Personalising the Philippines’ China Policy: Where Individuals Matter

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Mission of the Afrasian Research Centre

Today's globalised world has witnessed astonishing political and economic growth in the regions of Asia and Africa. Such progress has been accompanied, however, with a high frequency of various types of conflicts and disputes. The Afrasian Research Centre aims to build on the achievements of its predecessor, the Afrasian Centre for Peace and Development Studies (ACPDS), by applying its great tradition of research towards Asia with the goal of building a new foundation for interdisciplinary research into multicultural societies in the fields of Immigration Studies, International Relations and Communication Theory. In addition, we seek to clarify the processes through which conflicts are resolved, reconciliation is achieved and multicultural societies are established. Building on the expertise and networks that have been accumulated in Ryukoku University in the past (listed below), we will organise research projects to tackle new and emerging issues in the age of globalisation. We aim to disseminate the results of our research internationally, through academic publications and engagement in public discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

The post-Cold War era has witnessed the rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is competing with the United States for influence in world politics and primacy in the Asia-Pacific. Proximity to China, on the one hand, gives the Republic of the Philippines (RP) access to the Chinese market and investments. One the other hand, it presents a big security threat due to China’s ambitions, especially when the two countries are involved in both bilateral and multilateral territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS). As a smaller power, it is critical for the Philippines to select its strategy carefully in dealing with its giant neighbor.

In the last two decades, Philippine-Chinese relations have experienced dramatic fluctuations, which leads to disagreements about what kind of strategy the Philippines is employing in dealing with China. While some scholars assert that Manila has implemented a balancing strategy (e.g. De Castro 2014, 2015), others argue that it has shifted from balancing under the Aquino administration to bandwagoning since President Rodrigo Duterte came to power (e.g. Clemens 2017). An increasing number of researchers agree that the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries have employed hedging strategies in relations with China (e.g. Goh 2005; Roy 2005; Ba 2017; Tran and Sato 2018). Disagreements are partly due to the different focus periods, but the Philippines’ case still appears abnormal.

By suggesting that the changes in the Philippines’ foreign policy are responses to China’s growing power and the uncertainty about U.S. commitments in the region (e.g. De Castro 2017), those studies only look at factors at the international level to explain the country’s foreign policy. Although the Sino-American power dynamics play an essential role in understanding the shifts in the Philippines’ foreign policy, domestic factors are also important (Heydarian 2017). The presidential system of the Philippines, for example, gives the president almost complete power in constructing its foreign policy (Quiambao-del Rosario 2016), which makes Philippine foreign policy highly “personalised.” An increasing number of scholars have called for more attention to the personalisation of the Philippines’ foreign policy (e.g. Zha 2015; Heydarian 2017; Trinidad 2017; Despi 2017). Those studies, however, have not developed a rigorous analytical framework to study the country’s foreign policy under each administration systematically.

Why does the Philippines’ China policy oscillate so much? This article aims at answering this question by examining Manila’s foreign policy under the leadership of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, University of Antwerp
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President Benigno Aquino III, and President Rodrigo Duterte in relation with Beijing. In doing so, it will develop an analytical framework to explore what foreign-policy decision-makers prefer and what factors facilitate as well as hinder their quests.

1. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Theoretical Background

In explaining states' foreign policies, structural realism, with a top-down view of politics, emphasizes the distribution of power as the driving force in shaping the scope and ambition of their policies. It further asserts that domestic politics and leaders' characteristics have little influence in determining states' foreign policies (e.g. Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 2008). Although states' relative material capabilities are important in defining the scope and ambition of their foreign policies, the actual decisions are made by flesh and blood officials who operate in social settings.

In contradiction to structural realism's top-down view of politics, liberal theories rest upon a bottom-up view. For liberals, the driving forces of foreign policy and international politics are not international pressures but individuals and interest groups, and therefore, states' choices of policies reflect the preferences of those societal actors (e.g. Keohane 1984; Moravcsik 1997). While structural realism ignores the human factor due to its focus on the international system, liberals neglect the importance of political leaders in constructing states' foreign policies.

