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The New Normal of President Duterte's *Independent* Foreign Policy

By Julio Amador and Deryk Baladjay

Since his election to office in 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte has tested the country's foreign policy to its very seams. Early into his term, Duterte made an indelible impression on the international community for his fiery rhetoric and remarks owing to, some would argue, his unique brand of public relations. Coming from the mayorship of his hometown of Davao, his style of governance has translated into how he handles the day-to-day politics of national government. Features of this leadership style are now evident in his foreign policy.

Julio Amador and Deryk Baladjay, Senior Research Fellow and Research Assistant, respectively, at the Ateneo School of Government in the Philippines, explain that: "The Filipino public is not supportive of the Duterte administration's approach toward China."

The institutional context of the Philippines' foreign policy is found in the 1987 Constitution. Article II, Section 2 explicitly renounces the use of war as a means to an end, and gives due deference to international law. According to Section 7 of the same article, the governing administration is mandated to pursue an independent foreign policy that accords national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination above all else. These constitutional thresholds seem to stand in contrast to what President Duterte claimed in 2019 to be his exercise of independent foreign policy.

Duterte's approach to the United States, its treaty ally, and his desire for closer cooperation with China and Russia, despite overwhelming objection from the wider public, and at times, the military, makes for quixotic implementation of his independent foreign policy.

The Philippines and the United States: significant in more ways than one

The contemporary bilateral relationship between the Philippines and the United States traces its origins to the mid-20th century. Despite having a shared complicated history, both countries inked the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDA) to allow for better cooperative measures against forces hostile to U.S. national interests in the Asia-Pacific. This treaty paved the way for more detailed implementing agreements such as the 1998-99 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the 2002 Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (renewed in 2007, 2012, and 2018), the 2007 Kapit Bisig (Hand-in-Hand) Agreement, and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

The rich diplomatic and military relationship of the Philippines and United States has stood the test of time on numerous occasions. For example, the contested 1998-99 VFA has provided deterrence against external threats and prompt HADR operations such as the U.S. response to post-typhoon Haiyan relief operations. Another example is the second Aquino administration's deepening of bilateral relations with the United States, culminating in the 2014 EDCA. When challenged in a stand-off by China in 2012, the Philippines relied on its alliance with the United States along with international law, despite heavy criticisms of ambiguous U.S. commitment at the time. On both occasions, U.S.-Philippine bilateral relations came out stronger and more resilient.

Under the Duterte administration, US-Philippines bilateral relations are strained. Despite high net support among Filipinos for the United States, the Philippine Government calculatingly distanced itself from its long-time strategic ally.

While Duterte continued to be antagonistic toward the United States, the US sought cordial ties with the Philippines. In 2017, when the Philippines was engrossed battling religious fundamentalists in the southern city of Marawi, the United States came to aid the Philippine military. Washington even responded to President Duterte's demand for historical redress through the return of the Balangiga Bells in 2018. And in 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed that the MDT sufficiently applies to the South China Sea, finally dispelling the ambiguity of U.S. commitment in the region.

Bilateral relations reached a new low when President Duterte, in response to the visa cancellation of Senator Ronald dela Rosa, threatened to abrogate the VFA in early 2020. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic and increased regional tensions, the Philippines suspended its termination of the VFA acknowledging the significant role of the United States as a strategic regional balancer and the value of that role to the Philippines.

The Philippines and China: upsetting domestic politics and geopolitics

Another notable feature of the Duterte administration's independent foreign policy is the strategic shift toward unorthodox partnerships – specifically China (and Russia). A closer examination of the political economy behind this strategic shift shows an underlying reality of how the Philippine government views its newfound partners.

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The Philippine government eyes the benefits of being a part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). After President Duterte's normalization of ties with China in 2018, Chinese foreign direct investments in the Philippine economy increased to almost $200 million compared with a meager $570,000 in 2015 at the height of the tense relations between Chairman Xi Jinping and President Benigno Aquino. Since the warming of ties between the Philippines and China, some $24 billion worth of economic deals have reportedly been signed. Through the BRI alone, job opportunities for the Filipinos could reach in the 20,000s. This, in turn, legitimizes and fuels the Philippine government's local infrastructure "Build, Build, Build" program. Unfortunately, the promised Chinese development assistance has yet to trickle down to most of the Duterte administration's infrastructure projects and only a few Chinese-backed projects have begun.

The Filipino public is not supportive of the Duterte administration's approach toward China. According to the same statistics by Social Weather Stations, net support for China has registered a significantly low rating (-36 or "Bad"). The onset of the Coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated this negative view of China. President Duterte's soft stance against aggressive Chinese incursions remains his official position, to the chagrin of Filipinos and like-minded states and fellow leaders willing to defend the natural rights of the country.

The Philippines' independent foreign policy: a new normal?

The Philippine government's practice of foreign policy has been more reactionary than proactive and is unlikely to be sustainable.

The prevailing view four years into the Duterte administration's independent foreign policy is that no substantive gains have been made and it has unnecessarily alienated an ally and potential strategic partners. If indicative of anything, President Duterte's exercise of foreign policy thus far has not been so much a pursuit of independent foreign policy but is rather a significant misalignment with the views of the majority of the population.

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