

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 6 June 2022

Foreign Policy & Disinformation Narratives in the 2022 Philippine Election Campaign

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Supporters of presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr., son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and his running mate Sara Duterte, daughter of President Rodrigo Duterte, display a banner with their portraits during a campaign rally in Paranaque City, suburban Manila, on 7 May 2022, before the 9 May 2022 presidential election. Photo: Ted ALJIBE/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- President Rodrigo Duterte is leaving with a mixed record of foreign policy accomplishments where he attempted to shift the focus of the country's foreign relations away from Western countries despite the lack of solid support from the public and the bureaucracy.
- While domestic issues dominated the 2022 presidential elections, one foreign policy issue that emerged during the campaign was the Russia-Ukraine conflict where the presidential candidates weighed in on the neutrality position adopted by President Rodrigo Duterte.
- The Russia-Ukraine conflict became a flashpoint for campaign disinformation as narratives of Duterte's affinity with Putin as a "strong man" and a decisive leader were heavily promoted.
- Disinformation networks also praised the neutral stance of presidential candidate Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. while it negatively targeted the supposedly pro-Ukraine and pro-Western position of opposition candidate Vice President Leni Robredo.
- Given the 2022 election results, future foreign policy issues in the Philippines will likely be influenced and distorted by disinformation networks and pro-Marcos propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

As Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte finishes his six-year term, he leaves a mixed record of accomplishments in the country's foreign policy. His pursuit of an "independent" foreign policy changed the otherwise consistent and predictable approach to the country's foreign relations. While the republic maintained its sole military alliance with the United States (US), the Duterte administration has explored security cooperation with countries like China, Russia, Israel, Japan and India. The firebrand leader almost abrogated the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US in an effort to bolster the Philippines' standing as a "free agent" to other possible regional security partners. It took the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed assurances from the Biden administration to save the US-Philippines alliance.¹

Of all Duterte's foreign policy "adventures", his apparent pivot to China is considered the major change in the country's international position. The populist president expressed confidence and trust in China despite lingering maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea and his country's victory in the Permanent Court of Arbitration against China.² Yet, after almost six years of propping China to his domestic audience, Duterte was unable to convince the Filipino public to trust China. In a July 2020 survey, Filipinos' trust towards China was at its lowest since 2016, the year that Duterte became president. China's net trust of -37 points is far from how the public positively views the US at +42 net trust rating.³

There is also scant anecdotal evidence that Duterte's foreign policy positions are adopted by the country's defence and security establishment. This section of the Philippine bureaucracy has remained loyal to traditional allies like the US, Japan, and other Western countries, and is not entirely convinced that veering totally away from established operating practices would be in the country's interests. In a 2020 survey of more than 600 members of the Philippine security establishment, particularly security sector officials and civilian bureaucrats, their preferred top three security partners were Japan, US, and Australia. China was the least preferred partner, with Russia not far ahead.⁴

It was expected that Duterte's foreign policy manoeuvres would be a major campaign issue in the 2022 elections. The main question was whether these positions will be maintained by the new presidential administration. Historically, foreign policy issues have never mattered to the Filipino electorate's making of choices,⁵ and that remained true in this electoral cycle. However, the Russia-Ukraine war that started at the beginning of the electoral campaign period in February 2022 made it possible for presidential candidates to express their own stances on this issue. The two major presidential candidates, Bongbong Marcos Jr. and Leni Robredo, expressed opposing positions on this international conflict. While Marcos Jr. agreed with Duterte's position of neutrality, Robredo adopted a more nuanced position that respects multilateralism, democracy, and human rights.⁶

This paper argues that disinformation narratives that were pro-Russian, anti-US, and pro-China played a role in propping up the "strong man" image of Marcos Jr., attacking Robredo as a "puppet" of Western powers, and stoking fears that a pro-Ukraine position by the government would likely prompt China to be more aggressive towards the Philippines.

These disinformation narratives became an important source of campaign capital that benefitted certain candidates while they also distorted and oversimplified complex foreign policy issues and historical facts. As disinformation has most likely played a vital role in the outcomes of the 2022 elections,⁷ it can be expected that these narratives about Philippine foreign policy issues will likely not go away in the coming years.

