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and continental shelf are either rocks or low-tide elevations, which at best can only generate up to 12 nautical miles of maritime entitlements.

The delegation also presented how China’s conduct has interfered in the Philippines’ right to exercise sovereign rights and jurisdiction over its own EEZ. They also called attention to how China’s island-building and fishing activities have caused irreversible damage to the marine environment of the South China Sea.

Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert F. del Rosario closed the Philippine presentation by stressing anew the importance of the arbitration process to the peaceful and rules-based resolution of disputes in the South China Sea.

The Tribunal has given China until 1 January 2016 to respond to any matter raised during the hearing. Afterward, the Tribunal will deliberate and issue a final decision in 2016.

“[T]he Philippines has always adhered to the rule of law, and our decision to resort to arbitration reflects our belief that it is a transparent, friendly, durable, and peaceful dispute settlement mechanism that can bring stability to the region. The Philippines remains committed to pursuing arbitration to its final conclusion, and will abide by its decisions.”

President Benigno S. Aquino III
Intervention during the 27th ASEAN Summit, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 21 November 2015
Not only has China's ambiguity failed to achieve favorable political results, arguably fueling anxiety and increasing the "tensions and risks" in the region, but the PCA judgment highlights that this approach is similarly ineffective at sheltering it from formal resolution of the maritime claims at issue. With jurisdiction now asserted, clarification of its claims would serve both China's and the region's interests.

Ryan Santicola
Judge Advocate of the US Navy, "The Diminishing Returns of Ambiguity in the South China Sea," The Diplomat, 3 November 2015

The tribunal will almost certainly rule that China's nine-dashed line is an illegitimate basis upon which to claim maritime territory. This decision would likely be made on the grounds that historical claims have no recognized legal value. Although such a ruling would not discredit, per se, the claim put forward by Beijing, it would require China to provide an alternative legal justification and would represent a blow to Beijing's rhetorical position.

Ashley Townshend
Research Fellow, United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney, "Possible Wriggle Room on South China Sea Claims," The Asia Sentinel, 14 October 2015

The use of force in the South China Sea can only delay a solution. The only way to realize one's national interest in a stable international environment is to utilize, develop, and comply with international law.

Stein Tønnesson

“We believe this arbitration benefits everyone. For China, it will define and clarify its maritime entitlements. For the Philippines, it will clarify what is ours, specifically our fishing rights, rights to resources and rights to enforce our laws within our EEZ. And for the rest of the international community, it will help ensure peace, security, stability and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. This arbitration will be instructive for other States to consider the dispute settlement mechanisms under UNCLOS as an option for resolving disputes in a peaceful manner.”

Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert F. del Rosario
Concluding Remarks at the Adjournment of the Hearing on the Merits, The Hague, 30 November 2015

“We emphasised the importance for the states concerned to resolve their differences and disputes through peaceful means, in accordance with international law including 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

Chairman's Statement of the 27th ASEAN Summit, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 21 November 2015

“The territorial dispute in the South China Sea is a serious conflict. I am always a bit surprised why in this case multinational courts should not be an option for a solution. We wish that the sea trade routes stay free and safe, because they are important for all.”

Angela Merkel
Chancellor of Germany,
In her remarks during a visit to Beijing, China, 29 October 2015

"[W]e believe that disputes should be settled in accordance with international law, and that international law, including the law of the sea, should be respected. It's in everybody's interests for these matters to be resolved peacefully, consensually and in accordance with the rule of law."

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull
In his remarks during a press conference in Manila, 8 November 2015
"[T]he United States supports the Philippines’ decision to use arbitration under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to peacefully and lawfully address differences."

United States President Barack Obama,
In his remarks during the bilateral meeting with President Benigno S. Aquino III,
17 November 2015

"Greater resort to UNCLOS arbitration would clear away important issues, promote prospects for further negotiation and constitute an encouraging precedent for using impartial tribunals to settle the territorial issues as well."

