

THE DUTERTE DOCTRINE

A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST GUIDE
TO UNDERSTANDING RODRIGO DUTERTE'S
FOREIGN POLICY AND STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR
IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

MICHAEL MAGCAMIT, Ph.D.

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Executive Summary

In his much-acclaimed historical account of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides concluded that it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this event inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable. The probability of conflict ensuing between the emerging and established powers has been referred to by war scholars as the ‘Thucydides’ trap’. In the contemporary Asia-Pacific context, the fault lines leading to this trap can be attributed to the continuing strategic competition between a seemingly declining United States and a rising China. Failure to circumvent this trap can ultimately result in a ‘war of all against all, as the world tumultuously shifts from one superpower to another.’

Against this backdrop, this paper examines President Rodrigo Duterte’s foreign policy and strategic doctrine using a neoclassical realist model. The doctrine has four main elements:

1. cultivating a more favorable image for China;
2. moderating the country’s American-influenced strategic culture;
3. mobilizing state-society relations supportive of ‘sinicization’; and
4. overhauling the country’s Western-based institutions to better accommodate Chinese pressures and incentives.

This doctrine’s rapprochement with China downplays territorial issues, and capitalizes on the promise of economic payoffs from warm bilateral relations. It holds that the sooner the government can adjust to the new realities of global power relations – by adhering to Chinese remedies and prescriptions for settling geopolitical disputes; adopting Chinese norms and principles for engaging in international relations; and emulating Chinese institutions and practices for managing domestic affairs - the better it will

be for the entire country and its people. Thus, in sharp contrast to what critics would dismiss as naïve and defeatist, the Duterte doctrine is deemed by the current government as a calculated and forward-thinking strategic outlook. Furthermore, under Trump's America First doctrine, America's new antipathy toward prior international commitments contributed to the deterioration of multilateral institutions. This unhelpfully convinces Duterte of his allegations of Western hypocrisy.

However, the administration may consider several points. First, there may be a misperception of the geopolitical environment. The United States is still the leading superpower in terms of hard power (e.g. military) assets, and upsetting the longstanding alliance, in order to pursue closer relations with China, will have repercussions. Second, the government may fail to consider a wider array of foreign policy options vis-à-vis China out of fear that any and all pushback will necessarily engender armed confrontation. Alternatives include filing a formal protest against Chinese island-building activities in contented waters, more patrols by the Navy in Panatag Shoal, and requesting the US to formally commit that the Panatag Shoal is covered by the Mutual Defense Treaty. Finally, while foreign policy must ideally be conducted with enough flexibility to accommodate international realities, domestic stakeholders may resist the Duterte doctrine for a multitude of reasons, such as perceived primacy of the ongoing territorial dispute with China and a traditionally pro-U.S. public opinion.



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In his earlier projects, he examined the contexts and motives behind the small powers' efforts to substantively and/or tactically link their security interests and free trade policies, including Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Aside from being the author of *Small Powers and Trading Security: Contexts, Motives, and Outcomes* (Palgrave 2016), his works have also appeared in various academic journals including *International Politics*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, *World Affairs*, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, *Asian Affairs*, *Journal of Asian Security* and *International Affairs*, and *Journal of Human Security*.

The Duterte Doctrine: A Neoclassical Realist Guide to Understanding Rodrigo Duterte's Foreign Policy and Strategic Behavior in the Asia-Pacific

Michael Magcamit, Ph.D.

The Philippines and the changing distribution of international power

More than two centuries ago, Thucydides examined the dynamics that drove Sparta and Athens to an epic war that lasted between 431 to 404 BC. Based on his historical account of the events leading up to what we now refer to as the Peloponnesian War, there were two intertwined factors that ultimately decided the fate of the two ancient cities. As Athens continued to accumulate power, the Athenians' sense of entitlement grew along with their demand for greater influence and control within the existing arrangement (Allison, 2015, 2017; Strassler, 1998). At the same time, however, Athens' ascent to power inevitably heightened the insecurity, fear, and resolve of the Spartans to defend the status-quo conditions that made them the leading land power on the peninsula for centuries (Allison, 2015, 2017; Strassler, 1998). In Thucydides' words, 'it was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable'. Graham Allison (2015,

