

The Philippine Pivot to China and Russia: Duterte's Foreign Policy Revisited

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Reexamining Rodrigo Duterte's tirades against Western power blocs and the results of his diplomatic efforts to obtain Chinese and Russian assistance has never been more relevant, considering the measures his successor adopted to reinforce or reconfigure his foreign policy. To this end, the article revisits Duterte's pivot to China and Russia, refining the discussion of their rationale and providing a qualitative assessment of their outcomes. Through a critical review of presidential speeches and news reports, the article unpacks the connection of the strategy to the following: first, Duterte's anti-colonial narrative; second, his drug war; third, the desire to improve the country's military, trade, tourism, and infrastructure; and fourth, the management of the South China Sea conflict. While the foreign policy considered the country's geopolitical and economic realities, the article found that it failed to achieve its desired outcomes. With mounting pressure at home to demonstrate the gains of his Beijing-friendly policy and the political and economic repercussions of transacting with Moscow, Duterte appeared to have recalibrated the strategy before he left office. The policy's failures should offer lessons to international relations researchers, the administration that preceded Duterte, and, more importantly, to less powerful nations engaging with competing major powers.

Keywords foreign policy, balancing strategy, Philippine-China relations, Philippine-Russia relations, Duterte

I. Introduction

The Philippines offers an interesting case to explore the implications and potential outcomes of varying balancing strategies for developing nations in the Global South. Reflecting on the June 2022 statement of Rodrigo Duterte's successor and ally, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., there are indications that the new president will continue the former's foreign policy, believing it is aligned with the Philippines and China's national interests. Despite the South China Sea territorial dispute, Marcos Jr. referred to China as the

country's "strongest partner" and "good friend" (Bajo, 2022). However, just a month after this affirmation, Marcos Jr. (2022) declared to his Filipino audience during the first State of the Nation Address (SONA) that he "will not preside over any process that will abandon even one square inch of (the) territory of the Republic of the Philippines to any foreign power." This pronouncement contradicted Duterte's position on the issue, as the former head of state refused to take decisive actions in upholding the country's sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration's backing. Yet, in an interview in New York in September 2022, Marcos Jr. claimed that "we (the Philippines) have no territorial conflict with China" (Cordero, 2022). One wonders if the mindset is to overlook China's aggression in the disputed waters — while the president is committed to upholding the country's territorial integrity, there are no territories to defend if no conflicts are recognized.

Similar conflicting approaches could be observed concerning Marcos Jr.'s management of the country's diplomatic relations with Russia. Echoing Duterte, Marcos Jr. remarked that his government would remain neutral on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. On another occasion, Marcos Jr. contradicted this statement and stated that Ukraine's sovereignty must be respected (Mercado, 2022). Political analysts have taken these statements to indicate that Marcos Jr. intends to steer the country's foreign policy in a different direction. This reorientation may be further evidenced by Marcos Jr.'s meeting with US president Joe Biden last September 2022, where they initiated talks on reinforcing the Philippine-US cooperation, addressing the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on energy prices and food security, and advancing a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute. However, just a few days after the said meeting, Marcos Jr. reiterated the country's intention to continue its conversations with Russia to secure much-needed fuel, feed, and fertilizer, among others (Marlow et al., 2022).

Considering the new administration's continued referencing or reconfiguring of Duterte's foreign policy, this article argues that it is helpful, if not necessary, to assess the Philippine pivot to China and Russia. While much has been said about the former president's geopolitical strategy, a comprehensive analysis of its motivations and the conditions that influenced them can offer insights into the contexts within which the new administration will operate and frame its foreign policy. For this reason, the article revisits Duterte's shifting relations with the West, the commonality of motivations, and the outcomes of his foreign policy pivot. Through a critical review of presidential speeches and news reports, this article aims to unpack Duterte's rhetoric and policy, explain their rationale and purpose, and underscore several lessons that may be useful not only to international relations researchers and the administration that succeeded Duterte but, more importantly, to less powerful nations engaging with competing major powers.

