

The 2022 Philippines Presidential Election and its Influence on Asia-Pacific Geopolitics

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Abstract

In the 2022 Philippines General Election on May 9, 2022, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte were elected as the new president and vice president. The election results will not only affect the direction of the Philippines’ foreign policy choice of embracing the U.S. or leaning on China, but also influence the ways the Philippines deals with the U.S.’ Indo-Pacific strategy and the South China Sea disputes. Although most of the media see Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as China-friendly, this paper argues that the new president will adopt a hedging strategy between Washington and Beijing — that is, a combination of economic cooperation with and military confrontation against China in order to protect the national interests of the Philippines.

Keywords: 2022 Philippines General Election, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, South China Sea Dispute, Hedging

I. Introduction

On May 9, 2022, the people of the Philippines directly elected their 17th president and 16th vice president since 1935. Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. (also known as Ferdinand Marcos Jr.) and his running mate, Sara Duterte, won the presidency and vice presidency by a landslide; both led the preliminary count with over 83% of the votes.¹

1. “Preliminary results show Ferdinand Marcos Jr wins Philippine presidential election,” *Xinhua*, May 9, 2022, <<https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202205/09/WS62793969a310fd2b29e5b8a8.html>>.



Figure 1. Ferdinand Marcos Sr.’s Son, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., Will Be the Next Philippine President

Source: “For Bongbong, economic growth key to restoring Marcos family honor,” *Nikkei Asia*, May 12, 2022, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/For-Bongbong-economic-growth-key-to-restoring-Marcos-family-honor>>.

The election results decided the direction of Philippine foreign policy choices — that is, whether to embrace the U.S. or lean toward China. This will also influence the future development of Philippine policy in responding to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the South China Sea dispute. This paper will examine the background of the leading presidential candidates and their policy stances, the Philippines’ role in the Indo-Pacific strategies and the South China Sea dispute, and will discuss the influence of the result of the 2022 Philippines presidential election on geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific.

II. Background and the Policy Stances of the Main Presidential Candidates

There were five leading candidates in the 2022 Philippine presidential election. Except for Ferdinand Marcos Jr., a well-known China-friendly candidate, the other

candidates had a more positive view of U.S.-Philippine relations. They were also more skeptical of China's role in the region than President Duterte.²

Marcos Jr. was the only candidate who signaled almost perfect continuity with the incumbent populist pro-China President Rodrigo Duterte. Marcos Jr. has expressed his position on the South China Sea in some media interviews and has suggested setting aside the 2016 ruling and engaging more with China.³ Since Marcos Jr. allied with Rodrigo Duterte's daughter Sara Duterte, people assumed he would likely continue Duterte's policy of acquiescence to China.

The biggest issue between the Philippines and China is the South China Sea dispute. China has used the "nine-dash line" to claim it has the majority territory of the South China Sea as these areas belong to Chinese traditional territory. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. believes a better way to deal with the South China Sea dispute is to approach China and pursue engagement with Beijing. In addition to that, Marcos Jr. has also mentioned that he would not ask for help from the United States because "the problem is between China and us. If the Americans come in, it's bound to fail because you are putting the two protagonists together."⁴

In a media interview, Marcos Jr. once described people at the Chinese embassy in Manila as his friends.⁵ Moreover, Marcos Jr. has argued that maintaining a close defense cooperation relationship with the U.S. will make China dissatisfied and the

2. Water Lohman, "Scenarios for a post-Duterte Philippines," January 18, 2022, *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*, <<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/philippines-election/>>; "The Philippines' pivot toward China could change when Duterte steps down as president," *CNBC*, March 23, 2022, <<https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/24/philippine-presidential-election-dutertes-china-pivot-could-change.html>>.

3. "Philippine Presidential Candidates Espouse Tougher China Sea Approach," *VOA News*, April 21, 2022, <<https://www.voanews.com/a/philippine-presidential-candidates-espouse-tougher-china-sea-approach/6539123.html>>.

4. "Philippine Presidential Candidates Espouse Tougher China Sea Approach."

5. "Philippine Presidential Candidates Espouse Tougher China Sea Approach."

Philippines will suffer from it.⁶ This highlights Marcos' relatively China-friendly position.