2017) has referred to the unstable condition that emerges when rising power challenges the established leader of the international order as the Thucydides' trap.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and the fault lines leading to the Thucydides' trap are engendered by the intensifying strategic, economic, and geopolitical rivalry between a rising China and a seemingly declining United States. Three interconnected events are driving the gradual shifts in the balance of power and influence between Beijing and Washington: (1) China threatening to end US economic dominance within the next few decades; (2) the US squandering its unipolar moment and forever losing its superpower; and (3) world politics retrograding eastward to the Pacific away from the Atlantic Ocean (Cox, 2011; Fergusson, 2012; Sachs, 2009). If not managed properly, this highly anticipated global power shift could easily result in cataclysmic conflicts (Hoge, 2004). As pointed by A.F. Organski (1958), the changing distributions of power resulting from different material growth rates among the great powers are typically accompanied by episodes of increased international instability. This fundamental problem of leapfrogging — when a challenger's power overtakes that of the dominant nation — is a destabilizing force that can set the entire international system to slide almost irreversibly toward war (Organski and Kugler, 1981).

The Philippines' foreign policy and engagement strategy vis-à-vis the regional security conditions and dynamics being engendered by this transitional moment is interesting to study under this backdrop. President Rodrigo Duterte's strategic preferences are interesting to examine precisely because they go directly against the two most common features of small powers' dependence-based strategic behavior. These are: (1) that small powers tend to favor the existing status quo and prefer to operate within prevailing order as opposed to attempting to subvert and revise it (Archer et al., 2014, Magcamit, 2016; Rothstein, 1968); and (2) that small powers tend to be staunch supporters of international laws and institutions as these instruments reduce the cost of facilitating international relations and add greater weight to their foreign policies (Barston, 1973; Magcamit, 2016; Keohane, 1969). Under the current Duterte administration, the Philippine

government has been more vocal in challenging the Western-dominated status quo and has even threatened to reconsider its longstanding alliance with the world's superpower. Duterte has fiercely criticized both the US and the European Union (EU), insisting that while the former continues to treat the Philippines as its colony, the latter as a whole represents the last vestiges of imperialism in Asia (Cigaryl, 2018; Lacorte, 2016). This behavior is in stark contrast with the security-maximizing, pro-establishment approach of many small powers.

In addition, rather than being a strong advocate of the key principles, norms, and rules being promoted by major international organizations, the Philippine government has openly criticized the hypocrisies, double-standards, and inefficiencies of these actors. In defending his offensive language toward these intergovernmental institutions — from the United Nations (UN), to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and Human Rights Watch (HRW) — Duterte has emphasized that these non-state actors cannot coerce sovereign states into adopting their codes of conduct, and has speculated that these groups are merely conspiring with each other to shame him and his government (Placido, 2018). Thus, while most leaders of functioning market democracies in the East will not hesitate to seek protection from the US should China decide to directly contest the status quo, Duterte had threatened to sever ties with Washington in an effort to cement his pivot to China (Paddock, 2016). Similarly, while many in the international community view the 2016 Hague Tribunal's ruling on the West Philippine Sea a testament to the salience of international laws and institutions, the Duterte administration had refused to celebrate the occasion, and instead announced that it was setting aside the decision to secure better economic relations with China.

At this watershed moment in the history of international politics, does Duterte's Sino-centric security approach give the Philippines indispensable strategic capital to successfully navigate and exploit both the challenges and opportunities that the impending new order might bring? Contrary to what his critics claim, does Duterte's preferred attitude and behavior toward China, in fact, reveal a more calculated and forward-thinking strategic

outlook rather than a defeatist and naïve stance? Or are the president's rhetoric and actions meant to prepare the Philippines for the proverbial embrace of the serpent?