The article is organized as follows. The first section briefly reviews recent works that examined Duterte's foreign policy and shifting global alliances. In the second section, the article revisits Duterte's pivot to China and Russia and further clarifies how this alignment strategy, his tirades against the United States and Western power blocs, and the desire to acquire assistance to improve the country's military, trade, tourism, and infrastructure intersect. It also touches on the importance of these actions in Duterte's projection and performance of his political branding. The reasons behind Duterte's changing policies in the South China Sea are unraveled in the third section, underlining the influence of the United States on the issue as well as the potential gains of cooperating with non-traditional partners. This discussion is followed by a qualitative assessment of the outcomes of Duterte's diplomatic efforts. The article ends with a conclusion that highlights its salient points and suggests several directions

for future research.

II. Duterte's Foreign Policy: A Brief Literature Review

Duterte's foreign policy has been well-researched in the field of Philippine international relations, producing multiple publications within the short period of six years. One of the earlier works on the topic is Bautista's *Smooth Waters Ahead or Rising Tides of Uncertainty? Philippine Foreign Policy under President Rodrigo Duterte* (2016), which provided an overview of the trajectory of the Philippine foreign policy under the Duterte administration. Stressing the three interconnected pillars of Philippine foreign policy, namely national security, economic security, and the protection of overseas Filipinos' rights and interests, Bautista's work reminded what the Duterte administration needs to do to ensure that it strikes a balance in pushing for a "radical shift in longstanding foreign policy alignments" (p. 6), takes advantage of the competing economic initiatives in the region, and serves the Philippine national interest.

The Philippines' relationship with Japan is also indispensable, especially when discussing Duterte's redirection strategy. However, this article does not touch on the Duterte administration's foreign policy with Japan since de Castro's *The Duterte Administration's Foreign Policy: Unravelling the Aquino Administration's Balancing Agenda on an Emergent China* (2016) already provided a comprehensive analysis on the topic. An essential contribution of de Castro's work is the emphasis it has given to the role of Japan in Duterte's equi-balancing policy: a diplomatic strategy implemented by small powers to engage great powers via multinational institutions (Simon, 2008, in de Castro, 2016). As de Castro underlined, the marginalization of the United States and the strengthening of the Philippines' alliance with China

were promoted along with fostering “a security partnership with China’s foremost rival in East Asia” (p. 153). Japan has long been the country’s top official development assistance (ODA) partner, which remained the case throughout Duterte’s presidency. That said, one wonders the extent to which the Duterte administration benefitted from its well-publicized efforts to please China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. This article attempts to provide answers to these questions.

Meanwhile, de Castro’s 2017 article *Developing a Credible Defense Posture for the Philippines: From the Aquino to the Duterte Administrations* expanded his earlier discussion on Duterte’s unraveling of his predecessor’s foreign policy by looking at his administration’s commitment to reinforce the Philippine military’s territorial defense capabilities. Although Duterte ordered the review of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA, or the security pact that authorizes the US forces to use Philippine military facilities to help minimize the chances of armed conflict in the South China Sea), evidence showed that Duterte continued former President Aquino III’s military modernization efforts. According to de Castro, several factors influenced this decision, such as keeping the military happy and content amidst the population and military’s disapproval of Duterte’s pivot to China and the growing Chinese threat in the South China Sea, among others.

The impact of domestic politics and policies on Philippine foreign policies was further unpacked in Heydarian’s *Tragedy of Small Power Politics: Duterte and the Shifting Sands of Philippine Foreign Policy* (2017). Despite Duterte’s anti-US rhetoric, Heydarian’s work argued that the Duterte administration’s policies reflect a different story, observing how the government maintained its defense ties with the United States while forging a stronger alliance with China. Also, by comparing the state of domestic affairs during the Arroyo, Aquino III, and Duterte presidencies, Heydarian demonstrated the public’s role in and the importance of securing “enough

political capital” for reshaping foreign policy (p. 230).

The connection between foreign policy and domestic agenda was also covered in Arugay’s *When Populists Perform Foreign Policy: Duterte and the Asia-Pacific Regional Order* (2018). Arugay, however, observed the utility of foreign policy in representing the will and securing the support of everyday people. In particular, it referred to Duterte’s anti-US rhetoric and the country’s conflict with China in the South China Sea in discussing the former president’s “populist foreign policy.” While this article agrees with Arugay’s claim that foreign policy may embody the people’s will, it does not treat Duterte’s anti-US performance as being populist. In this regard, the article leans more towards Webb’s (2017) understanding of Duterte’s performance of people’s anti-US sentiment—a reference to Duterte’s subversiveness and his means of satisfying people’s thirst for a “revolutionary break” from their colonial past (p. 136). That said, this article further refines the discussion of Duterte’s verbal attacks against the United States and the West by viewing them as tools for bolstering both his formidable image and pro-Filipino posturing.

