

ASSESSING THE DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION'S INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY



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Assessing the Duterte Administration's Independent Foreign Policy

The Asia Pacific Pathways Foundation Inc. and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung – Manila conducted a Track Two Observer (TTO) webinar in July 2020 to assess the current challenges and opportunities confronting the Philippines in light of the shifts in regional security. Key changes were driven by the devastating impact of COVID-19, the waning influence of regional multilateral institutions, and the intensifying US-China competition. The centerpiece of the discussion revolved around the developments surrounding the “independent foreign policy” of the Duterte administration, specifically the abrupt postponement of the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the United States and the Philippines.

This memo outlines the challenges, opportunities, and recommendations that can be the basis for evaluating the trajectory of the independent foreign policy, given the influx of dramatic changes unfolding within and beyond the Philippines. Participants from government agencies and non-governmental institutions examined the current foreign policy direction of the Duterte administration and its implications towards international defense engagements and the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Background

The Duterte administration's independent foreign policy stems from the bold pronouncement of lessening the country's dependence on the US and

diversifying its security partnerships with other countries, including China and Russia. While projecting a proactive Philippines in international politics received initial traction, the independent foreign policy must sustain such momentum. It needs to be agile to navigate the evolving challenges of an increasingly contested region.

The unexpected turn of events and the conditions upon which the independent foreign policy has operated has revealed the structural challenges that foreign policymaking in the Philippines needs to overcome. The Marawi uprising unveiled the deeply entrenched path dependence of the Philippine military with their American counterparts, which was further galvanized by a very pro-American sentiment of the domestic population. These institutional and domestic considerations have forestalled the fundamental aims of the Duterte administration's independent foreign policy towards building strategic relations with China and Russia, and thus, achieved a very slight margin of deviation from the previous administration.

During his penultimate State of the Nation of Address, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte argued that he had nothing against the US and China, and noted once more that the Philippines could not go to war against China to assert its rights in the West Philippine Sea.¹ These statements underscore how the Duterte administration continues to view foreign policy from the rather narrow perspective of being entangled in an outright war between the two great powers and the limited option of either declaring war or appeasing China. These views continue to dwarf the Philippines' agency to shape its external environment to achieve its own national interests.

Challenges

Having established the strategic and policy backdrop upon which the independent foreign policy has unfolded, this section outlines the challenges that it currently faces both internally and externally.

Sino-Filipino relations

One of the cornerstones of the independent foreign policy is renewing the Philippines' relationship with China. The Philippines' inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies this so-called reset. However, China's relentless encroachment in the sovereign waters of the Philippines, its unfulfilled economic investments, and its mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic became inflection points in the bilateral relations.² This ultimately put the efficacy of the independent foreign policy under increasing pressure and scrutiny.

A recent survey conducted by the Social Weather Station (SWS) revealed that 61% or three out of five Filipinos believe that China withheld information on COVID-19 from the rest of the world.³ Another survey made by the SWS in July 2020 showed that Filipinos trust the US and Australia more than China.⁴ China's perception has sunk from poor to bad, garnering a net trust rating of -36. The latest poll is consistent with a previous study made during the pre-pandemic period, showing the lack of inclination among Filipinos to pivot to China.⁵

The mismatch between Beijing's policy pronouncements and actual behavior in the South China Sea plays a major role in shaping the perception of ordinary Filipinos towards China. Even in the midst of the pandemic, Chinese aggression in the South China Sea has remained consistent. Chinese intrusions made it even more challenging for the Philippines to defend its territories in the West Philippine Sea, while also confronting a public health crisis. Attesting to this reality, the Chinese embassy drew flak from its *Iisang Dagat* or One Sea video that was seen by the general public as an attempt to whitewash Chinese aggression in the high seas.⁶

Refocusing on internal security

The Duterte administration has also managed to refocus its defense and military resources away from external security issues to more internal ones. The government has reasserted that the principal national security priorities are domestic crimes, the enforcement of law and order, and fighting insurgencies posed by the Community Party of the Philippines and

the New People's Army. This runs in deep contrast to the previous Aquino administration that emphasized external security threats with respect to the South China Sea and implemented policies to embark on the Philippines' defense modernization campaigns, strengthen security ties with like-minded countries like the US, Japan, and Australia while leveraging the gravitas of regional and multilateral fora to address the Philippines traditional and non-traditional security issues.