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT & THE 2022 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

When Russia mobilised its forces to attack Ukraine in February 2022, the initial stance of Duterte was to adopt neutrality,⁸ despite the fact that Russia's invasion was a blatant violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter and the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity which the Philippines has historically defended with vigour and consistency. As the chief architect of foreign policy, Duterte strived to foster partnerships with non-traditional partners such as Russia and the populist leader has not hidden his admiration of Russian President Vladimir Putin. In fact, Duterte visited Putin in Russia twice, in May 2017 and February 2019.⁹ Duterte's neutral stance regarding the conflict was aligned with his desire to deepen relations with Putin's Russia. This policy position was extolled by the Russian ambassador in Manila, stating that this reflected the close personal relationship between the two leaders.¹⁰

Discussions about the conflict were then transposed to the presidential campaigns and it became a hot topic for the major candidates in the 2022 elections. Duterte's neutral stance was adopted by Marcos Jr. who said that "I don't think there is a need to take a stand. We are not involved except for our nationals."¹¹ This was supported by his running mate and the president's daughter Sara Duterte who insisted that her position on the conflict is not even important. On the other hand, opposition presidential candidate and incumbent vice-president Robredo took a different stand by categorically condemning Russia when she said: "I stand in admiration of the Ukrainian people's courage and resilience, and am proud of their efforts to defend freedom and a rights-based order – ideals that the Filipino people share."¹²

As expected, these contradictory positions became the object of attention for the mainstream media and the public. However, it was in the realm of social media that these policy positions became interwoven with disinformation narratives. These pieces of fake news ran contrary to established facts, oversimplified complicated historical positions and prior policies, and exaggerated features of politicians to make them appear clever and qualified as the country's next head of state.

There were three major disinformation narratives that linked the Russia-Ukraine conflict with the 2022 Philippine elections: the pro-Putin-Duterte-Marcos frame; the anti-US-Robredo frame; and the fear of China frame. All of these came from sources that have professed strong support for the Marcos Jr.-Duterte ticket or are loyal supporters of the Duterte administration.¹³

After President Duterte and Marcos Jr. manifested their common neutral stance, social media posts that lauded their position proliferated in the virtual world. In a nutshell, social media influencers and their supporters started massively sharing posts that depicted Putin, Duterte, and Marcos as “strong men” capable of making decisive and swift action when confronted with an existential threat. A critical part of this narrative is that these leaders share the conviction to flex one’s muscles in order to crush one’s enemies.¹⁴ A few fringe academics also provided scholarly scaffolding to this narrative by justifying the position to attack Ukraine as a brilliant move guided by *realpolitik*.¹⁵ This implied that Marcos Jr. is the rightful successor of President Duterte given their common position on the conflict and their ability to forge good relations with strong leaders like Putin. This also added to the notion that because Marcos Jr. is the direct scion of the country’s former dictator and ally of Duterte, he taps into the extant “authoritarian nostalgia” felt by many Filipinos.¹⁶

The pro-Russian sentiments among select Filipino politicians, policymakers, and prominent personalities have been embedded in the Philippine political system for several years. News website *Rappler* has uncovered links between Russia’s disinformation agents, pro-Putin news organisations, with their counterparts in the Philippines. In fact, President Duterte’s visit to Moscow in 2017 included a pledged partnership on “information dissemination” between the communication offices of both governments. It is also noteworthy that works of pro-Russia geopolitical experts such as Adam Garrie were being extensively used by pro-Duterte and pro-Marcos journalists in their writings about Philippine foreign policy issues.¹⁷

The second disinformation narrative painted the US as a weak country and an unreliable military ally and projected Vice-President Robredo as a US lackey. This two-part allegation has deep historical roots in the country given the colonial and neo-colonial experience of the Philippines under the US. And while the US is highly trusted by the Filipino public in general, the bitter feelings of colonial exploitation and neglect in light of China’s increasing regional aggression have some resonance with Filipino elites and the middle class. Social media posts by supporters of Marcos Jr. and Duterte engaged in negative campaigning that depicts the US as an unreliable ally, given its refusal to send troops to Ukraine.