Marcos Jr. mentioned that he would dismiss any potential offer of help from the U.S. in negotiations with China over the South China Sea if he were elected president. Additionally, he also mentioned that arbitration was no longer available for the Philippines, and thus he would lead the Philippines to engage more with China.⁷ In terms of foreign policy, he expressed an eagerness to stay on friendly terms with China, despite Beijing's militarization in areas disputed by Manila and other parties in the South China Sea.⁸ Some people in Duterte's party, PDP-Laban, decided to support Marcos Jr. Additionally, former Duterte officials and a nationwide volunteer group that helped the president win in 2016 also were mobilized by Duterte to support Marcos Jr. That is why Marcos Jr. won the presidency by a landslide, even though he has been characterized as a dictator's son.

Other major candidates, such as Francisco "Isko Moreno" Domagoso, Leni Robredo, Manny Pacquiao, and Panfilo Lacson (ordered alphabetically by the first names of candidates), held overtly hawkish and nationalistic positions on China's aggressive behavior in Philippine-claimed territory in the South China Sea.⁹

Francisco "Isko Moreno" Domagoso declared his zero tolerance for Chinese maritime aggression and promised he would push China to abide by international law if he became the president of the Philippines. In addition, he also guaranteed Philippine fishermen that they could work in the South China Sea "unharmedly,

6. Jason Castaneda, "Philippine frontrunner Marcos favors China over US," *Asia Times*, February 1, 2022, <<https://asiatimes.com/2022/02/philippine-frontrunner-marcos-favors-china-over-us/>>.

7. Luis Liwanag & Basilio Sepe, "Philippine Presidential Front-Runner Shuns US Help in S China Sea Negotiations," *Benar News*, January 26, 2022, <<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/china-talks-01262022134149.html>>.

8. "Philippines enters final leg of 2-way presidential race," *Kyodo News*, April 9, 2022, <<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/04/f4ab9d2dd709-philippines-enters-final-leg-of-2-way-presidential-race.html>>.

9. Jason Castaneda, "Philippine frontrunner Marcos favors China over US."

unhampered, and without disruption.”¹⁰ In an interview with Reuters, Domagoso said that reports of harassment, blockades, and assaults by the Chinese maritime military in the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ) would become a thing of the past with him in charge. He promised to strengthen the Philippines’ naval power and marine assets to protect its territory.¹¹

Domagoso laid out his position on China, saying that China needs to accept the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague on the South China Sea. This effectively ruled that Beijing’s nine-dash line claim, which the Chinese government used to outline the majority of the South China Sea as the Chinese traditional territory, had no legal basis under the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS). Domagoso’s stance on the South China Sea issue contrasts sharply with that of President Duterte, who has been reluctant to confront China.¹² Economically speaking, several political analysts stated that China is not an “enemy,” and Domagoso would support the idea of joint oil and gas exploration deals in the South China Sea with China.¹³

Robredo stated that, if she were elected president, the Philippines would assert its sovereignty over its portion of the South China Sea and that the Philippines should recognize the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling. This is not to say that she is taking a pro-U.S. position, but instead she wants to lead the Philippines to pursue an “inclusive and independent” foreign policy.¹⁴ Some have reported that she wanted

10. Karen Lama, “Manila mayor vows to take on China as Philippines president,” *CNBC*, January 31, 2022, <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/manila-mayor-vows-take-china-philippines-president-2022-01-31/>>.

11. Neil Jerome Morales, “Factbox: Key contenders for Philippines’ 2022 presidential election,” *Reuters*, February 8, 2022, <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/key-contenders-philippines-2022-presidential-election-2022-02-08/>>.

12. Karen Lama, “Manila mayor vows to take on China as Philippines president.”

13. Yen Nee Lee, “The Philippines’ pivot toward China could change when Duterte steps down as president,” *CNBC*, March 24, 2022, <<https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/24/philippine-presidential-election-dutertes-china-pivot-could-change.html>>.