Assessing the foreign policy from an economic angle, Balboa’s *Duterte’s Foreign Policy Pivot and Its Impact on Philippine Trade and Investments: An International Political Economy Perspective* (2020) provided a detailed analysis of the impact of Duterte’s China shift on Philippine trade and investments in the first three years of his presidency. Although the volume of Philippine exports to China and Russia increased under Duterte’s watch, Balboa argued that there were no clear indications to what extent Duterte’s foreign policy influenced the described growth. Further, it found that despite Duterte’s tirades against the United States and its allies, the country’s trade with its traditional partners was generally unaffected. However, Balboa’s research was published a year before China became the Philippines’ top trading partner — it would be interesting to find out if

this development could offer more apparent linkages between China's total trade worth and Duterte's pro-China policy.

This review of select recent works on Duterte's foreign policy demonstrates several unexplored areas for research on the topic. First, it made apparent the lacking discussion on Duterte's demarginalization of Russia. In most cases, Duterte's alignment with Russia is mentioned or examined in passing. To fill this gap, this article asserts that the renewal of Philippine-China relations rests on the same foundation and motivation as the expansion of the Philippine-Russia ties. Second, and as mentioned, earlier works have framed Duterte's foreign policy as either realist or populist. There remains an opportunity to expand the discourse by interrogating his pro-Filipino rhetoric and politics. Lastly and most importantly, the outcomes of Duterte's policy shift have yet to be investigated. Now that Duterte's term has ended, scholars are better positioned to conduct a more accurate analysis and assessment of his alignment strategy.

III. Aligning with China and Russia, Antagonizing Western Power Blocs

To put everything into context, China was second only to Japan in terms of its total trade worth before Duterte's term began. The country's exports to Japan totaled USD 12.3 billion in 2015, while China only stood at USD 6.17 billion (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2016). Meanwhile, Russia accounted for less than one percent of the country's total trade and was deemed "a statistically insignificant source of foreign investment" (Ibarra, 2017). Observing these numbers, it would appear that there is an opportunity to improve the country's trade with China and Russia.

The year 2016 also marked the start of Duterte's *Build Build Build* (BBB), dubbed as the cornerstone of his administration's domestic policy. The policy aimed to uplift Filipinos' lives by constructing critical infrastructures such as seaports, airports, bridges, roads, railways, and dams. In this regard, Duterte believed that his government could rely on China, especially with the latter's demonstrated capacity to complete infrastructure projects in Africa and Central Asia (Ibarra, 2017). While Japan has generally been the country's most reliable infrastructure development partner, tapping it for BBB projects would have entailed "more stringent social and environmental standards" and delayed their completion (Camba, 2021). Thus, Duterte thought it was logical to partner with China—it could give him the latitude to reward local elites and increase the likelihood of completing his big-ticket projects before the end of his term (Camba, 2021).

Meanwhile, pursuing Russia diversifies the Philippines' sources of energy and capital. Russian businesses could also potentially fund BBB—hence the repeated invitations from Duterte. However, the most controversial engagement this newfound partnership endorsed was the expansion of the Philippine-Russia defense ties. Against the backdrop of the battle of Marawi City in 2017, the Philippine government took steps to acquire Russian firearms and military hardware. Russia proved a willing provider and an eager ally, offering Duterte "direct military assistance such as assault rifles and armored personnel carriers and intelligence on the foreign ISIS fighters operating in Southeast Asia" (de Castro, 2022). To further energize the Philippine-Russia relations, Duterte signed in 2019 a USD 14.7 million deal to procure 16 Russian-made Mi-17 heavy-lift helicopters (de Castro, 2022).

Beyond the described potential gains, Duterte's alliance with China and Russia helped the former president project a formidable image. Whenever the United Nations lambasted his domestic policies, particularly his war on drugs, Duterte brandished these connections like an arsenal at his disposal.