A neoclassical realist model of foreign policy analysis

Neoclassical realism links together internal and external variables that drive the creation of foreign policy, as defined by classical and structural realism respectively. Proponents of the theory set out a two-pronged assumption: (1) that a country's foreign policy is primarily a function of its relative position in the international system particularly by its relative material power capabilities, and thus tend to be realist; and (2) that the effect of such power resources on foreign policy is neither direct nor simple as systemic pressures must be decoded via intervening variables present at the unit level, and thus are neoclassical (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2003, 2004). There are three main rationales behind neoclassical realism's thrust to provide in-depth examinations of the contexts through which foreign policies are developed and adopted. First, adhering to Thucydides' mantra, that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must', neoclassical realists assert that it is the relative material power of the state that determines the fundamental limits of its foreign policy (Rathbun, 2008; Rose, 1998).

Nevertheless, neoclassical realists emphasize that there is no instantaneous transmission belt that automatically connects the state's material capabilities to its foreign policy strategy and behavior (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998). Decisions concerning foreign policy preferences are made by actual state officials, and as such, how they view and perceive the relative power that they own is just as crucial, if not even more crucial, than the level of relative power per se (Rose, 1998; Wohlforth, 1993). Second, neoclassical realists stress that the power and freedom of state leaders and elites for extracting and mobilizing national resources is limited (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, 2006, 2009). This means that in examining relative material power, both the structure and strength of states vis-a-vis their respective societies are also significant factors to consider because they influence the amount

of national resources that can be allotted to foreign policy. Hence, while countries may more or less have the same amount of capabilities, it is possible for them to behave and act differently due to their structural differences (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998). And third, supporters of neoclassical realism argue that while systemic stimuli (incentives and pressures) may affect the overall pattern and course of foreign policy, the effects are not always robust or explicit enough to reveal specific details and information about state behavior (Rathbun, 2008; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004).

Neoclassical realism also identifies two major intervening variables that help shape a country's behavior and response toward constraints and opportunities in the international system: (1) the perceptions of a country's decision-makers through which systemic stimuli are filtered and processed; and (2) the strength of a country's state machinery and its relation to the immediate society (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998; Schweller 2003). For neoclassical realists, Aaron Friedberg's (1988: 13) structuralist formulation of 'a reliable but invisible transmission belt connecting objective material change to adaptive behavior' is flawed and misleading. There are no compelling reasons to believe that state officials are able to comprehend the distribution of power accurately, and that these understandings would somehow be automatically translated into national policy. In practice, the conversion of capabilities into behavioral responses is often vague and erratic precisely because the global distribution of power can steer a country's behavior and conduct only by influencing the decisions of its state leaders and elites (Lobell, 2009; Ripsman, 2011).

Furthermore, neoclassical realists argue that aggregate estimates of global power distribution are insufficient due to the fact that state leaders do not always have absolute access to a country's total material power resources (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, 2006, 2009). In order to provide a systematic analysis of international power, the governments' effective capacity for acquiring and controlling the resources of their societies needs to be taken into account. The underlying neoclassical realist argument here is that since foreign policy is developed by the government and not the entire nation per se, hence, what matters is state power rather than national power. Fareed Zakaria (1998:9) defines state power as 'that portion of national

power the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decision-makers can achieve their ends'; while Thomas Christensen (1996: 11) refers to this as the national political power or 'the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives'.

In contrast to the structuralist position that an invisible albeit perfectly functioning transmission belt interlocks a state's material capability and strategic behavior, the neoclassical realist interpretation highlights the defects that prevent states from flexibly modifying their foreign policies to fit the changing international strategic landscape. That this imaginary transmission belt is defective implies that a country's foreign policy elites are or can be: (1) prone to acquiring inaccurate and flawed perceptions of systemic stimuli; (2) susceptible to adopting unsound decision-making procedures; and (3) ineffective in mobilizing the national resources necessary for implementing policies (Lobell, 2009; Ripsman, 2009, 2011; Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, 2006, 2009). These problems are generated by four main factors: (1) leader images that can alter perceptions; (2) strategic culture that can determine state responses; (3) state-society relations that can decide a state's capability to adopt and execute decisions; and (4) domestic political institutions that can either galvanize or restrain support for state officials in times of domestic opposition and crisis. The presence of these factors adds layers of complexity to the decision-making context at the national level. As a result, the ability of state leaders to formulate and adopt the most optimal policy responses possible at any given time is significantly curbed. Instead, state leaders are compelled to constantly select from a wide array of policy alternatives and substitutes in order to navigate between external (systemic) constraints and internal (domestic) requirements more flexibly.