14. “Five presidential candidates lay down specifics of their plans,” *Business World*, February 4, 2022, <<https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2022/02/04/427936/five-presidential-candidates-lay-down-specifics-of-their-plans/>>

to build stronger ties with the U.S., ASEAN countries, the European Union, and Australia.¹⁵

Furthermore, Robredo mentioned that the Philippines should lead ASEAN in developing the ASEAN-China code of conduct, as this would be the legal way to resolve tensions in the South China Sea. She also said that, although some countries disagree with such an approach, the Philippines must lead the way because the Philippines had the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling.¹⁶



Figure 2. Vice President Leni Robredo and Her Supporters during the 2022 Presidential Campaign

Source: “Robredo tells supporters: It’s an honor to fight with you,” *Manila Bulletin*, May 8, 2022, <<https://mb.com.ph/2022/05/08/robredo-tells-supporters-its-an-honor-to-fight-with-you/>>.

15. Yen Nee Lee, “The Philippines’ pivot toward China could change when Duterte steps down as president.”

16. “Philippine Presidential Candidates Espouse Tougher China Sea Approach.”

Manny Pacquiao criticized Duterte's close relationship with China.¹⁷ Additionally, he promised he would stop China's "bullying" of Filipinos in the South China Sea and proposed "peace talks" with Beijing. He also mentioned that the Philippines must reduce its imports under his administration and that the country should expand its exports. He stated that the Philippines should not allow itself to be bullied by China and requested more discussions on the issue.

Pacquiao also vowed to deploy navy ships in the disputed waters to protect his country's fishermen. In addition, he said he valued his country's relationship with the U.S., which he called "our best friend." Pacquiao once enjoyed President Duterte's support, but the two split over Pacquiao's criticism of the president for corruption and his gentle approach to China.¹⁸

Lastly, Panfilo Lacson stated that the Philippines should strengthen alliances with the United States, the European Union, Japan, Australia, and other countries with solid military power.¹⁹

Table 1. The List of Candidates in the 2022 Philippines Presidential Election

Names (Alphabetically)	Title	Policy toward China
Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.	Former senator; PFP party (Partido Federal ng Pilipinas)	Adopts a China-friendly foreign policy.
Francisco "Isko Moreno" Domagoso	Incumbent Mayor of Manila and President of the Aksyon Demokratiko Party	Declares a zero-tolerance of Chinese maritime aggression in the South China Sea but will discuss with China the idea of joint oil and gas exploration deals in the South China Sea.

¹⁷ Neil Jerome Morales, "Factbox: Key contenders for Philippines' 2022 presidential election."

¹⁸ Water Lohman, "Scenarios for a post-Duterte Philippines."

¹⁹ Javier Joe Ismael, "Lacson: PH must 'take initiative' to boost ties with the US, allies amid sea row," *Manila Times*, May 1, 2022, <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/05/01/news/lacson-ph-must-take-initiative-to-boost-ties-with-us-allies-amid-sea-row/869082>>.

Names (Alphabetically)	Title	Policy toward China
Leni Robredo	Current Vice President of the Philippines, former lawyer and human rights advocate; Liberal party	Pursues an “inclusive and independent” foreign policy; strongly against China in the South China Sea.
Manny Pacquiao	Incumbent Senator; PROMDI party (Progressive Movement for the Devolution of Initiatives/ Probinsya Muna Development Initiative)	Opposes perceived China bullying of Filipinos in the South China Sea, would propose “peace talks” with Beijing.
Panfilo Lacson	Incumbent Senator; Independent candidate	Suggests strengthening alliances with the United States, the European Union, Japan, and other countries to balance China.

Source: Organized by the Author.

III. Policy Stances of Marcos and Some Critics

With the exception of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the four presidential candidates participated in interviews with GMA’s Jessica Soho.²⁰ According to interviews by the GMA News, the candidates held varying opinions on various issues. For example, concerning the strategies to resolve the dispute in the South China Sea, Robredo said the Philippines should uphold the 2016 ruling of the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration and form a coalition of nations against China’s militarization of the disputed islands in the Sea. Lacson thought the Philippines should oppose China by building alliances with the U.S., the European Union, Japan, Australia, and other countries. Pacquiao mentioned that the Philippines should seek more discussions on the dispute by bolstering the country’s military presence in the area. Moreno also held a strong position, arguing that China should accept the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. These four presidential candidates were all in favor of joint

²⁰ Ditas B Lopez, “Presidential Candidates in Philippines Weigh in on China Dispute,” *Bloomberg*, January 23, 2022, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-23/presidential-candidates-in-philippines-weigh-in-on-china-dispute>>.

exploration in the South China Sea, and also agreed on recognition of the arbitration's ruling.

