

PERSPECTIVE

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The Philippines' China Policy and the 2022 Elections: Time for a Rethink

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Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr (C, in red), Philippine presidential candidate and son of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, gestures onstage to supporters during a campaign rally in Bocaue town, Bulacan province on 8 February 2022. Photo: TED ALJIBE / AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Foreign policy does not feature prominently in Philippine elections. Instead, its relevance as an election issue depends on how it can be connected with the daily material issues faced by voters.
- There is some credible basis that the 2022 elections will be subject to foreign interference given the intensity of great power competition in the region.
- The 2022 presidential candidates can be expected to raise the country's China policy as a subject for policy debate given the accommodationist stance of the Duterte administration towards China and its residual effects on the country's body politic and strategic posture.
- To put the Philippines' China policy in the consciousness of Filipino voters, campaign discourses will need to focus not only on the territorial disputes in the West Philippine Sea but also on China's impact on issues such as food security and access to natural resources, migration, business regulation, and transnational crime.

INTRODUCTION

After the theatrical series of events surrounding the filing for candidacy and substitutions, the Philippines opened 2022 with the official start of the election period on January 9.¹ Recent election surveys put Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. as the top choice for president at 53%, followed by incumbent Vice President Leni Robredo at 20%, Isko Moreno and Manny Pacquiao at 8%, and Ping Lacson at 6%.² Polls for vice presidential candidates, meanwhile, report a 45% preference for Sara Duterte, 31% for Vicente Sotto, and 12% Kiko Pangilinan.³

Although the campaign period would not start until February 8, some had already crafted and disseminated catchy slogans. Marcos’ *Babangon muli* (to rise again) is the centerpiece of his campaign narrative, which invokes nostalgia for the so-called glory days of his father, former dictator Ferdinand Sr., who ruled the country with an iron hand for over two decades. It is also apropos today as the country grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, *Babangon muli* is a “unifying” brand that implies a reinstatement of the Marcos family in Malacanang.⁴

In opposition to this narrative is Robredo’s *Dapat si Leni* (it should be Leni), a call rooted in her public health and welfare initiatives undertaken during the pandemic despite the measly budget allotted to the Office of the Vice President. In many ways, her slogan resembles former president Benigno Aquino’s *Daang matuwid* (straight path), implying a moral high ground and a single-minded focus to get the job done. Volunteer groups coined the hashtag *Husay at Tibay* (skill and durability) to reflect her ethos as being what the country needs to weather the pandemic and the corruption that is endemic to Philippine politics.

Though foreign policy normally does not feature prominently in Philippine elections, there are good reasons why it should in the coming election – for reasons related to the economic livelihood of the Filipino people, to national pride and sovereignty, and because of geo-strategic implications.

DUTERTE’S FOREIGN POLICY NECESSITATES IT BEING AN ELECTION ISSUE

Foreign policy is generally not an election issue in the Philippines, but there are compelling reasons why the 2022 candidates should articulate a China policy, not least because a president’s preference for a particular country at the expense of other partners has ramifications extending beyond one administration. In the case of Duterte, reinvigorated bilateral relations with China translated into political benefits for him and his political coalition. Amidst mounting criticisms by North American and European countries of his controversial drug war, the Duterte administration needed an alternative political backer. China took on this role in giving support to the war on drugs, a move that the administration welcomed, considering the numerous political enemies it has at home and abroad, not least of which is the International Criminal Court (ICC) that found evidence of crimes against humanity being perpetrated in the country.⁵ Furthermore, closer ties with China extended

to the provision of aid in support of Duterte's flagship Build, Build, Build programme. But while China may have offered US\$24 billion in investment pledges during his visit to Beijing in October 2016, the actual outcomes of these pledges and infrastructure projects exhibited a completely different scenario of support.⁶ This notwithstanding, the president remains relentless in justifying the country's preference for China, a rhetoric that is echoed by others in his administration. A provincial governor recently voiced his opposition to live-fire exercises between the Philippines and the United States as part of the annual Balikatan exercises because "we don't want to anger China."⁷

This symbiotic bilateral relationship likewise allowed China to reap some benefits. In particular, the Philippines' pivot towards Beijing downplayed the arbitration ruling on the South China Sea. The optimism about diplomatic rapprochement at the time was not entirely unfounded, but years on, some now perceive the costs to have been too great, namely marginalising discussions on the South China Sea during the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship in 2017, understating maritime incidents involving Chinese militia and Filipino fishermen, and limiting the patrols and presence of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) in the WPS.