Systemic stimuli, domestic intervening variable, and the Duterte Doctrine

Duterte's recent foreign policy rhetoric and actions provide important clues about how he expects the changing distribution of power to play out: that the axis of international politics will inevitably tilt toward the East.

This view is supported by the prognosis of some observers that the deterioration of orthodox neoliberal economic enterprise – the system that has propelled Western power and dominance for centuries – will pave the way for the most dramatic geopolitical shift since the beginning of industrial era (Hoge, 2015; Layne, 2012). The massive crises of the previous decade (2000-2010) have significantly weakened Western self-confidence and continue to tarnish its reputation and standing in the international community. And as if to add salt to the injury, the stagnation and decline in the West has coincided with huge economic growth rates in Asia, particularly in mainland China (Cox, 2011; Serwer, 2009).

All this has greatly contributed to the perception that a new consensus is in the making. In particular, a new world order that is centered around China is about to emerge. Unlike everywhere else, 'China looks like the final house on the hill, at least able to function with an outward appearance of coherence and purpose' (Brown, 2018). The continuing decline of US standing has led to predictions that the era of Pax Americana is coming to a close and will soon be replaced by Pax Sinica (Kugler, 2006). For those who see China not just as an ordinary sovereign state but as a civilization in pursuit of a grand mission, the transition from one superpower to another has major implications that go beyond simple national power calculus. As Beijing breaks free from a century of humiliation at the hands of the West to finally seize hegemony, its views and philosophies about the world are also expected to gradually build momentum until they eventually replace those that had been established by the West (Cox, 2011; Jacques, 2009).

Notwithstanding President Xi Jinping's earlier claims about not wanting to challenge American hegemony, history shows no records of passive and indifferent rising superpowers that ignored the huge opportunity created by the other actors' unfortunate decisions. On the contrary, the more Beijing accumulates power and influence, the more it will be tempted to push the boundaries of the existing order until it is able to remodel the international system in ways that reflect and reinforce Chinese values and interests (Shiffrinson and Beckley, 2013; Schweller and Pu, 2011). With the continuous rise of China, the 'West' is increasingly being reduced to an economic model that the Chinese have embraced and

cross-bred into something that the world is still trying to decode and make sense of (Rapoza, 2017). In order to compete and survive in this post-Western arrangement, a highly dependent small power like the Philippines might find it strategic and advantageous to bandwagon with the rising superpower by progressively mimicking the domestic economic and political systems of China instead of the US. The expectations about the risks and benefits of a global power shift compel state leaders to rethink and recalibrate their existing politico-strategic alignments (Shiffrinson and Beckley, 2013; Schweller and Pu, 2011).

Within this context, the Duterte doctrine which emphasizes: (1) cultivating a softer and more positive image for China; (2) mitigating the country's American-influenced strategic culture; (3) mobilizing state-society relations supportive of 'sinicization'; and (4) reorienting Western-inspired domestic institutions to adapt to Chinese incentives and pressures, can make sense. The behavior and actions being displayed by top Palace officials give the impression that as far as this administration is concerned, there is not much point for the Philippines to continue holding on to the past when the US and other major Western powers could run the world unchallenged. The sooner that the government can adjust to the new realities of global power relations – by adhering to Chinese remedies and prescriptions for settling geopolitical disputes; adopting Chinese norms and principles for engaging in international relations; and emulating Chinese institutions and practices for managing domestic affairs - the better it will be for the entire country and its people. Thus, in sharp contrast to what critics would dismiss as naïve and defeatist, the Duterte doctrine is deemed by the current government as a calculated and forward-thinking strategic outlook. Amid the growing systemic incentives and pressures being generated by China's rise, the president's Sino-centric statecraft is a necessity rather than a mere choice. The Duterte doctrine is expected to deliver the Philippines substantial strategic capital that it can utilize to successfully navigate and exploit both the challenges and opportunities of the impending new order.