Limited foreign policy-making horizon

The independent foreign policy is also symptomatic of the larger issue of internal transactional politics that has driven foreign policymaking in the country. This has led to the alienation of institutions and laws involved in long-term national security planning and implementation. The result of such limited outlook leaves the country with a less agile foreign policy incapable of addressing the influx of changes in international politics. Such transactional and limited appraisal of foreign policy that permeates in the Philippines' political system exposes the country against unwanted external interventions and systemic shocks in the international politics. Concerns about China's alleged political interference in the upcoming 2022 elections in the Philippines has been recently suggested in Philippine media.⁷ It was also noted during the workshop that China might support candidates that would acquiesce to its interests. This confirms that the transactional political culture in the country is a critical vulnerability that could be exploited both by various actors.

Intensifying US-China competition and fragmented regional cooperation

The current condition of the regional landscape makes it very difficult for a small power like the Philippines to advance its own national interests. The space for policy maneuvering is becoming more limited and rapidly shrinking due to the great power competition between the US and China. This further limits the Philippines' agency to shape its external environment, making it even more vulnerable to the aftershocks of the COVID-19 crisis.

Likewise, due to the devastating impact of the global pandemic, regional cooperation has also become even more elusive. ASEAN's diminishing role to stimulate dialogue and cooperation can be attributed to the decreasing convergence of member states towards a common set of strategic priorities and their varying appraisal of the current situation. The uneven recovery of ASEAN member states also shows their inability to convene now with every country striving to emerge from the devastating impacts of COVID-19. Given the bitter rivalry between US and China hanging over Southeast Asia, ASEAN member states may soon face the inevitable decision of taking sides, realizing its worst-case scenario of a failed enmeshment policy towards the great powers.

Opportunities

The following section examines the opportunities that the Philippines can leverage to enhance its independent foreign policy in the increasingly complex strategic landscape.

Converging strategic interests: The US, Australia, and Japan

Amid the deep uncertainty in the region, the Philippines has concrete reasons to remain optimistic, but this will require a recalibrated approach, especially at the core of its independent foreign policy. Four years after winning its arbitration case at the Hague, the Philippines received a declaratory statement from the US in support of its 2016 victory. For years, the US' lack of a coherent and clear policy regarding the extent of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) to defend the Philippines should an armed conflict ensue has become a contentious debate in the relationship. The recent signaling from the US towards its support for the arbitral ruling can provide a new opportunity to reexamine the scope of the alliance, which underwent a review-rescind-resuscitate cycle under the independent foreign policy. The naval presence of the US remains a strong deterrence against

increasing Chinese aggression. It benefits every coastal ASEAN state and prevents a power vacuum in the region.

Like the United States, Australia has also expressed support to the Philippines' 2016 arbitration case. It rejected China's unilateral claims, which violate the law set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁸ Australia's 2020 Defense Strategic Update will deepen Canberra's security relations with maritime Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines. In a similar note, Japan's latest defense white paper has also emphasized China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo in militarizing the South China Sea and relentlessly intruding in the disputed islands of Senkaku in the East-China Sea. Japan has also highlighted China's opportunistic ploy in using the current pandemic to spread disinformation and achieve its political goals instead of supporting efforts for international cooperation.⁹

Increasing regional convergence within ASEAN member states

Southeast Asian countries have started to demonstrate a firmer stance against Chinese actions in the South China Sea by upholding the provisions enshrined in the UNCLOS. In a diplomatic note sent to the UN Secretary general, Indonesia affirmed that China's historic claims have no international legal basis.¹⁰ Earlier this year, Indonesia was in a standoff with China in the northern Natuna islands, forcing Jakarta to deploy its fighter jets. Indonesia has also turned down China's offer for bilateral talks, contending that its position on the issue is crystal clear.¹¹ Meanwhile, Hanoi appears to be exploring anew the use of legal means to press its sovereign claims in the South China Sea. This was triggered after rising incidents of standoffs involving Chinese coast guard and its maritime militia. Like Indonesia, Vietnam has also sent a diplomatic note to the UN after China sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in the Paracel Islands. Similar to Vietnam, Malaysia has also been locked in a recent standoff with China over an exploration of oil resources in West Capella. These trends point to the potential coalescing among ASEAN member states on issues relating to the

South China Sea. However, the impact of COVID-19 will continue to be an obstacle for ASEAN to focus on the South China Sea. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam are also treading the South China Sea issue in a delicate balance given their economic relations with China.