Constructivism argues that it is not objective material reality, but norms and ideas that create or sustain actors' interests and the structure within which those actors operate. Constructivists look at how structures facilitate or constrain the interactions of those actors. They take into account the role of leaders and their interpretations of international and domestic norms in the study of international relations (e.g. Wendt 1999; Onuf 2012). However, states and leaders are often influenced by competing and sometimes conflicting international and domestic norms. It would be extremely difficult to explain past behaviour or make any predictions about the foreign policy choices, based on their interpretation of norms. Moreover, by downplaying or even rejecting the importance of the relative distribution of material power, constructivist theories, like liberal theories, are limited in explaining many aspects of international politics.

Using a more inclusive approach, neoclassical realism takes into account intervening variables at domestic level in the formation of states' foreign policies (the dependent variables), while retaining the emphasis on the distribution of power (the independent variable) like structural realism. Ripsman et al. (2016) classify those intervening variables into the four categories: leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. Despite having a greater explanatory power than structural realism, liberalism and constructivism, neoclassical realism privileges the distribution of power over other factors.

By adhering to paradigmatic approaches, all these research traditions—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—risk losing much of the nuance and complexity of international politics, and hence distort our understanding of the subject. Acknowledging the advantages and trade-offs of each approach, analytic eclecticism “selectively integrates analytic elements—concepts, logics, mechanisms, and interpretations—of theories or narratives that have been developed within separate paradigms” (Sil and Katzestein 2010, 10). The intention is to create varied and flexible frameworks to reveal how those elements matter in relation to specific research questions. In other words, it is the problems that determine the formations of the frameworks. This problem-driven approach keeps analytic eclecticism from the danger of including a never-
ending list of all conceivable causal factors. Analytic eclecticism does not intend to build grand theories or discover general laws, but to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of complex, multi-faceted problems. It is not an alternative model of research, but an intellectual stance that a scholar can espouse when conducting research that involves, but does not fit neatly within, well-known research traditions (Sil and Katzestein 2010).

1.2. Analytical Framework

Inspired by analytic eclecticism, this article develops an analytical framework which includes factors from individual, national, and international levels of analysis to study the role of Philippine presidents in the country’s China policy (a specific problem). It classifies numerous factors across the three levels into three categories of “policy preferences,” “facilitation,” and “hindrances.” It aims at providing a better understanding about what foreign policies political leaders favour (policy preferences), what factors smooth the progress (facilitation), and what makes it more difficult for them to pursue their preferences (hindrances). This paper, however, does not aim at explaining the formation of leaders’ preferences.

The presidents’ China policy preferences are manifested in their statements and actions. The statements may come from speeches, interviews, or written records that are available to the public. Their actions indicate their deliberate efforts in influencing the country’s foreign policy. Facilitation includes factors that make it easier for the leaders to pursue their preferences, while hindrances prevent them from doing so. Those factors may come from domestic or international levels of analysis. For example, their foreign-policy preferences may be smoothed by their popularity at home or may be challenged by domestic criticism. Internationally, they have to take into account the conditions of the external environment in formulating the country’s foreign policy. The extent to which their foreign-policy preferences are transformed into actual outcomes depends on a combination of all the above factors.

It is worth noting that units of analysis differ from levels of analysis. The former refers to the entities subjected to study, while the latter means the scope of the investigation (Viotti and Kauppi 2015). In this article, units of analysis are individual presidents, while levels of analysis include individual, national, and international levels. The purpose is to take individual leaders as a focal point to study the interplay between factors across the three levels of analysis.

2. ARROYO ADMINISTRATION (2001-2010)

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s foreign-policy preference was a close relationship with China. Meanwhile, the PRC tried to convince its neighbours about its peaceful rise, which became a convenient reason for Arroyo to promote her policy. However, domestic criticism and the sudden change in China’s South China Sea (SCS) policy prevented her government from leaning too much toward China. Therefore, the RP’s actual foreign policy under the Arroyo administration was characterised by a warm relationship with China, while maintaining a good alliance with the United States.

2.1. Arroyo’s China-Policy Preference

President Arroyo was an advocate of a pro-China policy. She said China, as a friendly neighbour, was crucial for the development of the Philippines (Sun 2004). She commended China’s developmental achievements when she met with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in October 2009 (Embassy of China
in Philippines 2009). She also commented that the North Luzon Railway project funded by China was the symbol of friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries (De Castro 2015, 78).

