

Xi: Talks on pact to avoid sea clashes could end in three years

By Jim Gomez
The Associated Press

MANILA, The Philippines — Chinese President Xi Jinping says negotiations between Beijing and Southeast Asian nations on a nonaggression pact to prevent clashes in the disputed South China Sea could be concluded in three years and promised that any differences will be dealt with peacefully.

Xi made the assurances after holding talks with President Rodrigo Duterte and other officials on a visit to the Philippines aimed at deepening relations with the American treaty ally.

Xi's overnight visit to the Philippine capital, Manila, was his last stop on a three-nation swing through Asia, where he offered infrastructure loans and aid and championed free trade amid a rivalry for regional influence with the United States.

"We will continue to manage contentious issues and promote maritime cooperation through friendly consultation," Xi said. He said China aims to conclude talks on the "code of conduct" in the disputed waters with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations within three years.

Four members of the 10-nation bloc — Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam — along with China and Taiwan have overlapping claims in the South China Sea. Many fear the long-simmering disputes could spark an armed conflict that could shatter Asia's bustling economies.

Ahead of Xi's visit, China and the Philippines tried to negotiate an agreement allowing joint oil and gas exploration in the disputed waters, but apparently did not reach a consensus. They signed a "memorandum of understanding on cooperation on oil and gas development" but officials provided few details.

"It's a cooperation to find ways to find a solution," Philippine energy secretary Alfonso Cusi said of the agreement.

China has sought a "maritime and air liaison mechanism," an arrangement for forces of the two countries to coordinate their naval and aircraft movements to



NONAGGRESSION TALKS. Student rallies wear masks bearing faces of, from left, U.S. President Donald Trump, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, while claiming that Duterte is selling the country to the two leaders during a demonstration outside the Presidential Palace in Manila, the Philippines. Xi received a red-carpet welcome in the Philippines, as he paid his first visit to the U.S. treaty ally with offers of infrastructure loans and new accords to prevent clashes and possibly explore for oil and gas in the disputed South China Sea. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

prevent incidents in the contested waters, but the proposal has been opposed by Philippine defense officials, two Philippine officials told The Associated Press.

Filipino nationalists have warned that any agreement that can undermine the Philippines' internationally recognized exclusive rights to fish and exploit resources within 200 nautical miles of the country's coast would violate the Philippine Constitution.

Beijing's relations with Manila deteriorated over the territorial rifts until Duterte won the presidency in mid-2016 and sought to rebuild ties with China while criticizing U.S. security policies in a dramatic pivot. The administration of Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, had brought the territorial disputes with China to international arbitration and won, but China has ignored the outcome.

Duterte has refused to immediately demand Chinese compliance with the ruling, which invalidated China's sweeping claims to the waters, where Beijing has transformed a string of disputed reefs into missile-protected island bases.

Duterte's rapprochement has fostered a new era of warmer relations with the Asian economic powerhouse, from which he has sought trade and investment, infrastructure financing, and weapons to fight insurgents. While western governments have sharply criticized Duterte's brutal crackdown on illegal drugs, China

has not. Both Xi and Duterte have often been in the crosshairs of human-rights groups.

Xi said he and Duterte "agreed to elevate our relationship into one of comprehensive, strategic cooperation," adding, "it sends a strong message to the world that our two countries are partners in seeking common development."

Xi's visit to the Philippines is the first by a Chinese president in 13 years.

More than 300 protesters with placards reading "Hands Off our Land and Seas" rallied in front of the Chinese Consulate in Manila. Another group of protesters later burned mock Chinese flags near the presidential palace, where Xi and Duterte met.

Duterte said Philippine participation in Beijing's "Belt and Road Initiative" was discussed and Xi invited the Philippine leader to attend the infrastructure loan program's second international forum in China next year.

The ambitious program has been criticized by the United States as enticing poor nations into debt bondage and has warned it could compromise their independence. Xi has denied that Chinese loans could lead to a "debt trap."

Aside from their trade disputes, China and the United States have wrestled over Beijing's assertive claims to the South China Sea. Chinese officials have asked Washington to back off from what they say

is a purely Asian dispute, but the U.S. has vowed to maintain a presence in the waters, where it has no claims but has pledged to promote freedom of navigation and overflight.

"We will continue to fly and sail wherever international law allows and our national interests demand; harassment will only strengthen our resolve. We will not change course," U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said at a meeting in Papua New Guinea that was attended by leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, including Xi.

Hundreds of Chinese arrested in Cambodia for online scams

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — Police in Cambodia have arrested more than 200 Chinese citizens accused of defrauding people in China over the internet.

Gen. Y Sok Khy, director of the Interior Ministry's Department of Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime, said 36 women were among the 235 Chinese arrested in three different villages in Takeo province, south of the capital, Phnom Penh.

Online scams by Chinese gangs that operate from foreign countries and target mainland Chinese are common throughout Southeast Asia and have been found as far away as Kenya and Spain. Cambodia has arrested and sent at least 1,000 Chinese and Taiwanese residents allegedly involved in such schemes to China since 2012.

The scams are carried out by making phone calls over the internet and employing deception, threats, and blackmail against the victims.

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