Table 2. Candidates' Stances on Various Issues

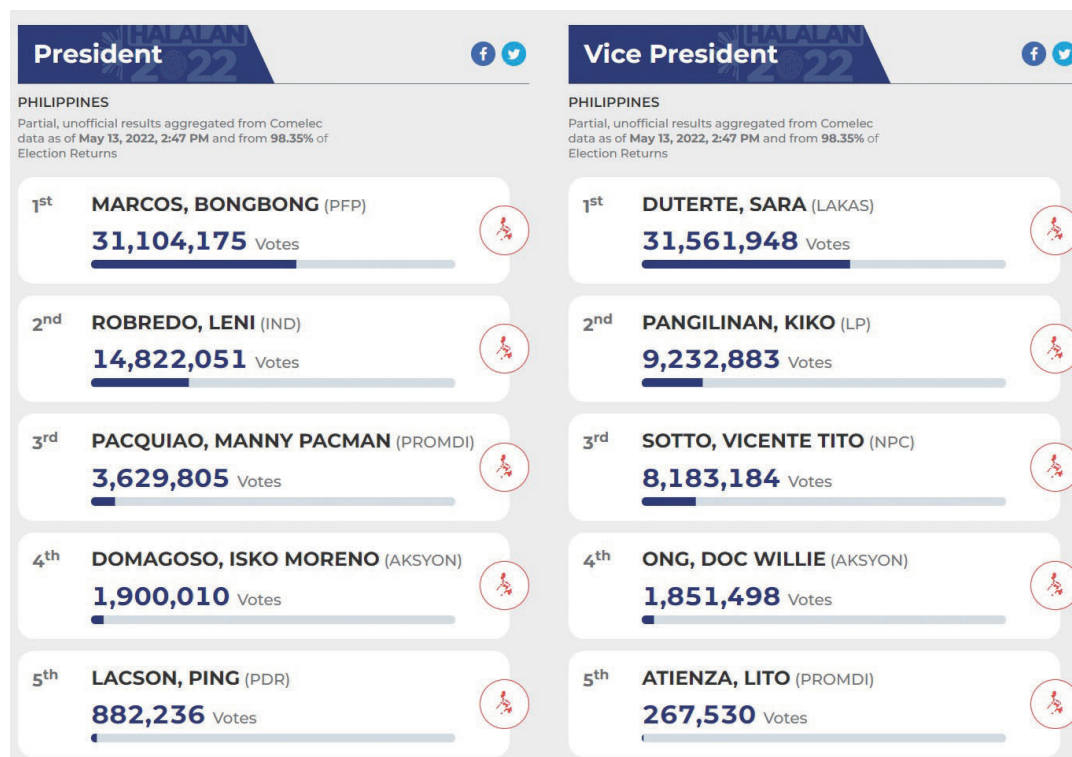
	LACSON	MORENO	PACQUIAO	ROBREDO
U.S. visiting forces agreement continuation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Peace talks resumption with communist groups	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Allowing offshore gaming operators	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Death penalty	No	No	No	No
Revising constitution to allow 100% foreign ownership	No	Yes	No	Yes

Source: Ditas B. Lopez, "Presidential Candidates in Philippines Weigh in on China Dispute."

Finally, the China-friendly candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. won the 2022 Philippines presidential election. The following discussion analyzes whether Marcos Jr. may have a China-leaning policy or will take a more flexible way to protect the Philippines' national interests.

Critics stated that a win for Marcos Jr. could threaten the future of democracy in the Philippines. This assessment stemmed from the view that during Duterte's term in office, we could see the damage he made to Philippine democracy because of the drug war. According to scoring by the Freedom House, the Philippines received a score of 65 out of 100 in its annual global survey in 2016, but the score fell to only 56 out of 100 in 2021.²¹

21. Joshua Kurlantzick, "A Marcos Presidency Will Be Bad News for the Philippines' Democracy," April 15, 2022, *Council on Foreign Relations*, <<https://www.cfr.org/article/marcos-presidency-will-be-bad-news-philippines-democracy>>.

Table 3. The 2022 Philippine Presidential Preliminary Election Result

Source: "The 2022 Philippine Preliminary Election Result," *ABS-CBN News*, May 13, 2022, <<https://halalanresults.abs-cbn.com/>>.