In view of this, foreign policy should matter in the upcoming elections. So far, Marcos has made it clear that his China policy will be a continuation of Duterte's pivot to China, evidenced by his meeting with Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines, Huang Xilian, shortly after announcing his candidacy in October 2021.⁸ Robredo, on the other hand, announced a tougher stance vis-à-vis China by pursuing an "inclusive and independent" foreign policy that puts Philippine security interests first, including following through on the 2016 arbitral ruling.⁹ Moreno and Lacson, meanwhile, are taking the middle ground in agreeing to the possibility of joint oil explorations with China, provided service contracts are awarded by the Philippine government.¹⁰

It may still be early days yet, but China policy should – at the very least – be critical in the upcoming elections. Foreign interference is a serious driver of democratic erosion globally, and elites in polarised countries such as the Philippines utilise external support to gain political advantage, such as access to credit and diplomatic backing.¹¹ Regrettably, this is now easily done since social media platforms allow the proliferation of disinformation campaigns by hyperpartisans.¹² This "infodemic" strikes at the core of well-functioning democracies because it engenders a dilemma: either voters fail to spot fake news, thereby making them more vulnerable to information campaigns and robbing them of informed choices, or governments regulate social media thereby stifling free speech, which is the very essence of a vibrant democracy.¹³ For this very reason, a well-crafted China policy must be grounded in efforts to counter not only misinformation, but also disinformation.¹⁴

A second reason why foreign policy should be taken seriously in the 2022 elections is the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. To date, China continues to occupy features, build artificial islands, and conduct militarised measures that undermine the PCA's 2016 award in favour of the Philippines. Adding salt to the wound is the incessant harassment of Filipinos in numerous maritime incidents. In June 2019, for instance, a Chinese ship hit and sank a Filipino fishing boat that was anchored in Reed Bank near Palawan.¹⁵ The Chinese

vessel immediately left the area without aiding the Filipino fishermen who were at that point floundering in the water. In April 2021, a Filipino journalist and her TV crew were chased by a Chinese Navy ship armed with heavy weapons.¹⁶ In November 2021, the China Coast Guard launched water cannons at a resupply mission for Filipino troops aboard the BRP Sierra Madre in the vicinity of Second Thomas Shoal.¹⁷ Moreover, the introduction of China's Coast Guard Law and the swarm of militia vessels in March 2021 at Whitsun Reef, an area well within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, are significant security issues that are sidestepped by Duterte's China policy.¹⁸ Indeed, China's coercive actions became normalised in 2021 with the region's attention being diverted to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ All these snowballed into a heavily criticised defeatist attitude in confronting China's aggression. Interestingly, the professional bureaucracy held the line and relied on the PCA award to defend Philippine jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea.²⁰

The disconnect between the top officials of government and the bureaucracy spills over to the rest of the Filipino strategic community. Surveys show that despite the Philippine government's turn to China, Filipinos preferred Japan, the United States and Australia as international partners.²¹ This is understandable, considering longstanding public attitudes, incidents of Chinese harassment of Filipino fishermen, and the lack of significant economic dividends from Duterte's pivot to China, not to mention the reality of competing security interests in the South China Sea. A majority of China-funded projects have either yet to start or to be approved. Only three have been reported to be under construction.²² Still, Duterte continues to cite his debt of gratitude to China for its help during the pandemic, including mask and vaccine diplomacy. Moreover, this stance becomes ever more difficult to sustain as the administration gets embroiled in corruption charges regarding the Department of Health's (DOH) mismanagement of pandemic funds and as the country faces a surge of new cases as 2022 opened.²³

Hence, the problem lies in how the Duterte administration made the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea issue a function of Chinese development assistance to finance the president's infrastructure programmes. In practice, this meant that the security sphere became hostage to the potential economic benefits the country could reap from its closer engagement with China. There is certainly a case to be made for radically rethinking this approach to an important neighbour. For this very reason, foreign policy in general, and China policy in particular, deserve attention in the upcoming elections.

