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## THE PHILIPPINES' FOREIGN POLICY DIRECTION: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE FIRST YEAR OF PRESIDENT DUTERTE

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### ABSTRACT

President Duterte's election as the 16th president of the Republic of the Philippines has put the country into the international media limelight. President Duterte's use of unconventional language in his public speeches, his infamous drug campaign and his being the second head of the state after President Marcos who tried to infuse the idea of an "independent foreign policy" in the conduct of the country's foreign relations are just some of the reasons for such media attention. Under Duterte's administration, the Philippines opened up and became friendly with China despite the latter's "aggressive militarization" in the South China Sea. Along with China, Duterte has also opened a new vista of military cooperation with Russia. This article examines one-year of President Duterte's foreign policy – vis-à-vis the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, and its traditional ally, the United States. It aims to discuss the direction of Duterte's Foreign Policy in his first year of presidency and its possible implications for the Philippines' relations with ASEAN, and the United States.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, China, Geopolitics, Independent Foreign policy, Philippine Foreign Policy, President Duterte, Southeast Asia.

### INTRODUCTION

Two weeks after Rodrigo Duterte's inauguration as the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the Philippines, the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) announced its decision on the sovereign claim of the Philippines to the West Philippine Sea. On July 12, 2016, ITLOS ruled in favour of the Philippines and rejected China's 'nine-dash line' historical and legal claims over the West Philippine Sea. It was a historic moment for the Philippines, which was vigorously pursued under the Presidency of Benigno S. Aquino III who believed that an international court could settle the rightful claimants on the disputed territories. China, however, has refused to officially recognize the decision of the ITLOS. This brings in a new dimension in the Philippines-China relations under President Duterte's leadership.

The decision to let the international tribunal settle the territorial disputes between China and the Philippines instead of a bilateral mechanism is due to the worry that

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the Philippines is at a disadvantaged position. Some Philippine policy elite thinks that China's preponderance of power may tilt bilateral negotiations to its favour. This is in addition to the "trust deficit" (Sevilla, 2017) over China's future geopolitical intention.

Duterte's approach toward China after the ITLOS decision portends a new but critical development in the Philippine-China relations. His reaching out to China illustrates a "practical" and conciliatory gesture. In his own statement to the United States and the Obama administration's criticisms against his policy on the "war against drugs" and his "anti-imperialist stance." Most importantly, it reflects the importance accorded by his administration on the economic, security and political well-being of the Philippines and the ASEAN. This means that, as the Philippines assumed chairmanship of ASEAN in 2017, Duterte tried his best to look at regional interests along with the Philippines' interests in dealing with China. Some members of ASEAN namely Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia are having a pro-China policy. These countries were known to be ideologically allied with China and their economic structure, as well as foreign investment

policies, is China-friendly. Given this, any decision within ASEAN organization that put China in bad limelight would probably be opposed by these countries, thus, creating a deeper division within the organization. It has to be noted that ASEAN remains to 'highly divided' on how to confront China in relations to its aggressive movement in the South China Sea. Cambodia, for example, has initiated an "intra-ASEAN divides" in the past five years by promoting China's position in ASEAN in exchange for economic gains from Beijing (Kurlantzick, 2018).

The ASEAN prioritizes economic growth and strengthening socio-cultural relations over war, conflict, and security cooperation. Duterte's approach to China is carefully calculated and aimed at providing a win-win environment for the Philippines, the ASEAN countries, and China. He is fully aware that if the Philippines aggressively assert its sovereignty over the disputed territories after the ITLOS ruling is no guarantee that the Chinese will relinquish its claim. In fact, China has simply reasserted its claim over the disputed territories after and in spite of the ITLOS ruling.

The geopolitical attribute of Southeast Asia is important not only for the United States and China but also for the ASEAN. Geopolitically speaking, Southeast Asian region shows not only an impressive economic growth in the last decade but of equal importance, it holds strategic routes such as the Malacca and the South China Sea critical to the stability of global trade. In addition, the region is also endowed with rich marine resources. Thus, the necessity of Duterte's preference for an economic mechanism amidst territorial conflict. This, however, is not a sign that the Philippine is surrendering its sovereign claim over the disputed territories. Rather, it affirms its commitment to a peaceful regional environment where actors in disputes are given the time to evaluate their position and arrive at a decision that is beneficial to all.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution mandates the Philippine President to adhere to the "policy of peace, equality, cooperation, and amity will all nations." The Constitution also categorically bars the Philippines from engaging in wars as a national policy. In spite of these constitutional provisions, Duterte is likely to face domestic criticisms for his 'peaceful' approach towards China. This *act-and-reaction scheme*, however, is but a normal feature of Philippine democracy. Like in any other democracies in the world, some if not all critical national decisions are needed to be properly communicated with the people they governed. Consultations, debates and