Some analysts worry that the Marcos family's past will threaten future Philippine democracy as the family continues to celebrate the legacy of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., despite turning the Philippines into a wealthy, well-functioning country, was known to be a brutal and corrupt dictator who was a barrier to any democratic opposition.

Many people believe Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will defend his father, the former dictator, and will likely continue some of Duterte's authoritarian policies. Moreover, Marcos Jr. could extend Duterte's extrajudicial drug war and block any investigation by the International Criminal Court. In addition, Duterte's daughter, Sarah Duterte, could similarly extend her father's perceived wrongdoings.

On foreign policy, Marcos Jr. could also represent a continuation of Duterte, especially since he has publicly pledged to renounce the Philippines' victory in the

2016 international court ruling that rejected China's broad maritime claims in the South China Sea.

After Marcos Jr. won the election, many asked how he will deal with China's increasing military presence in the South China Sea and respond to the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy. Since Beijing and Washington have closely watched this election, Marcos Jr. now faces a challenging situation.



Figure 3. The Geopolitical Strategic Importance of the Philippines in the Sino-U.S. Indo-Pacific Rivalry

Source: Dominique Fraser, "What the Philippines Election Means for the Contest in the Indo-Pacific," May 9, 2022, *Asia Society*, <<https://asiasociety.org/australia/what-philippines-election-means-contest-indo-pacific>>.

IV. The U. S., China, and the Philippines in Asia-Pacific Geopolitics

On December 10, 1898, the U.S. government formally acquired the Philippines

from Spain. The history of the U.S. military presence in the Philippines continued from that time until the *U.S.-Philippines Military Bases Agreement* was abrogated in 1991. Traditionally, the U.S. and the Philippines have been in a close military alliance, thus forming solid defense cooperation.

The U.S. has strengthened the U.S.-Philippines alliance and built close military ties by establishing bilateral strategic and security dialogue under the 2+2 mechanism between foreign ministers and defense ministers and the Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board (MDB-SEB).²² The Philippines has also participated as a critical player in the U.S.' "pivot to Asia" strategy.

However, the Obama administration accused Duterte of human rights violations,²³ which triggered Duterte's nerves and led him to threaten to cut off all ties with the United States.²⁴ This dispute on human rights almost broke the U.S.-Philippines' decades-long relationship. On September 12, 2016, Duterte declared that U.S. special forces must leave the Southern Philippines.²⁵ In Duterte's public speech delivered in October 2016, he announced that the Philippines would change its foreign policy and would pivot away from the United States. Soon after, Duterte visited China and met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping to discuss future cooperation between the Philippines and China.

The Trump administration shifted away from the Obama administration, which had concentrated on democracy and human rights. Obama's successor, Donald Trump,

²² Ren Yuanzhe, "US-Philippines Defense Cooperation during the Duterte Administration: Adjustments and Limitations," March/April 2020, p. 104, *China International Studies*, <<http://www.ciisjournal.com/Admin/UploadFile/Issue/mdsqluj.pdf>>.

²³ Ben Westcott, "Obama to meet Philippines President Duterte, raise human rights issues," *CNN*, August 30, 2016, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/30/politics/obama-duterte-laos-meeting/index.html>>.

²⁴ "Duterte Threatens to Cut Off Ties With US Again," *VOA News*, October 25, 2016, <<https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-duterte-us-ties/3565246.html>>.

²⁵ Manuel Mogato, "Duterte says he wants U.S. special forces out of southern Philippines," *Rueters*, September 12, 2016, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-duterte-idUSKCN11110J>>.

however, no longer accused Duterte of human rights violations but emphasized security cooperation instead. Trump had a telephone conversation with Duterte in April 2017, congratulating him on what he termed extraordinary achievements in drug control.²⁶ The Trump administration regarded the Philippines as a major stakeholder for U.S. interests, and therefore the U.S. did not want to undermine long-term relations with the Philippines. The U.S. understood that if it pushed the Philippines too much, the Manila would move closer to China, which was the last thing the U.S. wanted to see.

