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# Creating sustainable future for West PH Sea

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Last month, four medium-range missiles, launched by China's military from that country's mainland, were fired into the waters between the disputed Paracel Islands and the southern island-province of Hainan, according to US defense department authorities. The Chinese call this area the South China Sea. It's not entirely clear why the Chinese began firing missiles into one of the most fragile ecosystems in the world. Millions of people depend upon this ecosystem as their primary source of protein — and millions more depend upon it for their livelihoods.

This destructive treatment of that ecosystem is unfortunately not new for the Chinese.

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A wide body of research has shown that China's efforts to build islands — often in the Philippines' waters — have devastated marine life.

A recent report from James Cook University in Australia shows that the damage is even more severe than previously thought.

According to the lead author, professor Eric Wolanski, Chinese dredging to construct manmade islands has permanently destroyed many reefs; on top of that, the region is massively overfished. There are typically between 100 and 150 Chinese fishing boats working each reef that China controls. For comparison, in the Great Barrier Reef, which is managed sustainably, between 0.1 and 0.5 fishing boats are working per reef.



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“Reefs degraded or killed by island-building and overfishing produce less fish and coral larvae for those downstream. The levels vary, but in the most extreme cases there are no more new coral and fish larvae getting through, due to all its sources of larvae being destroyed,” says Wolanski.

Let’s face it. China’s effort to expand its control of the West Philippine Sea has come at a time when the United States hasn’t been paying attention. US Ambassador Sung Kim is one of America’s most talented diplomats, but back in Washington the Trump administration has until recently ignored the problem. While Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s recent speech reaffirming the PH-US relationship was a positive step, the reality is that it is too little and too late.

Much has changed since Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s return to the Philippines in 1944 after the devastation of the Japanese occupation. In partnership with Filipino leaders, the United States’ efforts to rebuild the nation established the Philippines as the first truly independent democracy in Asia.

But since that proud era, the relationship hasn’t had the attention it deserves. Although many Filipinos feel abandoned by their once-closest ally, the majority are not in favor of a Chinese-centered future. Filipinos understand that Chinese investments might lead to short-term benefits, but very often they come at a terrible economic and environmental cost.

How can the United States help?

By investing in a sustainable future through a new partnership with the people of the Philippines that addresses the most pressing issues they face.

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One of the first priorities in this partnership should be the creation of a sustainable fisheries strategy for the region. Countries that depend upon this fragile ecosystem, including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, should be part of this partnership, and all participating countries should agree to certain principles, including respecting the July 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration and respecting the sovereign territories of the other countries involved.

China should be welcomed into the partnership — as long as it agrees to abide by international law.

This new sustainable fisheries partnership should be grounded in science, with marine biologists and sustainable fisheries experts guiding its planning. There is no time to waste. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the South China Sea accounted “for about 12 percent of global fish catch in 2015. More than half of the fishing vessels in the world operate in these waters, employing around 3.7 million people.”

But the South China Sea has also been dangerously overfished. Fishing stocks have been depleted by 70-95 percent since the 1950s, and catch rates have declined by 66-75 percent over the last 20 years.

There is still time to build a sustainable future for the West Philippine Sea and for the millions of people who depend upon it. If he is elected US president, Joe Biden can begin a new era in the proud PH-US partnership with the protection of one of the Philippines’ most important natural resources as its primary goal.

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