correct information dissemination drive about the issue would help governments receive fewer negative feedbacks and strong support from the people since they are aware of the issue. In addition, people are also aware of what and how their government positioned itself vis-à-vis a given issue. Any unfamiliar policy adopted by a government may possibly create a negative reaction from the people as the people themselves will tend to look at this policy as foreign and a 'threat' to their values. Although an *act-and-reaction scheme* is very natural in a democratic environment, it will have more negative in form when a given political decision is unfamiliar to the people. Any non-conventional policy statements delivered by the President, especially in line with the South China Sea or the West Philippine Sea (from the Philippine version) would not escape the scrutiny of the media and an informed Filipino public.

As mentioned earlier, the political and economic elements of the Duterte's new approach is central in extending friendship with China. China's *One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR)* is appealing to both the Philippines and other regional countries. Thus, this paper argues that Duterte's decision to strengthen ties with China does not only redefine the Philippine-US relations, at least within his six-year terms. It also has bearings in the future geopolitical and geo-economic direction of the ASEAN and its engagement with China under the One Belt, One Road Initiative.

#### **DUTERTE'S LEADERSHIP STYLE AND THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Duterte's majority votes over the other presidential contenders suggest one thing—most Filipinos have become tired of traditional political elites. They wanted a new, strong and charismatic personality to steer the country for the next six years. These are the traits that have made Duterte a populist president. His appeal extends from the poor to the middle-class Filipinos who support his programs on poverty, unemployment, corruption and illegal drug problem. His performance and track record as a mayor of Davao City impressed millions of Filipinos, while his rise to power is regarded as unprecedented. He is, after all, the first-ever elected president to hail from Mindanao.

With no experience in the national government prior to becoming the president, Duterte's leadership style is arguably different from a traditional politician and statesman who may be aware of appropriate diplomatic languages as well as the protocol in dealing with foreign

leaders in other countries. He is fond of using unconventional language. He tends to deviate from a prepared speech and simply speaks extemporaneously when giving public speeches. His charismatic and strong but combative persona makes him the subject of daily political discussions in the Philippines. His antagonists consider him a "dictator" (Cayabyab, 2016) a "madman" and a "punisher" (de Castro, 2016). Meanwhile, his supporters elevate him as the country's saviour.

Duterte's campaign to end illegal drug trade and corruption and his controversial statements on foreign relations issues has raised criticisms at home and abroad. Civil society groups, the Catholic Church, local and foreign media outlets have denounced the killings associated with the illegal drug campaign as a human rights violation. Their unrelenting criticism of Duterte's leadership could force the US and the European to rethink their political and foreign aid to the Philippines. Nevertheless, Duterte's rise to power creates a fresh, positive, and potentially fruitful economic and political relations with China and (possibly) Russia in the first year of his administration. There are, however, various considerations that one should look into to appreciate the unpredictable and unconventional shift in Duterte's foreign policy statements.

In some countries, the practice of accommodating ideas from the non-state actors into the decision-making processes is simply a natural by-product of their democratic rights as stipulated in their constitution and national tradition. The idea of wider participation in the decision-making process is, in principle, good for the nation. It provides a consolidating mechanism for sectoral groups whose public debates, filtering and synthesizing ideas and information can help the nation arrive at an acceptable decision.

The process, however, demands tedious and tiring arguments and counter-arguments before they become acceptable to both state and non-state actors. This means decisions might take a long and deliberate process. In some instances, the process would have to undergo testing and evaluation, thus, delaying decisions. In some countries, state actors accommodate public interests despite their limited participation and under the presumption that the state's decision reflects the interests of the people.