In pursuing her policy preference, Arroyo cooperated with China in various ways. Diplomatically, she used the Executive Issuances power to issue Proclamation no. 148, declaring June 9 every year as the Filipino-Chinese Friendship Day, after only six months in office (GOVPH 2002). This symbolic gesture coincided with the celebration of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the Philippines and the PRC. The same year, she strongly supported China's call for the establishment of a free-trade area with ASEAN, at a conference in Tokyo organized by the Japanese newspaper Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Jones 2002). On the question of Taiwan, she affirmed her commitment to the one-China policy, which was appreciated by Chinese President Hu Jintao (Sun 2004).

Economically, Arroyo and her allies had provided China with preferential access to huge government contracts. In 2005, for instance, Arroyo signed the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) with China, later joined by Vietnam, which granted China Oilfield Services Ltd., a subsidiary of China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), the right to conduct seismic survey within 200 nautical miles from the coast of the Philippines. The agreement raised the question whether Philippine national security interests had been traded for personal benefits. On the sidelines of the Boao Forum on Hainan Island in April 2007, Arroyo signed another deal with the Chinese, the National Broadband Network project, to install a telecommunications network linking government offices throughout the archipelago. The $329-million deal, known as the NBN-ZTE project, was covered by a 20-year loan at 3% annual interest, on the condition that the Chinese company Zhong Xing Telecom Equipment Corporation (ZTE) would be assigned as the sole supplier and provider (Storey 2008).

During her presidency, President Arroyo paid three state visits to China, in October 2001, September 2004, and June 2007, among other types of visits. She also signed 65 bilateral agreements with China, far surpassing the 8 agreements signed by former president Ferdinand Marcos (Rodis 2014)

2.2. Facilitation of Arroyo's Preference

From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, China tried to persuade its neighbours about its peaceful rise, by demonstrating its cooperative intentions (Heydarian 2017). For instance, China agreed on a Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with ASEAN in November 2002. This document expressed the commitment of the parties to the rule of international law and the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as encouraging them to voluntarily agree to practice self-restraint, non-use of force, functional cooperation, and consultation (Weatherbee 2015, 176). Although this agreement was just a non-binding political statement which relied on the voluntary will of the parties, it was the first time that China had agreed on a multilateral arrangement of this kind. China's profession of a peaceful rise became a convenient reason for Arroyo to promote close ties with China at home.

2.3. Hindrances to Arroyo's Preference

In pursuing her pro-China policy, Arroyo faced domestic and external challenges. Domestically, she and her allies were accused of trading the Philippines' territorial sovereignty for Chinese official development aid and personal economic benefits. Many of the deals she signed with China came under political criticism from the opposition, the business community, and civil groups in the Philippines for their lack of transparency and overpricing (Zha 2015). In response to heavy criticism, Arroyo suspended the NBN-
ZTE project in September 2007, after only a few months of signing it, and informed President Hu that it was effectively cancelled two weeks later. Similarly, Arroyo, under domestic pressure, allowed the JMSU contract to lapse in 2008 (Storey 2008).

Externally, the Arroyo administration suddenly faced China’s increasing assertiveness in the SCS, following the introduction of the Philippine Baseline Act in March 2009. China increased its naval presence in Philippine territorial waters by deploying many patrol vessels in the disputed area (De Castro 2017). The same year, China attached its controversial nine-dashed-line map to its Notes Verbales to the UN Secretary General, in objections to the joint submissions by Vietnam and Malaysia to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. With the map, China claimed almost the entire SCS and asserted that it had “indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof” (Rosen 2014).

2.4. Actual Policy under the Arroyo Administration

The Arroyo administration was called the “golden age” in Philippine-Chinese relations (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005). Diplomatically, bilateral cooperation achieved remarkable progress. For instance, the two countries inked a strategic partnership in 2004 aimed at setting aside territorial disputes in the SCS, and increasing mutual understanding as well as economic cooperation (South China Sea Issue 2004). Economically, the two-way trade between the Philippines and China increased significantly from $1.9 billion in 2001 to $10.7 billion in 2010 (UN Comtrade n.d.).

