

Issue

Brief

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Navigating Contemporary Philippine Foreign Policy Under Marcos Jr.

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Abstract

The Philippines continues to be embroiled in the overarching regional dynamics of Southeast Asia influenced by the intensifying power competition between its traditional ally, the United States and its largest immediate neighbour, China. Such geopolitical configurations have put significant pressure on the current administration of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. to steer the Philippines through turbulent waters. This brief deciphers Marcos Jr.’s foreign policy and argues that it is an approach that is ‘independent’ like that of his predecessor’s. It provides a comparative analysis of the two successive administrations’ foreign policies, and explores how their similarities and divergences can impact the Philippines’ geopolitical position amidst the evolving security dynamics of Southeast Asia and the greater Indo-Pacific region.

When President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. took office on 30 June 2022, his rise in Philippine politics led analysts to speculate on the future direction of Philippine foreign policy.¹ They agreed that Manila will have to navigate its position with utmost caution given the current nature of regional and international geopolitics, and the deepening and broadening of recurring and emerging security challenges. Indeed, the geopolitical landscape continues to transition towards multipolarity with the rise of potential great powers in the Eastern Hemisphere such as China and India.

Moreover, the resurgence of Russian power, along with the ongoing war in Eastern Europe, add more layers of complexity towards Southeast Asian geopolitics due to the spillover of socio-economic issues such as food crises, energy insecurity, poverty, and runaway inflation. Additionally, as the power competition between the United States (US) and China intensifies in the Western Pacific, the Indo-Pacific will undeniably take centre stage in international geopolitics. The geopolitical significance of the Philippines has increased amidst these conditions.

The Philippines is strategically positioned at the outer rim of maritime Southeast Asia and serves as a gateway between the Western Pacific and the rest of Asia. Additionally, the proximity of the Philippines to critical sea routes and sea lines of communication (SLOC) adds more heft to its position in Indo-Pacific affairs. Washington is a traditional treaty ally, and Beijing is its most powerful immediate neighbour.

Manila, therefore, is at the centre of the polarising US-China power competition.

This brief navigates contemporary Philippine foreign policy against the backdrop of current regional geopolitical trends. The first section provides an assessment of the foreign policy approach of Marcos Jr.’s immediate predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. The next sections underscore how the Philippines under Marcos Jr. is addressing the emerging security challenges in its immediate geographic periphery as it seeks to broadly continue his predecessor’s approach. The last section highlights the divergences between Marcos Jr.’s and Duterte’s foreign policy approaches and explores the future challenges and opportunities for the Philippines in the context of Southeast Asian geopolitics.

Understanding Duterte's Foreign Policy

The Duterte presidency, from 2016 to 2022, put the Philippines within the radar of geopolitical analysts because of political statements he had made against the United States (US) that courted controversy, and the turns he made in forging a Philippine foreign policy outlook different from that of his predecessors'. Indeed, early in Duterte's term, both Filipino and Western political commentators had expected that the Philippines under his administration will join the Chinese bandwagon at the expense of the US and the alliance.² Duterte did announce, in 2016 during a trip to China, that the Philippines would be separating from the US.³ Some years later, in January 2020, Duterte also threatened to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the Philippines and the US—a pillar of the two countries' Mutual Defence Treaty of 1951.⁴ This brief attempts to go beyond the political rhetoric and analyse the on-ground realities of Philippine foreign policy during this period to identify the shifts in Manila's external relations during those six years.

Most Filipino analysts describe Duterte's foreign policy as "independent".⁵ To be sure, different observers have interpreted Duterte's approach in varied ways. When asked about the direction of Duterte's foreign policy in an interview by Radio Television Malacañang in April 2018, Ambassador Jose Santiago Sta. Romana, who was the Philippines' envoy to China during the Duterte administration, described the then Philippine president's foreign policy based on three principles: first, while the alliance with the US remained pivotal in security and foreign policy decision-making in Manila, Duterte sought to lessen the country's dependence on Washington on particular issue areas, such as trade and commerce; second, Duterte wanted to create a conducive political environment in Manila's geographical periphery by stabilising relations with China and harnessing the latter's growing material capabilities for the Philippines' economic gains; and third, Duterte endeavoured to explore new areas of strategic cooperation with the Philippines' non-traditional partners in Asia.⁶