PH-China relations and the Duterte doctrine

Since his first day in office, Duterte has been gradually distancing himself from the US while steadily converging the country's foreign policy with Chinese interests. In a surprising departure from the previous administration's opposition to China's aggressive maritime expansion, Duterte appears resolute in downplaying the country's territorial disputes in efforts to establish closer economic and political relations with the Chinese (Baviera, 2017; Tiezzi, 2018). His willingness to 'temporarily' set aside the 2016 Hague Tribunal Ruling on the West Philippine Sea highlights the president's perceptual bias and preferential treatment in favor of Xi, a leader whom he has confessed to simply love. In defending his decision against critics who accuse him of abandoning the country's sovereign and territorial rights, Duterte relayed his Chinese counterpart's 'friendly' albeit stern warning that if he forced the issue, both China and the Philippines would have no other alternative but to go to war (Mogato, 2017). Hence, rather than compelling China to accept the tribunal's decision (a decision that the Chinese dismissed as 'ill-founded' and 'naturally null and void'), Duterte has decided to de-emphasize and compartmentalize territorial and maritime issues when negotiating with China (Baviera, 2017).

For Duterte and his allies, untangling economic relations from the management of geopolitical issues is the most rational choice that any small power can pursue. Beijing's pledge to finance 12 projects with an estimated total cost of US\$4.4 billion, and another 3.8 billion Philippine pesos (US\$73 million) in economic and infrastructure assistance, have been used by the government as a concrete evidence that the president's strategy is working effectively (Malinao, 2018; Cigalar, 2018; Tiezzi, 2018). Instead of pushing the government to assert its sovereign rights over the contested islands, the president insists that Filipinos must 'remain humble and meek' to receive the 'mercy' of Xi (Esmaquel II, 2018a). Duterte has persistently sold the idea that the Philippines needs China, more than China needs it. Understandably, when news about Chinese actions which are deemed as clear violations of Xi's promise to discontinue its militarization of the area have been uncovered, the Philippine government responded in an acquiescing and consenting manner.

Despite the Duterte administration's oversimplification of maritime and territorial disputes into a zero-sum game in which small powers have virtually no other choice but to submit to the whims of great powers to avoid greater sufferings, alternative measures are available for the government to explore, such as the recommendations outlined by Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio and former DFA Secretary Albert Del Rosario. These include: (1) filing a strong formal protest against China's building activity; (2) commanding the Philippine Navy to patrol Panatag Shoal and, in an event of Chinese attack invoke the Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT); (3) requesting the US to declare Panatag Shoal as part of Philippine territory for purposes of the MDT; (4) agreeing to Washington's standing offer to hold joint naval patrols in the West Philippine Sea to demonstrate the two countries' joint determination in preventing Beijing from building on Panatag Shoal; and (5) avoiding any act, statement or declaration that cedes Philippine sovereignty over its territories in the West Philippine Sea (Fonbuena, 2017).

However, for a leader who professes that China is 'a very important ingredient' to the realization of his reforms and that Xi is the only leader who understands his problems and is willing to help, these options are seen more as stumbling blocks rather than solutions to its security conundrum. This can be reflected in the way Duterte handled his ASEAN chairmanship in 2017 that has further solidified China's leverage over the organization's key agendas. With the Philippines acting as chair, the ASEAN member states evaded any reference to Beijing's militarization of the West Philippine Sea and, instead, chose to emphasize the positive momentum in Southeast Asia's relations with China. With the relegation of the maritime issues to the backseat, the 31st Chairman Statement released under Duterte's watch took a significantly softer stance despite its purported adoption of the ASEAN-China framework COC (ASEAN, 2017). From being the most aggressive claimant state and Beijing's most resolute geopolitical rival, Manila has been transformed by Duterte into one of China's vassal capitals along with Phnom Penh and Vientiane within a span of two years.