At the same time, the Philippines tried to improve its military capabilities with assistance from the United States. In 2003, the Philippine Defence Reform Program (PDR) and the Capability Upgrade Program (CUP) of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) were introduced after the visit of President George W. Bush to Manila. While the objective of the PDR was a system-wide reform, the CUP aimed at improving the AFP’s military operation by upgrading communications, mobility, firepower, force protection, and combat life support (De Castro, 2011, 237). From 2001 to 2010, most of the arms transfers to the Philippines came from the United States (SIPRI n.d.).

3. AQUINO ADMINISTRATION (2010-2016)

In contrast to his predecessor, President Benigno Aquino III’s preference was an anti-China policy. His confrontational policy was widely supported by Filipinos due to his popularity at home and China’s aggressiveness in the SCS. However, he faced difficulties in promoting his policy preference due to budget constraints, uncertainty about U.S. commitment to defend the Philippines in the SCS, and the Philippines’ increasing dependence on the Chinese economy. Therefore, the Aquino administration adopted a hard-line stand in the SCS disputes, while trying to maintain positive economic relations with China.

3.1. Aquino’s China Policy Preference

For Aquino, a hard-line stand against China is necessary, as seen in his comment, “If we don’t stand up for our rights, who do we expect will be standing up for our rights?” (Dumlao 2013). He repeatedly condemned China’s expansion in the SCS on many occasions. For instance, Aquino has criticized China’s land reclamations in the SCS and compared China’s expansive actions to those of Nazi Germany twice. Aquino’s
A statement is one of the strongest reactions to China’s military build-up and territorial ambitions (Bradsher 2014; Kameda and Yoshida 2015). China got infuriated by the statement and said that Aquino’s comparison showed his ignorance (Xinhua 2015). In another interview with the AFP in April 2015, Aquino cautioned that China’s increasing assertiveness in the SCS might lead to the interruption of vital international shipping lanes and rich fishing grounds, and therefore, should spark fear around the world (Malakunas 2015). Joining the ASEAN Summit in November 2015, Aquino took every chance to condemn China’s land reclamation in the SCS and urged ASEAN leaders to halt China’s violation of international law (Pazzibugan 2015).

Facing China’s heavy-handedness in the SCS, Aquino declared his support for the modernization of the AFP. He emphasized the importance of territorial defence in protecting the country’s vast maritime borders and territorial claims in the SCS. The objective is to create a modest but “comprehensive border protection program” (De Castro 2017).

Besides supporting military modernization, Aquino had stressed Philippine-U.S. friendship and invoked a treaty alliance with the United States. On the sidelines of the 2011 ASEAN annual summit, for example, Aquino met President Barack Obama and discussed maritime security in the SCS. Obama said they would “look out for each other” (Burgonio 2011). During Aquino’s visit to the United States in 2012, he sought American help to enhance the Philippines’ capability to defend its territorial claims. He received a reaffirmed support from his U.S. counterpart in helping the Philippines build a “minimum credible defence posture” (Pennington 2012). Aquino again emphasized the treaty alliance with the United States when he met Obama in Manila and Washington in 2014 and 2015 respectively (U.S. Embassy in the Philippines 2014; White House 2015).

Most notably, Aquino took the lead to file a landmark arbitration case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) against China over the SCS. In its application, the Aquino government challenged the validity of China’s nine-dash line, which claimed almost the entire SCS, and urged China to cease its unlawful activities that violate the sovereign rights and jurisdiction of the Philippines under the 1982 UNCLOS (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016). As expected, China refused to take part in the arbitration, saying that the tribunal did not have jurisdiction in the case. However, China’s absence could not block the proceedings. By being a signatory to UNCLOS since 1996, China recognizes the compulsory jurisdiction of the Court (Nguyen 2015). On July 12, 2016, five judges of the arbitral tribunal issued a highly anticipated and unanimous award in favour of the Philippines. Besides upholding Manila’s requests, the court also accused China of destroying the environment during its land reclamation. China said that the verdict “is null and void and has no binding force” (Panda 2016a); however, the decision made by the arbitration tribunal is final and cannot be appealed by the parties. Aquino, who had finished his term as the Philippines’ president by the time of the verdict, said the ruling should be viewed as a “victory for all nations,” and not just for his country (Dizon 2016). Aquino admitted that it was not easy to pursue arbitration; however, the decision was a game-changer (Nicolas 2016).