Understanding Duterte's Foreign Policy

While Duterte understood the role of the US as a “stabilising force” in regional affairs, as indicated in the National Security Policy 2017-2021,⁷ he believed that there was a need to recalibrate his predecessor’s deep alignment with Washington, given that the US has not followed through with some of its commitments as an ally.⁸ To remedy this policy imbalance, Manila sought to improve ties with China: it postponed a number of bilateral drills with Washington, and Duterte did not make a single state visit to the US.⁹ Duterte also downplayed the Philippines’ arbitral victory before an international tribunal in The Hague, which nullified China’s expansive interests in the West Philippine Sea.^{a,10} These decisions were made not only so that the Philippines would benefit from closer economic ties with China, but also to create a more conducive environment for negotiation vis-à-vis the West Philippine Sea.

Throughout the Duterte administration, commercial and economic relations between the Philippines and China grew exponentially and by 2021, China had become the Philippines’ largest trading partner, largest source of imports, and second largest export market.¹¹ Duterte leveraged Manila’s growing relations with Beijing to add momentum to his ‘Build Build Build’ (BBB) national infrastructure development initiative. To reciprocate Manila’s positive outlook towards Philippines-China relations, Beijing pledged US\$24 billion worth of deals in October 2016 to kickstart the BBB program.¹²

In December 2016, China provided US\$ 14 million worth of small arms and ammunition to improve Manila’s counterterrorism and anti-drug trafficking operations.¹³ Against the backdrop of the instability in Marawi in Mindanao, in the south of the country,^b Beijing donated US\$7.3 million worth of small arms and ammunition to the Philippines in June 2017.¹⁴ In the words of former Chinese ambassador to the Philippines Zhao Jinhua, it symbolised reinvigorated bilateral ties.¹⁵ While the provision of assistance for counterterrorism and anti-drug operations indicate a potential for the Philippines and China to improve security cooperation in the non-traditional security sphere, the Philippine defence establishment maintains limited cooperation with China in the non-traditional security realm given the latter’s lack of transparency and openness

a What China and most analysts refer to as ‘South China Sea’.

b A firefight, which broke out between Philippine government forces and Islamic State-aligned militants in Marawi

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in its engagements, particularly towards issues pertaining to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Southeast Asian state. In November 2018, the Philippines officially announced its participation in the BRI through a Memorandum of Understanding.¹⁶

Contrary to common conception, however, Duterte's foreign policy approach was neither purely anti-US (anti-West) nor purely pro-China. While Duterte may have certain personal biases against the West,¹⁷ his administration remained transactional with both the US and China. Despite a more overt accommodation towards China's interests than the previous government, the Duterte administration remained cautious in their approach towards issues of security, given China's continued threats to Philippine sovereignty and sovereign rights in the West Philippine Sea. The Philippine defence establishment remained steadfast in addressing China's assertiveness and desire to militarise the disputed territories further.¹⁸ Accordingly, compared to previous administrations, the Duterte administration shifted the focus of the Philippine military deeper towards maritime security, which resulted in more frequent and expansive patrols in the West Philippine Sea.¹⁹ In addition, from 2016 to 2021, the Philippine Government lodged 231 diplomatic protests against China's provocative activities in the West Philippine Sea.²⁰

Along with these developments, Manila also expressed its willingness to invoke its security guarantees under the defence treaty with the US if China attacks any Philippine naval vessel or allow its assertion to spill over into Philippine territory.²¹ This showed Duterte's acknowledgement of the continued importance of the alliance in Philippine security and foreign policy, despite his desire to be less dependent on Washington. Indeed, as of 2022, the largest *Balikatan* bilateral exercise between the Philippines and the US took place under the Duterte administration.²² The Philippine defence and foreign policy establishments have emphasised that the US maintains its role as the Philippines' most important and preferred partner.²³

Understanding Duterte's Foreign Policy

Under the Duterte administration, the Philippines also showed great support for the strengthening of the US 'hub and spokes' policy in the Indo-Pacific.^c During this period, the Philippines and Japan strengthened relations and inaugurated a two-plus-two meeting between the defence and foreign affairs ministers of the two states.²⁴ In a similar vein, when the Australia-United Kingdom-US (AUKUS) defence arrangement was announced in 2021, Manila became the first Southeast Asian state to proclaim its support. Shortly after AUKUS was announced, then Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said, "The enhancement of a near-abroad ally's ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it."²⁵