THREE WAYS TO PLACE FOREIGN POLICY ON THE ELECTION AGENDA

Historically, foreign policy has not been a major consideration in Philippine elections. Local pollsters such as Social Weather Stations and Pulse Asia continuously record public attention for bread-and-butter issues such as employment and inflation over external defense. Consequently, foreign policy issues can be reframed in three ways in the context of the Philippines.

First, foreign policy has consequences that are deeply felt and reverberate in domestic politics. While on the surface, improved bilateral relations with China seem the epitome of diplomatic success, the socio-economic impact cannot be discounted. As a result of the

Duterte administration's pivot to China, a steady influx of Chinese citizens entered the Philippines to work in Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGO) companies, thereby driving real estate prices up.²⁴ Even though there are economic benefits in this scenario, there are increasing incidences of transnational crime, including sex trafficking and money laundering, the latter made possible by the fact that POGOs are unregulated and hence can easily engage in tax evasion.²⁵ Higher incidences of corruption in the customs and immigration agencies have also been noted that facilitated the entry of POGO workers under various modus operandi.²⁶

Second, the current administration's pivot to China constructed the seemingly inextricable link between the South China Sea issue and Chinese development assistance. Be that as it may, these two spheres can be decoupled by reframing territorial and sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the contested waters as a food security issue. The South China Sea, after all, is a resource-rich area with known reserves of 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil.²⁷ It also contains diverse ecosystems ranging from 3,000 species of fish and 600 species of coral reef, mangrove and seagrass, as well as turtles and seabirds that depend on the islands therein.²⁸ For the Philippines, the rich fishing grounds in the West Philippine Sea contribute up to 27 percent of the country's commercial fisheries production.²⁹

China's activities, however, have compounded the pressures of overfishing, clam extraction, dredging for the construction of artificial reefs and other features, and hydrofracking. Thus, fisher folks' inability to access fishing grounds translates into higher market prices and uncertainty in regular provisions for their families and communities. The destruction of the marine environment as a result of the construction of artificial islands disrupts the natural processes of the ecosystems therein. Furthermore, it robs coastal communities of the opportunity to sustainably rely on and replenish the natural marine resources. Framing the South China Sea issue as a gut issue requires shifting attention to the critical role of the blue economy, which is crucial to maritime safety and security. A vibrant blue economy hinges on sustainable coastal tourism, improved port infrastructure, and managed and regulated fishing. Coastal welfare is an important part of this equation because economic insecurity onshore usually translates to illicit maritime activities. Hence, improved maritime governance in fisheries – to begin with – can prevent coastal populations from turning to criminal networks and activities such as piracy incidents, armed robbery at sea, human smuggling, trafficking, slavery, and illicit trade of drugs and wildlife, among others. Likewise, better maritime governance can prevent people from having to resort to illegal means to exploit maritime resources.

A third way in which foreign policy can feature in the election agenda is to reframe it as a long-term issue that extends to future generations. Foreign policy decisions based on short-term economic benefits are unsustainable because long-term consequences spill over to other spheres. Appeasing China to garner development assistance has ramifications that go beyond the bilateral relationship and towards the broader geopolitical balance of power. Pivoting to China does not only impact the Philippines' alliance with the United States, but also great power competition and the dynamics in the regional strategic environment. These also have long-term effects on the body politic of the Philippines.

Elections are important to the ordinary Filipino. As such, foreign interference in national elections cuts to the core not only of the Philippines' vibrant democracy, but also of the Filipino's deep-seated identity. More importantly, what is worse than a self-serving new president in 2022 is a president that serves the interests of another country instead of the Filipino people.

CONCLUSION

Putting foreign policy on the election agenda should be prioritised in the upcoming presidential bid in the Philippines. A well-crafted China policy, in particular, will serve the national interests of Filipinos, defend the country's sovereign and territorial integrity, and forge a path towards pandemic recovery. Reframing foreign policy as a gut issue and as a matter of national pride not only demonstrates that the political is personal, but also that the personal – the everyday struggles, the seemingly mundane realities of ordinary Filipinos – is political.

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