Jerome A. Cohen
Professor, New York University School of Law, "Did the Game Just Change in the South China Sea? (And What Should the U.S. Do About It?)," China File, 2 June 2015

What the Philippines seems to be seeking is for China to have to clarify its claims and bring them into conformity with international law. This in itself is only the first step in untangling the South China Sea disputes and enabling the parties to settle the disputes on a more fair and equal footing. In dealing with a neighboring country that is stronger in all aspects, the arbitration is also a way to draw public attention to China’s claims and actions and to create international pressure on China to reconsider its position.

Lan Nguyen
PhD Candidate, Faculty of Law, University of Cambridge, "South China Sea: Philippines v. China," The Diplomat, 27 July 2015

"A decision by the tribunal establishing UNCLOS as the predominant authority governing the SCS disputes will benefit all parties by narrowing the areas in dispute and opening the door for joint development. Overall, not only will arbitration lead to the most efficient and favorable outcome for the Philippines, it will also lay the groundwork for future stability among all claimant states in the SCS."

Emma Kingdon

"Japan continues to support the peaceful resolution of conflicts based on international law and has been paying close attention to the developments in the Philippines-China arbitration proceedings that have shifted to a new stage."

Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida
In his meeting with Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert F. del Rosario, 16 November 2015
“[I]n addressing the relevant issues regarding the South China Sea, it is important to proceed according to the basic guidelines and principles of international law and the Convention on the International Law of the Sea of 1982. [I]f the parties have decided to take a certain issue to an international court . . . this is their right and if a ruling is delivered it will be the ruling of an international court.”

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev during a press conference following the APEC Leaders’ Meeting in Manila, 18 November 2015

“[W]e want to see claims dealt with by rules-based, not power-based, solutions in Asia as elsewhere, in a way that is consistent with the long-term peace and stability of the region, with freedom of navigation and overflight, and in accordance with international law, including the law of the sea.”

Philip Hammond Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of the United Kingdom in a speech at Peking University, 12 August 2015

“W[his]is is a very interesting development which we are facing . . . We (need to) keep a very close eye on this one, it’s very important to play by international rules, the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) principle. We have to play by international rules, otherwise what kind of reference are we going to use to address all the regional problems we have?”

Hernani Coelho Foreign Minister of Timor-Leste, Interview with The Brunei Times, 26 June 2015

“Singapore as a non-claimant country does not take sides on the merits of the rival claims. We urge all parties to manage their differences calmly and peacefully in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS, with the common aim of maintaining regional peace and stability.”

Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 28 October 2015

“The Meeting agreed on the need to maintain peace and stability in the region and to promote maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and over-flight underlining the need to settle disputes by peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”

ASEAN-EU Senior Officials’ Meeting Brussels, Belgium, 2 July 2015

We place emphasis on two things: firstly, the observance of international law, which means both general international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and, in particular, the maintenance of the rights of navigation and overflight in the sea lanes of communication. That’s where our national interest lies in South China Sea maritime claims.

S. Jayakumar former Senior Minister of Singapore, “S. Jayakumar: Quality of next-gen leaders will be critical factor,” The Straits Times, 16 May 2015

China’s power play, combined with its refusal to arbitrate, its aversion to multilateral negotiations, and its refusal to enter into bilateral negotiations on the basis of equality, undermines regional stability and weakens important global institutions.

Peter Dutton Professor of Strategic Studies and Director of China Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College, “Did the Game Just Change in the South China Sea? (And What Should the U.S. Do About It?)” ChinaFile, 2 June 2015

“This is a very interesting development which we are facing . . . We (need to) keep a very close eye on this one, it’s very important to play by international rules, the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) principle. We have to play by international rules, otherwise what kind of reference are we going to use to address all the regional problems we have?”

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The statements in this brochure do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Foreign Service Institute.

Unless otherwise indicated, photos are from Philippine government websites.

For questions or comments, send an email to Mr. Louie Dane C. Merced at lcmerced@fsi.gov.ph