3.2. Facilitation of Aquino’s Preference

Aquino’s anti-China preference was facilitated by his popularity, China’s provocative actions in the SCS, and the U.S. Rebalance to Asia strategy. During his six-year term, he managed to sustain a high approval rate of more than 50 percent on average. A survey by Pulse Asia showed that Aquino remained the highest rated and most trusted top government official even in his last few months in office (Adel 2016a). Soon after Aquino became the president, China’s increasing naval presence and activities in the SCS led to a
handful of intrusions by Chinese vessels into waters claimed by the Philippines. In March 2011, for instance, China sent its vessels to the adjacent waters of the Philippines. Despite the Philippines’ complaint, China insisted that it had indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent territory (De Castro 2017). Following a tense standoff between Chinese maritime patrol vessels and the Philippine Navy in 2012, China took control of a rich fishing ground called Scarborough Shoal within the Philippines’ claimed EEZ and embarked on major construction activities (Malakunas 2015). More provocatively, China converted several reefs and rocks in the SCS into artificial islands and erected military facilities such as runways and ports from December 2013 (Watkins 2015). Furthermore, Aquino’s confrontational policy was supported by President Barack Obama’s Rebalance to Asia strategy which focused on Southeast Asia. The rebalance strategy came at a time when China’s power and influence was rising (Brandon 2012).

3.3. Hindrances to Aquino’s Preference

Aquino’s confrontational policy toward China faced several obstructions. Despite the president’s advocacy of enhancing AFP’s territorial defense capabilities, the plan suffered from a constrained budget and wearisome procedures. While the military modernization required substantial resources, it had to compete for funds with other priorities, such as education and public infrastructure. Additionally, the tiresome process of arms acquisition was further complicated by the AFP modernization law. In 2014, the Philippine Supreme Court’s decision to restrict the use of the Malampaya proceeds to finance government projects prevented the AFP from purchasing surveillance equipment and upgrading its vital naval infrastructure (De Castro 2017).

Although Aquino made a lot of effort to invoke the security alliance with the United States, his administration was uncertain about U.S. commitment to defend the Philippines in case of armed conflict with China in the SCS. The Obama government even declined to clarify if the mutual defence agreement would be activated in the disputed areas (Heydarian 2017).

Further, the Philippine economy became increasingly dependent on the Chinese economy. After the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012, the Chinese government banned import of Philippine bananas and warned Chinese tourists not to go to the Philippines (Higgins 2012). This caused damage to the Philippine economy. Thus, it was essential for the country to maintain a positive relationship with China (Remo 2014).

3.4. Actual Policy under the Aquino Administration

Facing rising Chinese assertiveness in the disputed waters and the inability of the Philippine Armed Forces in countering the Chinese military, the Philippines asked its American ally for military assistance in overseeing the SCS. In 2011, on the sixtieth anniversary of the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), the United States provided a $30-million foreign military finance package to help the Philippines improve its military capabilities (Ortuoste 2013). In 2012, The Pentagon also agreed to transfer a number of weapons and equipment to its ally including vessels, fighter jets, and a coastal radar system (Lichauco de Leon 2012). In August 2015, Manila again asked Washington for military assistance in overseeing the SCS. In response, the United States agreed to provide direct military aid to the Philippines with the value of $50 million for 2015 (Gady 2015). The United States also offered the Philippines four new patrol vessels the next month after the Philippines’ request, and announced its intention to provide two more in November 2015 (Parameswaran 2015b).

The Philippines also acted to increase U.S. military presence in the region with a new pact. Early in 2012, the Philippines intended to broaden access to its territory for the American military to receive
services. This was actualized when the two nations signed the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014. The agreement, however, faced a constitutional challenge by left-wing groups and two retired Philippine senators, saying that was in fact a new treaty that required concurrence by at least two thirds of senators. In January 2016, the Philippine Supreme Court ruled that the EDCA was not a treaty, but an implementing agreement of the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement and the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (Parameswaran 2016). The implementation of the EDCA will enhance the U.S.-Philippine alliance. In addition, the presence of the American forces in the Philippines’ bases on a rotational basis will help the Southeast Asian country be better prepared for any development in the SCS.