Along with the recalibration of the US-China balance in Philippine foreign policy, Duterte's foreign policy approach opened doors for the diversification of strategic partners in Asia to enhance the Philippines' diplomatic connectivity and forge new defence networks. Along these lines, Duterte's inclination to invest in bolstering the Philippines' defence cooperation with non-traditional partners and Asian powers like India is backed by his understanding that the momentum towards security and development in international politics is now shifting slowly from the West to the East.²⁶ The signing of the BrahMos deal and the increased participation of India in maritime exercises with the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea illustrated Manila's intent to enhance its defence network through the diversification of strategic partners in Asia.²⁷ Moreover, the Duterte Administration also sought to explore new opportunities for strategic collaborations with Türkiye and Russia.^d

c The 'hub and spokes' policy refers to the US alliance network in Asia, which involves a series of bilateral treaties rather than a collective security framework.

d As mentioned earlier, while Duterte did not visit the US or any other Western state during his term as president, he made official trips to major and regional powers of Asia such as China, India, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

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Duterte's foreign policy must therefore be understood beyond a simplistic 'US or China' lens as it sought to position the Philippines at the centre of the power dynamics in a way that does not consist of pure bandwagoning nor balancing.^e While political statements reflected an aversion towards Washington, notable developments took place that highlighted the continued relevance of the alliance and the US hub-and-spokes network in the Western Pacific. Although there was an overtly positive perception towards Beijing under the Duterte administration, challenges remained in the bilateral relationship, including the delay in materialising Chinese investments and the continuous assertiveness of the Chinese Navy in the West Philippine Sea. Placing the Philippines at the political intersection of the power dynamics also allowed Manila to enhance strategic cooperation with non-traditional partners such as India, which paved the way for the enhancement of Philippine defence capabilities and security networks through diversification.

e 'Balancing' refers to fighting an adversary state either by enhancing one's internal capabilities or through alliance formation. 'Bandwagoning' refers to aligning with an adversary state to gain materially or get a share of the spoils. In this case, balancing refers to Manila overtly challenging China through its alliance with the US, while bandwagoning pertains to Manila aligning with China to gain from its rise. Under the Duterte administration, Manila neither consistently balanced against nor joined the China bandwagon.

The Foundations of Marcos Jr.'s Doctrine in Philippine Foreign Policy

As President Marcos Jr. took over Malacañang Palace following his victory in 2022, he declared that his foreign policy will utilise an independent approach like that of his predecessor.²⁸

Marcos Jr. highlighted how his wariness of falling deeper in existing spheres of influence has catalysed his aim for the Philippines to remain balanced in its strategic equations.²⁹ He also emphasised how the role of the US and the treaty alliance will remain significant in Philippine foreign and security policy under his leadership.³⁰ At the same time, he stated that ties with China will continuously be cultivated to avoid the exacerbation of the already tumultuous security architecture of Southeast Asia.³¹ In January 2022, when asked whether the Philippines will utilise the alliance to pressure China into conforming to international law and respecting the 2016 arbitral ruling, Marcos Jr. pointed to the need to prioritise diplomatic negotiations and consultations with Beijing without directly involving Washington.³² He highlighted his desire to continue strengthening strategic relations with non-traditional partners and other key states of the Indo-Pacific region.³³

Upon his election victory, President Marcos Jr. declared the keystones of his foreign policy: to consistently and vehemently safeguard the Philippines' territorial integrity, sovereignty, and sovereign rights, particularly in the West Philippine Sea and uphold the 2016 arbitral award;³⁴ and to continue the Philippine military modernisation programme to improve the Southeast Asian state's territorial defence and deterrence capabilities when most of the external threats impacting the Philippines are emerging from the maritime domain.³⁵ The president illustrated his resolve to recalibrate the parameters of the Philippine-US treaty alliance for it to evolve based on the security interests and needs of Manila.³⁶