During a visit to the Philippines in August 2018, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Walter Douglas announced that US\$60 million from US\$300 million in U.S. military assistance to the Indo-Pacific region would be used in the Philippines.²⁷

On one hand, the Duterte government restricted the U.S. from using military bases in the Philippines, which contrasted with the policy of the previous Benigno Aquino III government. It prohibited the U.S. from implementing “freedom of navigation operations” in the South China Sea. But, on the other hand, the Duterte government kept the *Mutual Defense Treaty* intact and U.S.-Philippines military exercises and military exchanges continued. Although we saw Duterte’s apparent pro-China image, he was nevertheless flexible in managing a balanced relationship between the Philippines, the U.S., and China.

The U.S. and the Philippines have held regular joint military exercises, such as “Balikatan” (“shoulder to shoulder”). This joint training program is an effective form of defense cooperation. The 2017 “Balikatan” drill was downsized sharply, with only 5,000 participants, because the Duterte government had a tense relationship with the Trump administration. Still, the number of participants in the 2018 exercise

26. Ren Yuanzhe, “US-Philippines Defense Cooperation during the Duterte Administration: Adjustments and Limitations.” p. 111.

27. “Philippines to get bulk of US Indo-Pacific security aid,” *World Bulletin*, August 30, 2018, <<https://worldbulletin.dunjabulteni.net/asia-pacific/philippines-to-get-bulk-of-us-indo-pacific-security-aid-h205420.html>>.

rose to 8,000 and remained at the same level in 2019.²⁸ This showed that the Duterte government had not given up on its ties with the U.S.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are committed to solid defense relations with the United States and remain skeptical of China's intentions in the region; even President Duterte has failed to control the AFP. Media reports mentioned that this explains why, during Duterte's six-year term, the AFP did not sign a single major defense deal with China. Instead, it has expanded its defense ties with the United States to improve its external defense capabilities.²⁹

What factors have influenced the Philippines decision whether to choose defense cooperation with the United States or to pivot to China's economic leverage? This is related to the complex conflict between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea.

In 2011, former president Benigno Aquino III adopted a balanced policy toward China's expansion in the South China Sea. In January 2013, the Philippines filed a statement of claim against China with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, Netherlands. The Philippines requests the arbitral tribunal to comment on two main issues: (i) whether China's maritime claims in the South China Sea based on the nine-dash line were valid or contrary to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and (ii) whether Scarborough Shoal, Johnson Reef, Cuarteron Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef, which have submerged features below sea level at high tide, are islands or rocks under Article 121 (3) of the Convention.³⁰

During the process, China refused to participate in the international mediation.

²⁸ Ren Yuanzhe, "US-Philippines Defense Cooperation during the Duterte Administration: Adjustments and Limitations," p. 106.

²⁹ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Philippine Foreign Policy After Duterte," March 15, 2022, *The Diplomat*, <<https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippine-foreign-policy-after-duterte/>>.

³⁰ Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Limits of Intergovernmentalism: The Philippines' Changing Strategy in the South China Sea Dispute and Its Impact on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 3, July 2020, p. 343.

The tribunal unanimously declared jurisdiction over the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea. The tribunal rulings on these two issues above were: (1) that China's "nine-dash line" claim was invalid to the extent that it exceeded the limits established by UNCLOS; and (2) that Scarborough Shoal is a rock that generates no exclusive economic zone (EEZ); Mischief Reef and Second Thomas Shoal are part of the EEZ and continental shelf of the Philippines; Johnson Reef, Cuarteron Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef are rocks that generate no EEZ or continental shelf.³¹ The rulings constituted a victory for the Philippines.

In addition to the lawfare, the Philippines also tried to bolster its security relations with the U.S., buying American military equipment and acquiring security guarantees under the 1951 *Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT)*.³² In April 2014, to curb Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea, the Philippines signed the 2014 *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)* with the U.S. In addition, the Philippines also strengthened its security cooperation with Japan.

However, after he took office, Duterte declared a relatively accommodative policy toward China and downplayed the South China Sea dispute. Duterte decided to set aside the South China Sea tribunal ruling and even announced the Philippines Navy would not join patrols in the South China Sea with the U.S. Navy. Moreover, Duterte tried to establish closer economic and diplomatic relations with China. Baviera mentioned that Duterte would adopt a hedging strategy against China by not breaking ties with China over the South China Sea dispute and because Duterte sought closer economic ties with China.³³

31. Robert D. Williams, "Tribunal Issues Landmark Ruling in South China Sea Arbitration," July 12, 2016, *Lawfare*, <<https://www.lawfareblog.com/tribunal-issues-landmark-ruling-south-china-sea-arbitration>>.