However, the increasing uncertainty about U.S. commitment to defend the Philippines in an armed conflict with China in the SCS drove the Aquino administration to request Japan's assistance (Trinidad 2017). In 2011, during his state visit to Japan, Philippine President Aquino signed the Strategic Partnership between the two countries. The most important objective is maintaining the stability and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region by ensuring maritime security (MOFA 2011). In July 2012, the two sides inked the Statement of Intent of the Greater Defence Cooperation Agreement, which enabled multilevel exchanges in a number of aspects, including military cooperation, security and defence, education, and maritime information (Amurao 2012). In 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promised to help the Philippines upgrade its maritime capabilities by sending ten patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard (Porcalla 2013). The deal was actualized in 2015 when the Japan Marine United Corporation won the bid to construct the ten vessels. The value of the deal was PHP 8.8 billion, in which PHP 7.4 billion came from Japanese Official Development Assistance and PHP 1.4 billion came from the Philippine government (Parameswaran 2015a). The visit in 2015, Aquino's sixth to Japan, came as China was flexing its growing maritime muscle in the SCS (Kameda and Yoshida 2015). The newest defence agreement was concluded in March 2016, which would pave the way for Japan to transfer defence equipment and technology to the Philippines (Laude 2016). One month after the agreement, Tokyo announced a lease of five TC-90 patrol aircraft to Manila. At the 2017 ASEAN Summit, the two sides agreed that the planes, initially leased, would become a donation. The first two of the five planes arrived at the Philippines in March and were ready for commissioning in November 2017 (Mangosing 2017).

The SCS legal case soured the Philippines-China bilateral relations; however, Philippine Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima confidently asserted that the economic ties between the Philippines and China would not be negatively affected by the territorial disputes. He believed that trade offered a win-win situation, so maintaining a positive economic relationship would be beneficial for both sides (Remo 2014). President Aquino and President Hu also agreed that the bilateral relations would continue while contentious issues would be treated separately (Department of Foreign Affairs 2013). Despite the Scarborough Shoal standoff, the trade volume between the Philippines and China increased by 5.5 percent from $12.6 billion in 2011 to $13.3 billion in 2012 (WITS n.d.). The volume of trade continued to grow in the following years under the Aquino administration. By the end of 2015, China passed the United States to become the Philippines’ second largest trading partner (after Japan), with the bilateral trade reaching $17.9 billion (UN Comtrade n.d.).

4. DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION (2016-PRESENT)

President Rodrigo Duterte is known for his pro-China and anti-America rhetoric. His popularity
allows him to promote close ties with China despite tensions in the SCS. Nevertheless, his softness in dealing with China has come under domestic criticism, and the importance of the U.S. military in the Philippines’ military blueprint makes it difficult for him to terminate the treaty alliance. The Duterte administration, therefore, strengthens ties with China, while remaining at the same time in its alliance with the United States.

4.1. Duterte's China Policy Preference

Duterte wishes to make peace with, and get close to, China. For Duterte, there was nothing good in confronting China since it is much more powerful than the Philippines (TMT 2017). In addition, China is the only nation to support Duterte’s policy of endorsing the extrajudicial killings of suspected drug offenders. China has called on the international community to respect the Philippines’ sovereign right in fighting the drug troublemakers in the country (Flores 2017). During the “Belt and Road” summit in Beijing, Duterte praised China’s leaders as being “generous,” “very liberal,” and “sincere” (Japan Times 2017). At a gathering of councillors in Pasay City, he expressed his gratitude to President Xi Jinping for his generosity and to the Chinese people for loving the Philippines (Ranada 2017).

In practicing his pro-China policy, Duterte has downplayed territorial disputes. Not only did he downplay the legal victory against China, but he also showed his willingness to have bilateral negotiations and joint development of resources with China in the SCS (Corrales 2017). By the same token, Duterte did not push for a multilateral resolution to address the SCS issue during the 2017 ASEAN Summit chaired by the Philippines (Trinidad 2017).