For instance, amidst the looming European Union (EU) sanctions in 2017, Duterte claimed that the Philippines would never be expelled from the United Nations as China and Russia would adamantly oppose it. In Duterte's words ("Duterte blasts UN, EU anew," 2017, translation by the author):

You want to expel us? You try. Your \$1,000 will earn P1 million from me if you can expel us from the UN. *Bakit, papayag kaya ang Russia pati China? Ulol pala kayo eh.* (Do you think Russia and China will approve? You must be crazy.). You think China and the rest of the countries in ASEAN will agree to that? Where will be the crucial vote that will come? The Security Council. And you think Russia and China will allow that?

Such pronouncements manifest Duterte's strongman politics, which he performed not only at home but also in the international arena.

Also, while the above statement was straightforward, Duterte's representation of Filipinos' anti-colonial sentiments is equally crucial in unpacking it entirely. As Webb (2017) posited, Duterte's popularity is propelled by his refusal to continue the indignity of his people's past. He postured himself as a figure willing to defy the West, supposedly ending Filipinos' continued subjection to colonial powers.

Following Duterte's anti-West trope, European nations have long been abusing the country's impoverished state: "You give us money then you start to orchestrate what things should be done and which should not happen in our country" ("Philippines president Duterte threatens to expel EU ambassadors," 2017). Duterte capitalized on this claim, advising the EU not to "fuck" with Filipinos for they are "past the colonization stage" ("Philippines president Duterte threatens to expel EU ambassadors," 2017). Analyzing Duterte's rhetoric provides an additional layer of understanding of his foreign policy: antagonizing the West was practical in the sense that it not only allowed

him to embolden his “status of both spokesman and defender” of the Filipino people but also strengthen his support base at home (Webb, 2017, 129–30). Such performances, augmented by his alliance with the prominent enemies of the United States, helped the former president portray his pro-Filipino branding effectively. Realizing these connections also helps demystify Duterte’s sustained popularity despite Filipinos’ rejection of the administration’s turn to China and Russia.

Thus, by situating Duterte’s refusal to antagonize China and Russia and his punitive policies in the context of imminent US and EU sanctions, it becomes possible to recognize the simplicity and practicality of his foreign policy: the administration perhaps presumed that repositioning the Philippines in Beijing’s and Moscow’s orbit would keep the country’s economy afloat amidst the tenacious defense of Duterte’s war on drugs against some of the country’s largest trading partners. Chinese and Russian backing was thought to provide a cushion for the possible economic and political repercussions of Duterte’s tirades against Western power blocs.

Yet, the renewed relations with China and Russia may also be construed as more than a buffer against economic shocks. Duterte believed that China and Russia could become dependable partners for funding and developing the country’s infrastructure, trade, tourism, and military. Duterte also turned to these two nations for his government’s pandemic response and recovery.

Initial results of Duterte’s efforts to revitalize the country’s relations with non-traditional partners are as follows. China committed to funding 40 government-to-government infrastructure projects amounting to USD 9 billion and aided Duterte’s pandemic response by sending medical supplies, testing kits, and Chinese vaccines (Gloria, 2021). Duterte’s term also witnessed incremental changes to the volume of Chinese visitors and investors in the Philippines, with the number of tourists tripled compared to the previous administration and the number of firms awarded

with Chinese foreign direct investment more than doubled (Gloria, 2021). According to government reports, China has become the country's top trading partner, with Chinese direct investments reaching USD 17.46 million in the first half of 2021 (De Guzman, 2021). On the other hand, the demarginalization of Russia in Philippine foreign policy resulted in the signing of eight bilateral agreements in 2017, ten trade and investment agreements amounting to USD 12.6 million in 2019, the acquisition of firearms, and the delivery of 2.8 million Russian vaccines in 2021 (Ranada, 2017; Gita 2019; Galvez, 2021). Superficially, these numbers paint a triumphant story of Duterte's ally diversification. However, as explained later, the delivery of China's commitments and the fate of the country's military deal with Russia illustrate a different picture.