32. Renato Cruz De Castro, "How Indo-Pacific Geopolitics Affects Foreign Policy: The Case of the Philippines, 2010-2017," *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2, September 2018, p. 133.

33. Aileen Baviera, "President Duterte's Foreign Policy Challenges," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 38, No. 2, August 2016, p. 205.

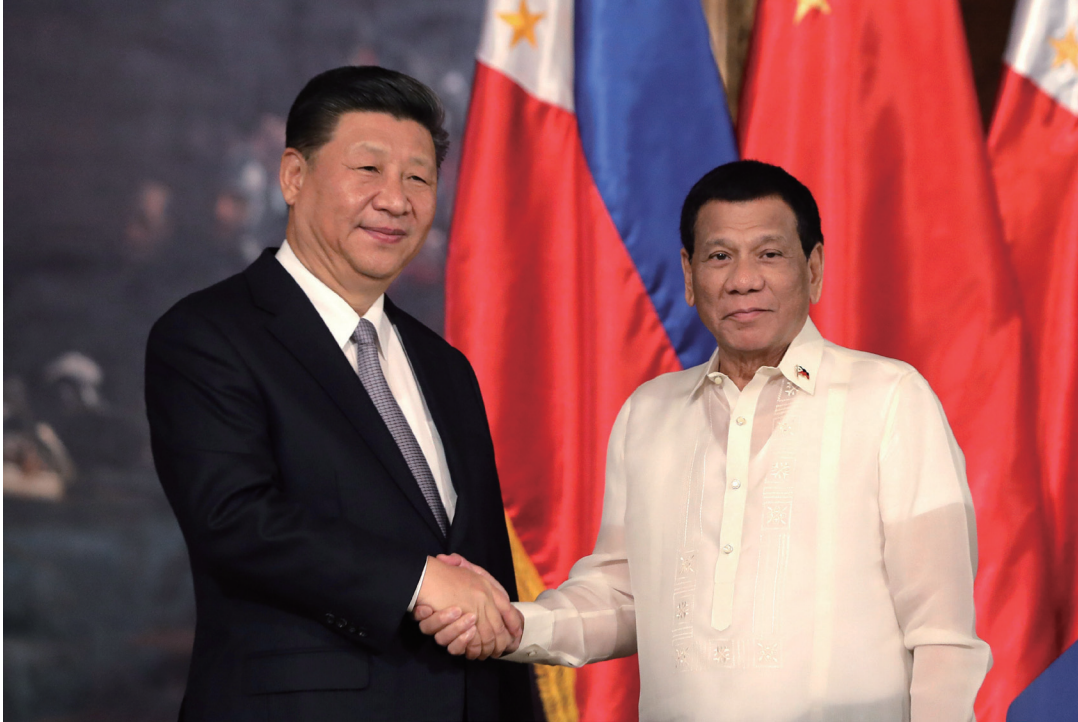


Figure 4. President Rodrigo Duterte Meets Xi Jinping

Source: “Duterte, Xi discuss the South China Sea, Ukraine in tele-summit,” *RAPPLER*, April 9, 2022, <<https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-xi-jinping-telesummit-april-8-2022/>>.

Frankly speaking, the Duterte administration adopted an accommodative policy with China because they would like to seek Chinese foreign investment in building the Philippines’ infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

But, in 2019, China’s People’s Liberation Army and Navy confronted the Armed Forces of the Philippines on Philippine islands in the South China Sea. Also, there were delays in the promised Chinese investment in the Philippines.³⁴ These developments prompted the Duterte government to rethink its accommodative policy

³⁴ Renato Cruz De Castro, “A Middle Power Between Appeasement and Limited Hard Balancing: The Philippines’ Strategic Dilemma in a Changing Indo-Pacific Region,” October 2020, p. 2, *EASC*, <<https://easc.scholasticahq.com/article/17816-a-middle-power-between-appeasement-and-limited-hard-balancing-the-philippines-strategic-dilemma-in-a-changing-indo-pacific-region>>.

and turn its attitude to a more balanced approach.

