

South China Sea row: Philippines rejects Chinese conditions for talks to resolve dispute

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Manila: The Philippines today said that it can't accept China's condition for talks on South China Sea as Beijing wants Manila to overlook the order of The Hague-based international tribunal on this issue.

South China Sea

The international tribunal had ruled last week that China had no legal basis to claim most of the strategic, resource-rich waters of South China Sea. Beijing had refused to accept the tribunal's jurisdiction in this matter.

"They asked us also to open ourselves for bilateral negotiations but outside of and in disregard of the arbitral ruling, so this is something that I told him was not consistent with our constitution and our national interest," Philippines foreign minister Perfecto Yasay said.

The foreign secretary, interviewed by broadcaster ABS-CBN, said he and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi discussed the possibility of bilateral talks on the sidelines of an Asia-Europe summit in Mongolia last weekend but made no headway.

The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled Beijing had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights to exploit resources in waters up to 340 kilometres (230 miles) beyond its coast, called its exclusive economic zone.

The fish-rich Scarborough Shoal, which lies about 230 kilometres from the Philippine coast, is a "traditional fishing ground" that should be open to Filipino, Chinese and other fishermen, the tribunal said.

"We would like to discuss with you how your (Filipino) fishermen would have access in that area, but not in the context of the arbitral tribunal (decision)," Yasay quoted Wang as telling him in Mongolia.

"They said, 'If you will insist on the ruling, discussing along those lines, then we might be headed for a confrontation'," the Filipino minister said in the interview.

He said direct talks with China over the maritime flashpoint were unlikely to start anytime soon due to Beijing's refusal to accept the ruling.

Yasay also said today President Rodrigo Duterte's "first and foremost" priority was to regain access to the Scarborough Shoal for Filipino fishermen.

"Let's do it one step at a time. Let's manage it on that basis," Yasay added.

"We have asked China to exercise restraint and sobriety in this regard, that we maintain the status quo for now in terms of not taking aggressive actions... Not coming out with any provocative statements," Yasay added.

Duterte said last week that he would send former president Fidel Ramos to China to start talks on the ruling.

However Yasay said he did not know if Ramos would accept and did not know when that mission could be dispatched.

- (With PTI inputs)