Duterte also ensures his Chinese friend by estranging the United States—China’s rival. Just before a bilateral meeting on the side-lines of the ASEAN summit in Laos in September 2016, Duterte called Obama “son of a whore” after Obama criticized him on human rights violations during his “war on drugs.” The statements prompted the U.S. side to cancel the meeting since Obama preferred “constructive, productive conversations” (BBC 2016). During his state visit to China in October 2016, Duterte announced that he would militarily and economically “separate” from the United States—the Philippines’ close ally (Ranada 2016).

4.2. Facilitation of Duterte’s Preference

Despite the territorial disputes with China, President Duterte can pursue his pro-China policy due to vast political support. He won a landslide election with about 6 million more votes than his closest competitor. A poll conducted by Pulse Asia after his inauguration revealed that Duterte received the highest approval rate at 91% (Adel 2016b). Thanks to that, he can follow his foreign policy preference.

4.3. Hindrances to Duterte’s Preference

Several factors that constrain Duterte’s pro-China and anti-America policy include public suspicion of China, domestic criticism to his softness in dealing with China, and strong ties between Philippine and U.S. military personnel. According to a survey by Pulse Asia in December 2016, only 38 percent of Filipinos trusted China. For the fishermen driven from their traditional fishing grounds, China is perceived as a big threat (Robles 2017).

Duterte is criticized for turning a blind eye to China’s construction on Scarborough Shoal and incursion on Benham Rise. Duterte’s opponent, Representative Gary C. Alejano, said he would include
complaints about Duterte’s softness regarding China’s actions to boost the impeachment case against him (Yee 2017). There is also a gap between Duterte’s affectionate statements about China and realistic concerns from his defence and foreign ministry officials about China’s increasing assertiveness in the SCS (Diola 2017). Lawmakers in the House of Representatives advised the president to deal with China in a more transparent manner and reminded him about the Philippines’ advantage of maritime rights (Cayabyab 2017). As China continues to assert its claims in SCS, national sentiment from the Filipino people urges the Duterte administration to take a stronger stand in the SCS disputes. Facing heavy criticism, Duterte pledged that he would raise the SCS issue with his Chinese counterpart. In April 2017, Duterte deployed his troops to a contested area of the SCS claimed by the Philippines. The move contradicted Duterte's previous policy of not antagonizing China. Duterte even said he would personally raise the Philippine flag on Pag-asa (Thitu) Island on the country’s Independence Day (Villamor 2017). In May, Duterte said that Xi threatened war if the Philippines intended to impose the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling and drill for oil in a disputed area of the SCS (Mogato 2017). Quoting the discussion with Xi, Duterte aimed at striking back at domestic critics who were criticizing him for going soft on China by declining to enforce the favourable ruling of 2017.

What prevents the Duterte administration from dismissing the alliance with the United States is the close relations between Philippine military officers and their American counterparts. The two forces have established a substantial degree of tactical synchronization and interoperability after decades of working together. In an armed conflict with Islamist rebels in Mindanao’s Marawi City, for example, the government sought American help to free the hostages taken by Maute militants despite the president’s bluster against the United States. This demonstrates the re-establishment of U.S. primacy in Philippine defence architecture (Chowdhury 2017).

4.4. Actual Policy under the Duterte Administration

The Philippine-Chinese relations under the Duterte administration has entered a new “spring time.” On October 20, 2016, Duterte paid a high-profile visit to Beijing. At the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, he was welcomed with full military honours, which are not made available to most leaders (Blanchard 2016). During the visit, the Philippine leader played down the July legal victory and agreed to bilateral talks on the SCS dispute (Beech 2016). As a result, Philippine fishermen have access once again to the disputed Scarborough Shoal, which has been under control of Chinese forces since 2012 (Panda 2016b). After the visit, Duterte extended an invitation to his Chinese counterpart to visit Manila on a mutually agreed date. Xi accepted the invitation and plans to pay his first-ever state visit to the Philippines in 2018 (Politiko 2017). Moreover, the Philippines and China are talking about a joint venture that allows the two countries to jointly explore oil and gas in the SCS (Corrales 2017).