IV. Changing Policies in the South China Sea and the Philippine-US Relations

Duterte's management of the country's maritime dispute with China offers additional insights into his foreign policy. For context, tensions in the South China Sea intensified in recent years as China rejected the Arbitral Tribunal's 2016 ruling that favored the Philippines and became increasingly aggressive in asserting its maritime claims. Apart from building and fortifying artificial islands, China had been harassing and intimidating Filipino fishers in the said area. A case in 2018, for instance, involved some Chinese Coast Guard personnel, who were caught on video seizing Filipino fisher's best catch at the Scarborough Shoal. In describing how powerless the Filipinos were in resisting seizures by the Chinese, Romel Cejuela, one of the victims, told the press, "The Chinese Coast Guard personnel board our boats, look at where we store the fish and take the

best ones. We cannot do anything because their huge vessels are there” (“Philippines complains,” 2018). In 2019, a Chinese vessel rammed and sank a smaller Filipino fishing boat at Reed Bank, an area within the Philippine exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea. The Chinese vessel reportedly fled the scene after the incident, leaving the 22 crewmembers of the Philippine vessel struggling in the middle of the sea for hours before being rescued by Vietnamese fishers (Stashwick, 2019). Instead of making China accountable and despite Duterte projecting himself as the champion of the underdogs, on both occasions, Duterte downplayed the reports and questioned the veracity of the Filipino fishers’ accounts.

Throughout his presidency, many criticized Duterte for his refusal to uphold the country’s sovereign rights over its EEZ in the South China Sea despite the Arbitral Tribunal’s backing. Duterte promised to defend the contested maritime space from China during his presidential campaign in 2016, but shortly after winning the presidential race, he balked at this promise and expressed his desire to shift the country’s allegiance to China. The president was consistent in appeasing China with defeatist pronouncements such as “I said China is already in possession. It’s now in their hands. So why do you have to create frictions… military activity that will prompt a response from China?” (Duterte, 2018a) and “*Gusto ninyo gawin na lang ninyo kaming province, [parang] Fujian* (If you [China] want, just make us a province, like Fujian)” (Duterte, 2018b, translation by the author). Duterte also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Xi, which involved, among others, the joint oil and gas exploration in the West Philippine Sea (Ng and Zhen, 2018).

Further underlining the pragmatism of Duterte’s foreign policy is his encouragement of a Philippine-Russia partnership in exploring potential sources of oil and gas in the disputed waters within the Philippine EEZ. In a move that seemingly follows Vietnam’s strategy, Duterte invited

Russia's largest crude exporter, Rosneft, in October 2019 (Mourdoukoutas, 2019). It is deemed a low-risk, high-reward collaboration for two reasons: first, Russia has no territorial claims in the South China Sea, and second, Russia consistently positioned itself as a service contractor for nations with sovereign rights over these waters (Ranada, 2019).

This article reiterates the assertion that Duterte's pro-China and pro-Russia stance and changing policies in the South China Sea cannot be detached from the ambiguous US position in the region (see Pitlo, 2016). Before Duterte, the emerging Chinese threat to Philippine sovereignty, not to mention the increasing terrorism in the region, triggered the rejuvenation of the Philippine-US allegiance. For this reason, the Philippines and the United States reaffirmed in 1999 their obligations under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty by enforcing the Philippine-US Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). However, with the United States failing to help secure Philippine islands from Chinese intrusions in the South China Sea in 2012 and as the United States slammed Duterte's war on drugs in 2016, Duterte deemed it timely to reassess its security engagement with its former colonial master (Pitlo, 2016). One implication of the said reevaluation is the de-prioritization of the EDCA implementation (Mangosing, 2018).

It seemed the final nail in the coffin in the souring relations between the Philippines and the United States during Duterte's term was when the cancelation of the US visa of Duterte's close ally, Senator Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa, in January 2020 (Esguerra, 2020a). A month after the incident, the Duterte government steered further away from the US orbit as Duterte ordered the termination of the VFA. In keeping with his tough persona, the presidential spokesman said that Duterte would not entertain any US initiatives to salvage the two-decade-old agreement, which the United States lamented as unfortunate (Lema, Petty, and Stewart, 2020). The administration argued that this was part of Duterte's independent foreign policy, especially

since ending the country's reliance on the United States for its security would require strengthening its national defense via other means (Esguerra, 2020b). This reasoning was also used to justify Duterte's efforts to harness China and Russia to upgrade the country's military hardware.