As soon as he took office, Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy approach quickly faced challenges. The first two state visits of Marcos Jr. to Indonesia and Singapore, in September 2022, reflected a commitment by Philippine leaders to uphold the vitality of intra-Southeast Asian cooperation. Following this, the Philippine president had his first meeting with US President Joe Biden on the side-lines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2022. During the meeting, Marcos noted that the role played by the US in the region is not

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only crucial but also necessary in securing the established order.³⁷ Two months after, both leaders met again on the side-lines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Cambodia and cemented their commitment to deepen the partnership and also evolve the alliance based on contemporary threats they are both facing in the Western Pacific.³⁸

In the same month, Marcos Jr. had his first in-person meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the side-lines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting in Bangkok. The two underscored the growing momentum of Philippines-China relations, particularly in the economic realm, and the importance of enhancing levels of engagement to strengthen ties further.³⁹ The meeting set the tone for the Philippine president's first state visit to Beijing in January 2023. Along with the 14 bilateral deals that were signed during the two-day trip, a decision to institutionalise and set-up a hotline between the foreign ministers of both states was made to minimise the chances for miscalculation and conflict in the West Philippine Sea.⁴⁰

“For Marcos Jr., the US will remain significant in Philippine foreign and security policy, while ties with China will be cultivated to avoid exacerbating the already tumultuous security architecture of Southeast Asia.”

Operationalising Marcos Jr.'s Foreign Policy Vision

The success of a state's foreign policy will depend on its ability to address sprouting issues based on the tools and strategies prescribed by its chief architect. While Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy sought to manage its relations with its traditional ally and its most powerful immediate neighbour, the reality of systemic shifts in the material distribution of power and the varied interests of established and rising great powers often complicate the strategic calculations of less powerful states.

China's continuous rise, coupled with its growing assertiveness, expansive interests, and disdain for the established order continue to provoke the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. As the US intends to check China's increasing provocations towards the status quo, Beijing continues to harness its growing material capabilities to enhance its power projection abilities, particularly in East and Southeast Asia, where its locus of power lies. Today, China's large-scale military build-up and reclamation activities in the South China Sea have not only altered the Western Pacific's geography, but also its balance of power.⁴¹ As early as in 2018, the then-incoming US Indo-Pacific Command Commander Admiral Philip Davidson had said that China already had the capacity of controlling the South China Sea "in all scenarios short of war with the US."⁴²

While the Marcos Jr. government maintains its position of keeping diplomatic channels open with Beijing, he has become more aware of the futility of being continuously accommodating towards China. Marcos Jr. was quick to recognise the folly of hoping that China will act like a better neighbour through greater appeasement.

After pledges made to manage relations peacefully during the bilateral summit between Marcos Jr. and Xi Jinping in Beijing, China continued to increase its strategic manoeuvres at the expense of Philippine sovereignty and sovereign rights. On 6 February 2023, Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) pointed a military-grade laser at a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel along the *Ayungin* Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal), which is well within Philippine EEZ.⁴³ The PCG was on a resupply mission to its vessel, *Barko ng Republika ng Pilipinas (BRP) Sierra Madre*, which serves as an outpost for the Philippine military within the state's waters. During the same month, a CCG ship and at least 26 Chinese maritime militia vessels were spotted around *Ayungin* and *Sabina* Shoals, which are well within Philippine EEZ.⁴⁴ On March 5, it was reported that PLAN and CCG vessels were accompanied by 42 suspected vessels of the Chinese maritime

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militia along the vicinity of Pag-asa—the largest island of the Kalayaan Group of Islands (KGI), an integral part of Philippine territory.⁴⁵ Similarly, a few days after Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang's visit to Manila in April, the CCG engaged in provocative and dangerous manoeuvres in Philippine EEZ against the PCG.⁴⁶

Following these activities, Marcos Jr. sought to bolster the Philippines' territorial defence and maritime security capabilities by strengthening its defence partnerships with the US and like-minded partners. In an attempt to recalibrate the treaty alliance with the US to address contemporary security challenges, the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was expanded in February 2023. Originally, the EDCA provided the US military with temporary access to five Philippine bases to enhance the Southeast Asian state's deterrence; however, during the visit of US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin to Manila on 31 January 2023, the two agreed to add four more locations to the EDCA.⁴⁷ This will not only bolster Philippine deterrence capabilities, but also the state's intent to modernise its military capacity and infrastructure.