Duterte had canceled key security initiatives with the United States to please China. In return, he had hoped Beijing would reward his “goodwill” by supporting the Philippines’ economic development and withdrawing its aggressive South China Sea claims.³⁵ But those rewards never materialized, and moreover Filipino fishermen continued to be constantly harassed by the Chinese coast guard and fishing boats in the South China Sea. China’s aggressive behavior in the South China Sea forced Duterte to radically shift his stance on China.

The Philippines has long regarded the United States as a traditional ally in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. has been the leading power in the Asia-Pacific region since the end of World War II until the rise of China in the 2010s. The threat of a rising China now drives the U.S.’ Asia-Pacific strategy. From 2011 to 2016, the Philippines was the United States’ ally and partner in the Asia-Pacific region. First, the Obama administration launched its “pivot to Asia” regional strategy in 2012. Former president Benigno Aquino III adopted his foreign policy stance to balance China after the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff.

President Trump announced his “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy in 2018 and attempted to secure the Philippines as a partner in the alliance to counter Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. The FOIP also presented an opportunity for the Philippines to develop its defense capabilities. If China crossed any South China Sea red lines, the Philippines would gain U.S. support by participating in a coalition of nations supporting FOIP.

The Biden administration recently proposed the “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity” (IPEF). The United States seeks to invite countries with similar ideas to cooperate, form alliances, and use economic power to contain threats

³⁵ Nick Danby, “Philippine Elections will shape Indo-Pacific Security,” March 18, 2022, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, <<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/philippine-elections-will-shape-indo-pacific-security/>>.

from China and increase the United States' influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is expected to consider joining the IPEF. Even though Marcos Jr. has always been considered relatively China-friendly, he will most likely put the national security interests of the Philippines at the center of his administration.

V. Conclusion

The Philippines was under American colonization for 48 years and has historically been a security partner of the United States. It was not until the Duterte government took office in 2016 that the Philippines was introduced to a new dynamic of defense cooperation partners that did not rely mainly on the U.S. The Philippines has engaged in joint military training with more countries, such as South Korea, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Furthermore, Duterte decided to forge new defense cooperation with China and Russia, which underscored an anti-American ideology.

The Obama government and other Western countries criticized Duterte's war on drugs, a program that resulted in thousands of deaths and human rights violations. This, in turn, led Duterte to distance the Philippines from the U.S. and move closer to China and other ASEAN countries.

Unlike Aquino III's balancing policy against China, Duterte adopted an accommodative foreign policy toward China. The Duterte government was unwilling to discuss the 2016 South China Sea arbitration, and Duterte visited China on more than five occasions during his term in office. He canceled key security initiatives with the United States to please China. By so doing, Duterte hoped Beijing would reward his "goodwill" by supporting the Philippines' economic development and by withdrawing its aggressive South China Sea claims. Those hopes, as we saw, were dashed.

The new Philippine president will most likely follow the foreign policy pendulum between Washington and Beijing and move with the recent consensus towards the United States.



Figure 5. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. between Washington and Beijing

Source: Cliff Venzon, “The U.S. and China congratulate Marcos on Philippine election win,” *Nikkei Asia*, May 12, 2022, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Philippine-elections/U.S.-and-China-congratulate-Marcos-on-Philippine-election-win>>.

According to the SWS (Social Weather Stations) polling agency, China is not popular among Filipinos. Out of 53 surveys conducted over the past 20 years, China’s net trust rating among Filipinos was only positive in nine out of 53 surveys. In 2019, China’s net trust rating reached -33% compared to the United States’ +72%. This implied that Filipinos have an anti-Beijing sentiment. Filipino fishermen have been constantly harassed by the Chinese coast guard and fishing boats. This will serve as a reminder to the new Philippines government that the Philippines should not allow China to do whatever it wants. This, however, does not mean that the Philippines will not seek to benefit from relations with China where it can.³⁶

Although Ferdinand Marcos Jr. appears to be China-friendly, his administration will likely follow Duterte’s hedging strategy, involving a mix of economic cooperation

³⁶ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Philippine Foreign Policy After Duterte.”

with and military confrontation against Beijing. After all, the Philippines understands that strengthening its alliance with the U.S. can ensure safety in the South China Sea. This will give it more bargaining chips to negotiate better outcomes with China.