

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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U nited States State Department Secretary Hillary Clinton announced Monday (April 30) in Washington, D.C. that the U.S. does “not take sides on the competing sovereignty claims to land features in the South China Sea” but adds that “as a Pacific power we have a national interest in freedom of navigation, the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, and the unimpeded, lawful commerce across our sea lanes.”

In remarks held at the Treaty Room of the U.S. State Department Monday afternoon, Secretary of State Clinton said that her country “supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all those involved for resolving the various disputes that they encounter. We oppose the threat or use of force

by any party to advance its claims. And we will remain in close contact with our ally, the Philippines. I look forward to continuing to work closely with the foreign secretary as we approach the ASEAN Regional Forum in July.”

Secretary Clinton spoke at a press conference after holding the first ever 2+2 meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Philippines Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario and Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin in the morning in the U.S. State Department.

When asked if the Philippines was able to “get an unequivocal assurance from the U.S. if it will come to the aid of the Philippines if shots are fired” at the Scarborough Shoal being played if China cannot be persuaded diplomatically to withdraw its vessels from the area, Secretary del Rosario said, “In terms of U.S. commitment, I think the U.S. has been very clear that they do not get involved in territorial disputes, but that they are firm in terms of taking a position ... towards a peaceful settlement of the disputes in the South China Sea towards a multilateral approach and towards the use of a rules-based regime in accordance with international law, specifically UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea). They have expressed that they will honor their obligations under the Mutual Defense Treaty.”

## **DEL ROSARIO PUSHES “3-TRACK APPROACH”**

At the same time, Del Rosario put forward “three-track approach to endeavoring to solve the problem that we currently have with China in the Scarborough Shoal.

“The first track is the political track. We are pursuing the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) a framework for a solution to this problem through a code of conduct that we are trying to put together and ultimately approve. Hopefully that will quiet the situation.

“Secondly, we are pursuing a legal track, and the legal track involves our pursuing a dispute settlement mechanism under UNCLOS. There are five of them. We think that we can avail of one or two of those mechanisms, even without the presence of China. And

“Thirdly, we are pursuing a diplomatic approach, such as the one that we are undertaking, which is to have consultations with China in an attempt to defuse the situation.”

When asked the same question, Secretary Gazmin reiterated Secretary Del Rosario’s position, saying, “The assistance we have sought is to help us bring the case to international legal bodies, so that the approach is the legal rules-based approach in resolving the issue in the South China Sea or the West Philippine Sea

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For his part, Secretary Panetta said, “I want to emphasize how deeply the U. S.

values this great partnership and the importance of the Mutual Defense Treaty that remains the cornerstone of our security relationship. Working together, our forces successfully are countering terrorist groups in the southern

Philippines

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## **ISR TO BE INTRODUCED IN PH**

“We are improving the Philippines maritime presence and capabilities with the transfer of a second high-endurance cutter this year. We are working to expand and improve joint ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) programs and our ability to counter cyber attacks. And I’m pleased to see the close cooperation being built between our forces through

training and exercises such as the recently completed exercise Balikatan in 2012.”

Secretary Clinton also disclosed their discussion of the “maturing economic relationship between our countries” and she wants “to see the Philippines join the Trans Pacific Partnership trade community. The foreign secretary raised the

Philippines

’ interest in seeking passage of the Save our Industries Act, and we have conveyed that message to the United States Congress. And of course, I complimented the

Philippines

and the Aquino government on the progress with our Partnership for Growth and the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact.”

While Clinton travels to Beijing in the evening for the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Secretary Panetta disclosed he will be hosting Secretary Gazmin a dinner at the Pentagon “to discuss, among other things, how we can deepen our engagement in ways that enhance this very important alliance and that promote our common vision of regional security in a very important Asia Pacific region.” # # #

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