Lastly, to demonstrate just how far the president is willing to take his courtship of China, he seems to be voluntarily falling victim to China's

infamous debt-trap diplomacy. By offering small, weak powers 'the honey of cheap infrastructure loans with the sting of default coming', the leaders from these countries become even more indebted to China, thereby undermining their capacity for crafting and exercising independent foreign policies (Fernholz, 2018). Indeed, the intensifying financial sinicization of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and now the Philippines is severely undermining ASEAN unity and cohesion vis-à-vis China's maritime and territorial ambitions. By penetrating the national economic and security agendas of individual ASEAN member states with the use of predatory loans, Beijing is able to dictate and impose its most preferred rules, norms, and procedures concerning Asia-Pacific's maritime affairs. While the adoption of a non-binding COC has been hailed by ASEAN governments as a significant step toward the creation of more amicable and peaceful relations in the region, it makes small claimant states more vulnerable to China's geopolitical sinicization, hence leaving them with no other viable option but to capitulate (Thayer, 2013).

PH-US relations and the Duterte Doctrine

During his first state visit to China in 2016, Duterte had inevitably revealed parts of his world view. In what appeared to be an indirect jab at the US, one of the Philippines' former colonial rulers, Duterte claimed that 'China is good' for 'it has 'never invaded a piece of my country all these years' (GMA News, 2016). He further added that during the Cold War, 'China was portrayed as the bad guy...and all of these years, what we have read in our books in school were all propaganda produced by the West' (GMA News, 2016a). In stark contrast to his extremely gracious treatment of China, Duterte's attitude toward US and the West in general have not been particularly convivial. Whenever he is criticized by Western leaders and organizations for his authoritarian style of leadership, the president does not hesitate in reminding the world about Washington's own history of human rights violations (Phillips, 2017). These underscore the extent of Duterte's efforts to reconfigure Manila's diplomatic alliances, a dramatic shift from the staunchly multilateralist approach pursued by his predecessor

Benigno Aquino Jr. But are Duterte's hopes and predictions about China's second coming warranted? Or is it premature on his part to begin writing off the West? When using the 'rise of China' phenomenon as an impetus for the Duterte doctrine, the president will be wise to maintain some perspectives.

Several scholars have argued that while economic power is moving toward the East, Washington and all other major Western capitals have sources of power which are not available to Beijing (Cox, 2011; Schweller and Pu, 2013; Shifrinson and Beckley, 2013). To begin with, the Duterte doctrine must take into consideration the fact that despite the hype surrounding China's huge economic success, overall, the country remains underdeveloped and a work in progress. Amid the expanding number of Chinese middle class and multimillionaires, at least half a billion people in China continue to live on less than two dollars a day without access to basic welfare safety nets (UNDP, 2018). The enormous social inequalities and severe environmental problems engendered by the country's export-oriented economic model (which the US has called 'unfair' and has threatened to oppose) create massive pressures to domestic peace and stability (Cox, 2011). Despite the economic troubles confronting the US, the Chinese still have a long way to go before they can catch up with their American counterparts in per capita terms (World Bank, 2018).

In terms of hard power, the Duterte doctrine must consider the absolute hard power advantage that the US maintains over all other great power contenders, including China. Washington's 2017 defense budget of US\$ 610 billion (roughly 36 per cent of the world's total expenditures on military) was larger than the next seven highest-spending states combined (SIPRI, 2018). As reported by *The Economist* (2014), 'Chinese commanders talk about not being able to match American hard power until 2050 at the earliest'. And unlike Beijing who has significantly fewer friends, Washington has allies in all parts of the world which compels it to spread its forces broadly albeit thinly (*The Economist*, 2014). History does suggest that countries with allies tend to win over those without. Based on these parameters, the US is expected to be the only major international player that will be capable of projecting a global military power for the succeeding several decades (Beckley, 2012; Layne, 2012).