To further galvanise support for the narrative that Washington cannot be trusted, videos of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. criticising the US went viral on social media platforms like Facebook. An example is a video of a press conference where Marcos Sr. stated that the US would not be able to immediately help the Philippines in case it invoked the Mutual Defence Treaty since such an act requires approval by the US Congress. According to *Vera Files*, one of the deputised fact checkers of Facebook in the Philippines, the video posted on Facebook on 28 February received more than 7 million interactions with the late dictator heard saying “What does that mean? That means delay, while we are dying there.” Pro-Marcos social media supporters immediately praised the late dictator for standing up to the US and having the foresight that the superpower is not a dependable ally of the Philippines. Marcos Jr. then is expected to share the political skills of his father in foreign policy.¹⁸

The more concerning part of this narrative is the allegation that Robredo can never be a viable president who can defend the country’s national interests given her proximity to the

US as claimed by pro-government media practitioners.¹⁹ There is no compelling evidence to support this claim. In a perniciously polarised political climate, it is easy to reduce positions to a dichotomy. Since Robredo is the leader of the opposition against Duterte and does not share the president's anti-US bias, she is therefore a possible "puppet" of the West. Wild speculations even included the claim that Robredo will allow US military bases in the country's territory.²⁰ Therefore, this disinformation narrative questions the credibility of Robredo as a possible head of state given her American connections and her lack of nationalist credentials, unlike Duterte and Marcos.

The third disinformation narrative revolved around the implications of the Russia-Ukraine conflict for the Philippines' own security challenges, notably its ongoing territorial and maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea. This narrative tended to justify Duterte's defeatist position that the Philippines cannot push against China since it will not win in a war with China.²¹ This jived well with the current position of the Duterte administration to accommodate China and allow Beijing a free rein in the country's maritime regions. Viral social media posts spread Duterte's own claim that the Philippines must not assert itself against the neighbouring superpower as China might then invade the Philippines, just like what Russia is doing to Ukraine.²² This China threat therefore must be met with pragmatism rather than by upholding the country's strategic interests as provided for by international law and norms. The narrative concluded that only Marcos Jr. has the sobriety to prevent a possible conflict with China, unlike his opponent Robredo, who has vowed to use the Arbitral Award as leverage in dealing with China.

DISINFORMATION AND THE FUTURE OF PHILIPPINE FOREIGN POLICY

As the Philippines increasingly felt the adverse impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, given the presence of overseas Filipino workers in Ukraine and the higher prices for oil and basic goods, President Duterte soon changed his stance. He condemned Russia's alleged violations of human rights in Ukraine, and the Philippines voted against Russia in the UN General Assembly and, surprisingly, the UN Human Rights Council as well.²³ With the government adopting a more robust policy position against Russia, however, the Marcos Jr. campaign – and the massive disinformation network behind him – was not able to capitalise further on the conflict. In fact, Marcos Jr. changed his stance by supporting Ukraine, thereby diluting the anti-Robredo narratives by trolls and other agents of disinformation.²⁴

Foreign policy positions of presidential candidates were not a major determinant of how the Filipinos voted in the 2022 presidential elections. The landslide victory of Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte as president and vice-president respectively, however, opens questions about the future of Philippine foreign policy under their government. As the new chief architect of foreign policy, Marcos Jr. will now have to decide on whether to continue the path of Duterte or recalibrate the country's foreign relations back to its more traditional and predictable mode.

If recent history is a reliable indicator, all previous Philippine presidents except Duterte initially attempted to strike a balance in its foreign policy towards the US and China.²⁵ For example, president Gloria Arroyo maintained equidistance between the two superpowers until she had to withdraw the Philippine contingent from the US-led war in Iraq. After this decision, she initiated closer relationships with Beijing which included an economic partnership with some dubious and anomalous dealings. Duterte's predecessor, president Benigno Simeon Aquino, also initially strove to hedge between the US and China. However, a series of events culminating in the Scarborough Shoal standoff led him to be less cordial to China and at the same time rely more on the US for security through the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).²⁶

The 2022 elections revealed that foreign policy issues can be used to promote electoral campaigns with the aid of massive and systematic disinformation. This paper looked into the various disinformation narratives embedded in the major foreign policy issue confronting the Philippines, namely how to navigate between the lingering and intense US-China rivalry. Rearing its ugly head, disinformation has wantonly oversimplified the otherwise complicated nature of foreign policy, falsely dichotomised positions on international issues, and emphasised posturing and superficial displays as policy competence and political savvy.

This does not bode well for the future of Philippine foreign policy under the incoming Marcos Jr. administration. Rather than deal with tough foreign policy decisions, the new government aided by a robust disinformation infrastructure might merely rely on a performative foreign policy that lacks substance, credibility and political will.

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