Curiously, however, after sending out the notice to terminate the VFA to the United States, Duterte repeatedly allowed the extension of its expiration date (Jeong and Lendon, 2021). While doing so, Duterte demanded that the United States pay more and provide vaccines to the Philippines to preserve the agreement (Dziedzic, 2021). The United States seemed to have responded to this call by donating 3.2 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in July 2021 (Tomacruz, 2021). In the same month, Duterte retracted the termination and agreed to restore the VFA (Mangosing, 2021).

Duterte's foreign policy flip-flops became increasingly noticeable in the last few months of his presidency. After numerous attempts to please China, there were instances when the Duterte administration seemed to have opposed the presence of Chinese vessels in waters and islands within the Philippine EEZ. In April 2021, Duterte's foreign affairs secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. lambasted China for its "dangerous maneuver" in the South China Sea after the Philippine Coast Guard conducted its maritime patrols and training exercises near the Scarborough Shoal (Venzon, 2021). However, unlike his foreign affairs secretary, Duterte's protest adopted a friendlier tone. Recognizing China's COVID-19 vaccine donations, Duterte said in a public address that "China is a good friend" but insinuated that "there are things which are not really subject to a compromise" (Venzon, 2021). After courting Russia for several years, Duterte condemned Putin for killing children and the elderly in Ukraine (Jeong, 2022). Duterte made this statement a month before he left office. A qualitative assessment of the outcomes of Duterte's pivot to China and Russia could help explain these curious turnarounds.

V. Underwhelming Outcomes, Recalibrating Relations

Benjamin Diokno, Duterte's former budget secretary and Marcos Jr.'s finance secretary, admitted that China failed to deliver on most of its promises to fund the construction boom in the Philippines (Locus, 2022). Despite the former president's eagerness to build goodwill with China, the Duterte administration fell flat in finalizing a single Chinese-funded flagship infrastructure project (Lee, 2020). Duterte's railway projects, for instance, which were supposed to be funded by Chinese ODA loans, were considered withdrawn by the Marcos Jr. administration due to China's failure to act on the former administration's funding requests (Lema, 2022).

To what extent the renewed relations could have impacted the government infrastructure project is also questionable. A quick review of Duterte's BBB would reveal that 80 percent of its projects were funded through Japan's ODA loans (Locus, 2022), making Japan the country's top ODA source and major infrastructure development partner (de Vera, 2021). As it stands, the only commitment clearly fulfilled by China was the construction of two grant bridges in Manila, namely the Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge and the Binondo-Intramuros Bridge. Projects such as the Kaliwa Dam and Chico River Pump Irrigation, which formerly had Philippine funding, were also delayed partly due to Duterte's persistence in relying on Chinese ODA loans (Camba, 2019).

Further, Duterte's appeasement of China did not reduce tensions between the two nations in the South China Sea, with China maintaining its claim of "almost the entire waterway" (Lee, 2021). If anything, it paved the way for the construction and complete militarization of three artificial islands in the said contested waters. Observing these outcomes of Duterte's pivot to China, Heydarian (2022) coined the term "pledge trap," or the "broadly illusory investment pledges" that encourage the advanced

deployment of strategic concessions. This pledge trap is evidenced by the government's inaction in the South China Sea, the preferential treatment Chinese investors received under Duterte's watch, and the numerous plans and funding commitments that never materialized.

Questions can also be raised concerning the actual impact of Chinese investments on the country and its people. Camba (2019) reported that although Chinese investments in the Philippines soared during Duterte's presidency, their developmental quality painted a different picture. The Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) provide a case in point. While a significant volume of Chinese FDIs flowed into these online gambling firms and other connected industries like real estate, hotels, entertainment, tourism, and services (Camba, 2019), they also brought several problems, such as human trafficking, fraud, illegal operations, kidnapping, and illegal detention (Bordey, 2022; Pitlo, 2019). Despite bringing jobs to the Philippines, they generally employed foreign nationals — only a quarter of their employees were Filipinos (Lucas, 2020). Some of these foreign operators and nationals, mainly those unregistered, were not even paying their taxes to the government (Ignacio, 2019). Their arrival also triggered an increase in rental prices in POGOs' locations, causing issues for Filipinos with less capital (Rivas, 2021).