Furthermore, the Duterte doctrine must also take into account that Western soft power remains robust despite the significant blows that it had suffered (and continues to suffer) since the aftermath of September 11 attacks (Beckley, 2012; Cox, 2011; Layne, 2012). Although authoritarianism has often been championed by the fiercest critics of liberal democracy as a potential alternative, the actual number of states under communist regimes suggests that the future does not look so bright for China's soft power ambitions (Cox, 2011). International society in the twenty-first century continues to be dominated by the principles and behaviors which have originated in and been maintained by Western state- and non-state actors (Beckley, 2012; Cox, 2011; Layne, 2012). To gain access to this gated community, prospective members will have to model themselves based on the norms, rules, and practices of the existing residents – mirroring rather than supplanting the Western systems and institutions that constitute contemporary international society (Cox, 2011, 2017). Indeed, Duterte needs to realize that even his Chinese role model Xi has been compelled to restructure China's domestic economy in order to adapt to the prevailing global economic system and therefore has vested interests in the preservation of its principal architects and operations.

To this extent, the Chinese appear to have a more profound discernment of the realities and complexities surrounding international politics than what their Western counterparts (and even its staunchest believers such as Duterte) could admit. Despite their efforts to accumulate more influence and power within a Western designed system, Beijing has remained largely circumspect toward its interactions with Washington. China recognizes the huge catastrophe that it will face should it attempt to balance the US and overhaul the prevailing Western-made structures that have enabled the country's exponential growth over the last forty years (Christensen, 2006; Cox, 2011; Schweller and Pu, 2011). Altering China's relatively pacifist US approach (which enables it to compete peacefully with the world's reigning superpower) will not only be disastrous for its export-based economy but can also trigger the entire Western alliance, along with the other powerful players in the Asia-Pacific, to take a decisive action against the Sino grand strategy (Cox, 2011; Schweller and Pu, 2011; Allison, 2017).

Nevertheless, Duterte's lingering distrust and cynicism toward the West keeps him within China's orbit of influence despite his seemingly warming attitude toward the US since the start of President Donald Trump's tenure at the White House. At a time when the supposed chief architect and defender of the liberal democratic world order is adopting strategies that weaken the very foundations of this arrangement, Duterte sees no reason to continue to adhere to and operate based on these US-defined principles, norms, and rules of engagement. Trump's 'America First' doctrine, which is primarily designed to protect US interests and reverse its decline, helps rationalize the Duterte government's growing alignment with Xi (Magcamit, 2017).

Why should the Philippines continue to give its loyalty to an old ally, if, rather than promoting and defending the values of a Western-configured international system, it is now trying to walk away from its commitments in the hope of 'making America great again'? Trump's so-called 'principled realism' has only reinforced Duterte's views about the prevalence and damaging impact of American hypocrisy (Magcamit, 2017). The US administration's exceptionalist stance on human rights and climate change issues; isolationist approach to free trade and migration problems; unilateralist response against 'rogue' states and sovereign leaders perceived to sponsor terrorism; and a revisionist interpretation of fundamental democratic principles and liberal ideals - highlight the widening cracks within the once cohesive and impenetrable Western realm (Magcamit, 2017). These fractures can cause irreparable damage to the West's influence and control over the management of the world economy, the distribution of global military power, the agenda-setting in various international institutions, and the spread of anti-West soft power, thereby irreversibly diminishing its dominance and status. Hence, instead of crafting a foreign policy that is anchored on some hollow multilateral principles and/or dependent on deteriorating multilateral institutions, Duterte figures that it would make more strategic sense to start pivoting toward a hegemonizing China and away from the collapsing West while there is enough time to maneuver.

Conclusions

Examining the factors and dynamics underpinning the construction and operation of the Duterte doctrine reveals important insights about the critical role of systemic stimuli and domestic intervening variables in the conduct of a small power's foreign policy. Amid the growing perception that the global distribution of power is now slowly titling toward the East, the Duterte doctrine has emphasized four key strategies: (1) nurturing a softer and more positive image for China; (2) mitigating the country's US-dependent strategic culture; (3) mobilizing state-society relations sympathetic to sinicization; and (4) modifying Western-inspired domestic institutions to better adapt to Chinese incentives and pressures. The identification of these 'anti-status quo' elements gives further credence to core neoclassical realist assumptions: (1) that the states' conduct of foreign policies and security strategies are mainly responses to the opportunities and constraints of the prevailing international system; and that (2) these responses are significantly shaped by unit-level factor such as the leaders' images and perceptions, forms of state-society relations, types of strategic culture, and natures of domestic institutions. Together, these systemic incentives and pressures transforming the Asia-Pacific milieu, and the domestic intervening variables shaping the Duterte administration's perceptions of external stimuli and level of state power, have resulted in a doctrine that prioritizes China's wishes and approval while relegating US interests and ascendancy to the sidelines. Indeed, this is a remarkable and daring paradigm shift for any small power wanting to navigate its own vessel.