Recommendations

Establish a constructive dialogue with China. The Duterte administration managed to stabilize the bilateral relationship between the Philippines and China. However, there is much work to be accomplished. The relationship is multifaceted and cuts across all aspects—political, economic, and strategic. From this appraisal of the relationship, the Philippines must learn how to effectively engage with China by establishing a neutral ground to manage tensions in the South China Sea. Like its ASEAN neighbors, the Philippines must be able to strike a constructive dialogue with China over its sovereign claims in the contested waters. This will allow the Philippines to navigate the complex relationship without undermining potential areas of cooperation.

Adjust strategic calculus to maximize the US hubs and spokes. The US remains a key plank for the Philippines' internal and external defense, covering a wide range of traditional and non-traditional security threats. The imminent abrogation of the near-century alliance will not only weaken the Philippines' defense and security but will also have far-reaching implications in the overall equilibrium in the region. Without the extended deterrence provided by the US, the Philippines must be prepared to compensate for its absence, while still grappling other serious issues relating to internal security, COVID-19, and the South China Sea. The Philippines must continue to uphold the VFA with the US. Washington's clear policy towards Manila's arbitral ruling signals a new chapter for both parties to iron out differences and find constructive means to achieve optimum outcomes.

The Philippines must also maximize its position within the umbrella of the US "hubs and spokes" by continuing its security cooperation with

Australia and Japan. The recent publications of Australia's defense strategic update and Japan's defense white paper serve as springboards for the Philippines to revisit its strategic calculus to obtain positive-sum results. Paramount in this collaboration include the sharing of best practices in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, information sharing on the increasing tensions in the South China Sea, as well as other existing challenges in cyber security, counterterrorism, and humanitarian and disaster relief. As the Philippines continues to upgrade its defense capabilities through its modernization campaign, it must utilize the defense outlooks presented by Japan and Australia, and the review of the US-Philippines alliance in developing interoperability within the US hubs and spokes in the changing threat landscape.

Expand trilateral cooperative agreements (INDOMALPHI) to include Vietnam. Despite the challenges of the consensus-driven approach by ASEAN, littoral member states that share deep concerns with the rising tension in the South China Sea have increasingly bonded together in the last several years. The ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) has become a launchpad that demonstrates a convergence among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines that led to the formation of INDOMALPHI. The trilateral cooperative agreement among the three states has expanded from the maritime domain to include joint air patrol.¹² The minilateral grouping has also extended its invitation towards other ASEAN member states to join their patrolling initiatives in the Malacca Strait and the Sulu-Sulawesi sea. This invitation leaves the possibility for Vietnam to eventually join INDOMALPHI to extend the reach and scope of the existing cooperation.

Issue-based and functional cooperative mechanisms provide a pragmatic alternative to the ASEAN centrality model, which provides avenues for affected member states to tackle issues relating to the South China Sea. Under the circumstances of the so-called new normal, minilateral arrangements cannot be underestimated given how regional cooperation has been quite absent.

Diversify partnerships with India, South Korea, and Taiwan. One of the novelties of the independent foreign policy during its launch in 2016 heralded the notion of diversifying partnerships beyond the conventional allies and partners. This is a defining pillar of the independent foreign policy that must be sustained. According to a poll released by SWS in July 2020, four out five Filipinos or 82% support the formation of alliances by the Philippines with other states that will defend its territorial rights in the West Philippine Sea.¹³ This momentum can be used to explore potential partnerships with countries such as India, South Korea, and Taiwan. India has been quite active with its engagement with the Philippines with regard to maritime security. However, the areas of collaboration can be expanded beyond the South China Sea to tackle non-traditional security issues, such as piracy and counterterrorism. Taiwan and South Korea were hailed as the role models in combatting the public health crisis. Both countries can also be tapped for other purposes such as marine life conservation, seabed exploration in Benham rise, as well as technology transfers in developing ships and vessels.

Conclusion

The external environment that underpins the independent foreign policy four years ago has undergone a dramatic shift. For the Philippines to advance its national interests, it must reinvent its approach to foreign policy given the ongoing structural changes brought by the current pandemic, fragmenting regional cooperation, and great power competition between the US and China. Amid the uncertainty that overshadows the region, the current developments afford the Philippines some space for policy maneuvering to assert its influence. The recent changes in the South China Sea policy of the US and the backing from Australia and Japan gives the Philippines a level of diplomatic leverage to constructively raise the arbitral ruling towards China. The timing of these changes is quite rare not only for the Philippines but the rest of the other ASEAN member states like Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Amid the trappings of the consensus-driven model of ASEAN, minilateral mechanisms provide an alternative among ASEAN member states that have overlapping claims in

the South China Sea to uphold the UNCLOS and using the arbitration case as a fundamental reference.