With the mounting pressure from his supporters to prove the gains from the described pivot, the continued harassment of Filipino fishers, and China's underwhelming delivery of promises, Duterte appeared to have recalibrated the foreign policy. Duterte expressed his detestation of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea during the ASEAN-China special summit in 2021 and proclaimed that China's action "does not speak well of the relations between our nations" (Morales, 2021). The Duterte administration also took steps to reconnect with the United States, indicated by a series of high-level visits and the restoration and endorsement of several defense

and security agreements (Grossman, 2021). In September 2021, the Philippines became the first Southeast Asian nation to support the AUKUS security pact, or “the tripartite nuclear-powered submarine pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States aimed at countering China in the Indo-Pacific” (Popioco, 2022). In the same month, Duterte’s foreign affairs and national defense secretaries were sent to the United States to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the United States (Grossman, 2021).

Duterte’s engagement with Russia also did not progress well towards the end of his term. The Duterte administration decided to scrap its procurement of Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters after completing a USD 216 million downpayment, citing the threat of economic sanctions from the United States as the main reason for the turnaround. However, as Farolan (2022) pointed out, the justification is questionable, considering that the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) was passed in 2017, and the risk of being sanctioned has been there since the Philippines started negotiating with Russia. CAATSA is a US law that imposes sanctions on Iran, Russia, North Korea, and other governments dealing with them (Farolan, 2022). Hence, it is curious that it was only during the twilight of the Duterte presidency that the government became concerned about US sanctions. De Castro (2022) hinted at other potential reasons behind the termination of the deal, such as the incompatibility of Russian-made weapons with the Philippines’ NATO-certified weapons systems, the negative impact of expanded Philippine-Russia security relations on the Philippine-US alliance, and the lack of shared awareness of each other’s interests.

VI. Conclusion

This article attempted to provide a comprehensive review of the rationale and qualitative assessment of the outcomes of Duterte's foreign policy. It unveiled the motivations and underlying reasons behind Duterte's contentious pivot to China and Russia through a critical analysis of presidential speeches and news reports.

Despite indications showing Marcos Jr.'s intention to continue (or even expand) Duterte's balancing strategy, this article opted not to go deeper in exploring this connection, especially since the Marcos administration is still at its embryonic stage. Nevertheless, Heydarian has started by forwarding an early analysis of Marcos Jr.'s "dynamic equilateral balancing" strategy (2022a) and his adoption of the ASEAN way (2022b). Also, topics such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Duterte's foreign policy, vaccine diplomacy's role in shaping global alliances, and the pandemic recovery initiatives in the Global South were left for future investigation, as they require separate analyses. The article hoped that its findings would be useful for navigating these topics.

Future research may also assess the United States' continued cooperation with democratic backsliding governments and how this US foreign policy promotes impunity in partner countries such as the Philippines (see, for example, Carothers and Press, 2021). Understanding the implications of this relationship in the Philippines and the underlying interests in such relations may be investigated, along with China's aggressive takeover of disputed islands in the South China Sea and the growing tension between China and Taiwan.

Summing up, the article argued that Duterte's foreign policy could be understood as being pragmatic for several reasons: first, it allowed him to promote his strongman and nationalist personas to his home crowd and

international audience; second, it made his drug war appear sustainable, thinking that the realignment could provide a buffer against the economic impact of his strained relationship with traditional allies and trade partners; and third, it (seemed to have) provided him opportunities to take advantage of the circumstances in the South China Sea despite the ambiguous US position in the region. Further, although Duterte's pivot to China and Russia never attained widespread acceptance among Filipinos, his pivot away from the United States and its allies, on the other hand, bolstered his popularity at home and helped promote his nationalist and defiant personas. Duterte's anti-West trope packaged within the described pivot helped him promote his nationalist and formidable personas.

The article also agreed that Duterte's decision to pivot to China and Russia was generally motivated by the state's national interest. This was evidenced by the administration's numerous attempts to diversify the country's sources of military aid, energy, and capital. However, a closer look into the outcomes of the pivot depicted a story of defeat. A broader lesson may be extracted from the underwhelming results of Duterte's widely publicized policy shift, especially for developing nations engaging with non-traditional partners: commitments are not set in stone and must be treated as immaterial until delivered.

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