Economic ties between the Philippines and China are also experiencing a dramatic upturn, which President Duterte expects to grow into a new commercial alliance (Blanchard 2016). In October 2016, Duterte visited China with a big business delegation. The “highly successful” visit of Philippine president to Beijing helped the country gain $24 billion in deals, of which $9 billion is credit facilities and $15 billion is in investments pledges. The two sides discussed the details of the deal in January 2017 (Venzon 2017). The agreements would create at least two million jobs in different industries of the Philippines including agribusiness, infrastructure, manufacturing, and tourism in a five-year period, according to Trade Secretary Ramon Lopez (Romero and Mercurio 2016).

Although Duterte threatened to separate from the United States, the Philippine-U.S. alliance has
remained intact despite recent scaling down in defense cooperation. In September 2017, the Philippines–United States Mutual Defence Board/Security Engagement Board met in Hawaii. The two sides agreed to bring the level of the Philippine-U.S. joint exercises back to the same scale, magnitude and scope as in the previous years (Department of Foreign Affairs 2017). Furthermore, during U.S. President Donald J. Trump’s visit to Manila on November 13, 2017, he and Duterte reiterated their commitment to the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty and the 2014 EDCA. The two leaders pledged to expand cooperation and strengthen the bilateral alliance (GOVPH 2017).

Moreover, the Duterte government wishes to “join hands” with Japan since the two countries are in the “same position with regard to China” (Harding 2016). Duterte paid a state visit to Japan on October 25, 2016 right after visiting China. He assured his host that his trip to Beijing was not about security, but only economics. During the visit, Duterte conveyed that the Philippines wanted to conduct military exercises with Japan (Beech, 2016). He also said that the two countries would work closely together on common issues, endorse the values of democracy, and respect the rule of law in peaceful settlement of the SCS disputes (Takenaka and Sieg 2016). As a result, Tokyo agreed on providing Manila a $157 million loan to build two patrol vessels for the Philippine Coast Guard (Luna 2016). This is expected to further beef up Philippine maritime security. Duterte said the Philippines-Japan strategic partnership was entering a “golden age” (Romero 2017).

CONCLUSION

Main Arguments

In the last two decades, the Philippine-Chinese relations have experienced dramatic fluctuations as a result of power transitions. Individual presidents have their own policy preferences in dealing with China, and certain abilities as well as constraints in pursuing their preferences. Despite showing great oscillations, the actual policy undertaken under each administration has not totally leaned to one side of the Sino-American spectrum. Under the Arroyo administration (2001-2010), the Philippines experienced a “golden age” in relations with China, while maintaining a good alliance with the United States. The succeeding government under the leadership of President Aquino III (2010-2016) tried to retain positive economic ties with China, despite adopting a hard-line stand in the SCS and seeking American military support. The Duterte government (2016-present) reveres to close ties with China, while diversifying the predominant dependence on the United States with a newly growing partnership with Japan.

Implications

Duterte is criticised for his flip-flopping foreign policy and lack of a clear strategy to manage the SCS disputes with China. However, it signifies that his SCS policy is still evolving (Baviera 2018). Chinese investments and political support for Duterte’s war on drugs are keeping his government temporarily silent on the territorial disputes as well as the legal victory before the PCA. However, Duterte is a man of contradictions as shown in the previous discussion. The uncertainty of future developments in the SCS and the mercurial character of Duterte will make it difficult to predict what will happen in the SCS.

However, the United States will remain the Philippines’ best protection against China’s expansion despite recent turbulence in bilateral relations. Duterte wanted to separate from the United States partly because of his advocacy of an independent foreign policy, but also due to his personal unease with former
president Obama. Unlike China, the Obama administration heavily criticized Duterte on his war on drugs as a serious violation of human rights. However, the new U.S. government under Trump has downplayed promotion of human rights and democracy abroad. This may help to reset the Philippine-U.S. relations (npr 2017).

Duterte is playing a three-way courtship among China, Japan and the United States to maximize benefits from both Beijing and its rivals. By getting close to China for pragmatic benefits, Duterte has pressured Japan and the United States also to provide large-scale investments and aid. As a result, Duterte has significantly boosted economic development at home, while intensifying networks with major powers in the Asia-Pacific region.

The dangerous game that Duterte is playing will require his successor to be cautious in calibrating the Philippines’ foreign policy. However, the nature of the presidential system will keep the Philippines’ foreign policy highly personalised.

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