As the Philippines strives to emerge from the global pandemic, it must reorient its independent foreign policy towards increasing cooperation. The revocation of the VFA during this time is counterproductive, leaving the Philippines highly vulnerable as it spreads its limited resources between external defenses and managing the public health crisis. Aside from strengthening all existing partnerships with conventional allies, establishing new linkages with countries such as India, South Korea, and Taiwan must also be explored. The “new normal” dictates that all disruptive issues henceforth will be transnational and borderless. The Philippines must be equipped by diversifying and forging new cooperative partnerships to address traditional and non-traditional threats, such as the public health crises, climate change, cyber security, and humanitarian and disaster risk.

In re-engineering the independent foreign policy, Sino-Philippine relations will remain critical. Its multidimensional character can achieve optimum results if there is equal respect and recognition of interests. With its limited defense capabilities, the use of diplomatic means remains the most pragmatic path for the Philippines. Utilizing the arbitral ruling, engaging China constructively, and maximizing its strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN should be the defining pillars of the revitalized independent foreign policy.

Notes

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Established in 2014, Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc. (APPF) is an independent policy think tank that aims to promote peace, development, and cultural understanding for peoples of the Philippines and the Asia Pacific through research, international dialogue, and cooperation. It is the Philippine member of the regional network ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies.

The organization's work focuses on the implications of international and regional developments for the Philippines and its foreign relations. It has dedicated programs which cover international security developments, maritime affairs, connectivity and integration, and China.

Principally, APPFI undertakes three major activities. First, it conducts and publishes policy-oriented research, disseminates the same to relevant stakeholders, and provides quarterly analyses of regional developments. Second, it organizes roundtable discussions and national as well as international conferences, solely or in partnership with other institutions. Third, it hosts exchanges and develops issue-based partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector in the Philippines and the Asia Pacific.

RESEARCH PROGRAMS

- CHINA PROGRAM

APPROFI's original flagship program focuses on China and Philippines-China relations. The China Program stands on two pillars: (1) promoting better understanding among Philippine stakeholders of the implications of China's emerging role in East Asia and the world, and (2) strengthening linkages and engaging in Track Two diplomacy between these two neighboring countries.

- MARITIME DEVELOPMENT & SECURITY PROGRAM (MDSP)

This multidisciplinary program explores how the Philippines can enhance advantages and minimize threats and risks arising from its maritime strategic environment, looking toward both the internal and external dimensions. MDSP aims to generate timely discussions and appropriate recommendations regarding the strategic implications of Philippine maritime security, marine economic resources, and coastal development.

- REGIONAL INTEGRATION & CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM (RICP)

The RICP promotes a critical understanding of the political economy of regional development, and of economic trends and issues that affect Philippine national and regional interests. It seeks to generate insights and research that will enable the Philippines to strategically navigate through its international economic engagements, and interact beneficially with regional states and multilateral institutions.

- REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM (RSAP)

The RSAP examines the evolving security environment, the role of multilateral and other forms of security associations, and institutional developments that affect Philippine and regional security. RSAP will be a hub producing research, intelligent commentary, and policy briefs from leading experts and specialists in the Philippines and the wider Asia-Pacific region.





Closely linked to, but independent from the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Philippines is a German political foundation. Established in 1964, KAS Philippines was the first ever KAS office in Asia. Ever since its inception, KAS has been actively working in the Philippines under the principles of freedom, justice, and solidarity.

With the main purpose of developing programs that boost the country's democratic institutions and processes, KAS strongly believes that human dignity and human rights are at the very heart of their work. Thus, KAS regards people as the starting point of its initiatives towards social justice, democratic freedom, and sustainable economic activity. KAS Philippines creates, develops, and sustains networks within the political and economic arenas by bringing people together who take their mandates seriously in society.

Given that KAS provides, not just research, but also robust and dynamic activities, the foundation considers itself not just as a think tank, but a think-and-do tank that works along socially equitable, economically efficient, and ecologically sustainable lines. KAS Philippines' country foci are institutional and political reform, the social market economy, and peace and development in Mindanao. The foundation works with civil society organizations, the academe, governmental institutions, political parties, think-tanks, the media, and decision-makers, creating strong partnerships along the way. Particularly, KAS Philippines aims to increase political cooperation in development cooperation at the national and international levels.

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