Marcos Jr. also gave emphasis to enhancing strategic relations with Japan – a key spoke in the US alliance network in Asia. During his state visit to Tokyo in early February this year, Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida signed a defence agreement that would allow Japanese troops to participate in exercises to address humanitarian issues in the Philippines.⁴⁸ More importantly, the deal has the potential to enhance and institutionalise more robust and formal frameworks for defence cooperation between the two states. Indeed, the coast guards of the Philippines, the US, and Japan held their first three-way sea drill off the Southeast Asian state's coast in June 2023 with Australia joining as an observer.⁴⁹

While Marcos Jr. continues to highlight that the ultimate path for stable relations between the Philippines and China will be through diplomatic and peaceful negotiations,⁵⁰ he remains aware of the difficulties involved. Xi's China is fuelled by nationalistic sentiments as a means of securing domestic political power. As China continues to grow, it is unlikely for Beijing to make concessions similar to what it gave in the 1950s and 1960s when it did not have the clout it has today.⁵¹ Making similar concessions would make Xi look weak at home and risk his political power. Moreover, China's vast material power and rising assertiveness create more hurdles for the possibility for long-lasting peaceful resolutions. An example of this is Beijing's overt delays in formalising a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.⁵² These issues add more layers of complexity to Manila's pursuit of its strategic interests.

The Opportunities and Challenges


While the term “independent foreign policy” has been used by both Marcos Jr. and his predecessor to describe their own stances, it is important to recognise their key differences. Duterte eventually sought to pursue a more balanced position between Washington and Beijing, with his statements overtly accommodating of China while often toning down Chinese assertiveness against Philippine interests. Examples of such projection include the removal of any mention of the South China Sea in the 2017 ASEAN joint statement and downplaying the sinking of a Filipino fishing boat by China in the West Philippine Sea in 2019.⁵³

For his part, Marcos Jr. has illustrated his willingness to call out Beijing openly for its provocative manoeuvres in Philippine waters. Upon the fresh incidents that took place early this year, the Philippines president summoned the Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines and emphasised that such behaviour from China ran contrary to the agreements he had with Xi in January.⁵⁴ In addition, not only has Marcos Jr. emphasised his commitment to upholding the 2016 arbitral ruling, but he has also noted that there are no conflicting territorial claims between Manila and Beijing, rather, it is the latter that seeks to illicitly claim Philippine sovereign territory.⁵⁵ Moreover, while Duterte reoriented the Philippine military’s focus to maritime security, Marcos Jr. has added more momentum in empowering the military’s role in the South China Sea.⁵⁶ He has also welcomed the idea of joint maritime patrols with other Southeast Asian neighbours and with extra-regional states like the US, Japan, and Australia to enhance interoperability, strengthen capacity building, and maintain stability in the region.⁵⁷

However, Marcos Jr. remains steadfast in seeking to prioritise efforts to maintain peaceful relations with Beijing, particularly in the economic realm. This can be seen through the carefully crafted statement by the National Security Council regarding Manila’s unwillingness to interfere in the Taiwan issue, which may exacerbate the US-China competition further.⁵⁸ More recently, on the sidelines of the awarding ceremony of the Award for Promoting Philippines-China Understanding in June 2023, Marcos Jr. emphasised that Manila has “not shifted away from China in any way” and while the dispute remains, it is not the defining characteristic of the overarching bilateral relationship.⁵⁹

The Opportunities and Challenges

Given the asymmetry of power and the perils of geopolitics, the Philippines cannot simply cut off relations with its most powerful and largest immediate neighbour. There will always be attempts to stabilise relations despite Beijing's growing belligerence. Consequently, along with better positioning the Philippines amid the power dynamics of the region, Manila will seek to leverage its deepening and broadening strategic relations with its ally and other key partners to fast-track the Philippines' military modernisation, improve its territorial defence capabilities, and enhance its diplomatic connectivity given the uncertainty of international and regional geopolitics.

However, given that the Marcos Jr. administration still has nearly five years to go, the tumultuous nature of international politics and the prevalence of future strategic uncertainty, may add significant challenges towards Manila's desire to pursue its foreign policy objectives. 

“ Marcos Jr. seeks to maintain peaceful relations with Beijing, particularly in the economic realm. ”

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