Does the Duterte doctrine represent a forward thinking strategic outlook and provide the Philippines with an indispensable strategic capital? The most accurate and honest answer that a neoclassical realist analysis can give is maybe yes and maybe not. There are three main reasons for this indeterminacy as can be gleaned from the discussions provided in the paper.

First, the Duterte doctrine may or not have perceived the systemic stimuli correctly. International politics is influenced by power primarily through the perceptions of leaders who are making the decisions on behalf of the states (Wohlforth, 1993). Being the humans that they are, leaders frequently

make mistakes when calculating one's relative power and strength of resolve, determining viable options at their disposal, and evaluating the likely outcomes of their decisions among others (Jervis, 1976; Stoessinger, 2005). Any leader can be prone to miscalculations and misperceptions especially in the absence of complete information. In fact, many wars had been fought in the past because the leaders had either underestimated the cost of war or overestimated their capacity to fight to a glorious ending (Stoessinger, 2005). Moreover, as Robert Jervis (1976) has noted, these errors can also emanate from the inherent biases in the leaders' collections of images and perceptions which constitute cognitive filters used for processing and assessing both available and incoming information. To this extent, the country's foreign policy and strategic behavior may be more closely linked to Duterte's personal character and conduct rather than the objective incentives and threats created by the international system.

Second, the Duterte doctrine may or may not be able to respond rationally to the systemic stimuli. Perceiving the systemic opportunities and constraints correctly does not provide an absolute guarantee that the leaders will always adopt the most rational and optimal choices consistent with the systemic requirements. While all decision-makers are predisposed to make irrational choices, some are more likely to do so due to their cognitive imperfections, distinctive temperaments, historical experiences, or unique peculiarities (Jervis, 1976; Byman and Pollack, 2001). In this sense, critics may view the Duterte doctrine as a reflection of the government's failure to consider all available policy options; or as a sign of the president's general paralysis and lack of interest to take most optimal albeit anti-China measures. Meanwhile, Duterte supporters may choose to see it in light of the structural imperatives created by the international system – the most fitting policy response for confronting external circumstances and conditions. The international system does not always provide clear signals about incentives and threats, and therefore, it is unreasonable to expect the Duterte doctrine (or any doctrine for that matter) to accurately discern both the opportunities and challenges that the global power shift will bring. To begin with, it remains unclear whether the rise of China will indeed result in the absolute redirection of global hard and soft powers from West to East.

Finally, the Duterte doctrine may or may not be able to mobilize the required level of domestic resources to respond effectively to the systemic stimuli. In an ideal world, a country's foreign policy framework is flexible enough to allow state leaders to precisely identify systemic incentives and constraints, and respond decisively to constantly shifting conditions. However, as George Tsebelis (2002) has observed, in the real world, this flexibility is substantially undercut by the domestic constraints to the state's decision-making processes (Tsebelis, 2002). Despite the huge amount of political capital that is currently at the president's disposal, there is no absolute assurance that the implementation of the Duterte doctrine will be immune to domestic resistance coming from various members and shareholders in the community. But even without any powerful opposition, the Duterte administration's access to the country's material, financial, human, and moral resources can only be limited. Consequently, Duterte is forced to negotiate and bargain with different veto players, interest groups, and societal clusters over the promotion and operation of his doctrine's key elements. Overall, these limitations reject the notion that there exists a reliable albeit invisible conveyor belt that automatically connects objective material change to a state's adaptive behavior. As the Duterte Doctrine reveals, this imaginary transmission belt is defective because state leaders can be prone to acquiring flawed and inaccurate perceptions of systemic stimuli; susceptible to making irrational and unsound decisions; and ineffective in consolidating national resources demanded by their policies and strategies.

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