This paper, however, argues that the personality, ideology, political parties and interests of elites including civil society and media create certain conditions that may

guide the direction of a country's foreign policy. In some cases, leaders' personal statement manifests their own historical reading and their ideological belief. It also indicates how much-informed leaders are about the intricacies of the given issue to come up with a justifiable and more acceptable decision. This is not to suggest that the Philippines, China, and other ASEAN member states have the same primordial interest. Their foreign policy priority is conditioned by domestic realities as they try to accommodate and adjust themselves into the dynamics of greater regional, and international developments. As argued by Aldren and Amnon Aran:

There are three basic approaches to understanding the impact of domestic factors on a state foreign policy. One approach sees the principal source of domestic influence in the actual structural form (i.e. institutions and regimes) of the state. A second approach sees foreign policymaking as being driven by the nature of the economic system within states. A third approach sees foreign policy as the product of a competitive pluralist environment as expressed by the interplay between interests' group politics and state decision-makers and structures" (Aldren and Aran, 2012).

Certainly, in these three approaches, the Philippines and the rest of the ASEAN countries have shared similarities. These similarities may emanate from the regional common vision to promote economic growth and competitiveness, increase literacy rate, as well as increase socio-economic services. All these similarities are clearly stated in ASEAN three communities namely: political community, economic community and socio-cultural community. However, there are differences among them that make cooperation difficult. These differences may stem from national strategy, methods or approaches as well as an ideological structure that a particular ASEAN member country would like to adopt. The celebrated *Unity in Diversity* within the ASEAN remains an ideal. They have yet to come up with a consolidated pronouncement that signifies their unity as an organization. Their lack of unity is most evident in the case of the South China Sea territorial dispute. For Cambodia, Lao and Myanmar, the economy takes priority in the context of ASEAN's engagement with China. Vietnam and the Philippines emphasize their sovereign rights while trying to balance it with economic interests in dealing with China.

Other ASEAN countries are pragmatic and call for a more cooperative regime in the South China Sea. This situation, however, simply indicates the importance of national interests to the ASEAN members even as new domestic and external environments oblige them to make some adjustments.

The firm stand of former President Aquino over the disputed territories in the South China Sea by submitting the issue to an international tribunal was part of his administration's priorities as a matter of national interest. One may argue that it has lent prestige to the Aquino administration. But one may also say that it was good for the Filipino people. The United States 'pivot to Asia' statement may partly explain the action of the Aquino administration. The US has decided to refrain from being entangled in the Middle East and North Africa. In view of China's economic rise, the US alliance with the Philippines assumes greater significance in preventing a regional 'hegemon' from growing. China views the US regional presence as a hindrance to its future economic and political expansion while the United States sees China's assertive policy in the South China Sea as "disturbing."

The demonization of China by the Western media and officials as a 'bad' hegemon while praising the US for being a 'good balancer' and a champion of human rights and democracy has resulted in China's negative image among its Asian neighbours. Such an image has induced a "trust deficit" (Sevilla, 2017) among these countries despite their cultural and historical umbilical links with China.

Negative perceptions of China are also a result of the West's inability to understand the history of China as well as its motives and aspiration. This negative perception vis-a-vis China is a product of official pronouncement, Western media reporting as well as the literary writing of mainly Western scholars. Using their own values and preferences as a benchmark of reading and interpreting the 'other world'- meaning non-western world-create an exclusivist approach of 'othering others' that do not fit within their preferred agenda. By imposing their standards of measuring a country's behaviour, policies and even culture, the West has failed to appreciate the value of cultural and historical diversities of nations and civilizations.

As the West continues to dominate the realm of representation of values, misunderstanding or in extreme cases, conflict and war may happen. What is needed,

therefore, is a continuing engagement in *ideational negotiation* between scholars and politicians, between government and people and among nations involved. Ideational negotiation, as opposed to practical and material negotiation, requires negotiators to revisit and redefine concepts based on an acceptable term by giving highlights on the historical, cultural and traditional values and meanings of two or more negotiating parties. In this case, negotiating parties include Western countries, China and Asian countries. *Ideational negotiation*, however, can only take place when all parties are willing to open up channels of communications to accommodate bargaining of interests and exchange of ideas without privileging or conditioning one value over another.

The Duterte Presidency signals a '*sentimental*' shift in the country's foreign policy. It does not suggest that any country shall surrender an inch of its territory to another country, but it simply calls for an opening up the channel of communication to possible build up commitment and trust. His affiliation with the political left in the past as well as being a mayor of Davao City in Mindanao Island, Duterte could have a lot to say about American imperialism. In contrast to his pro-American predecessor, Duterte has shown himself a "powerful politician" who can lead the Philippines towards a non-conventional direction. He can be considered to a leader who matters and "who leads matters" (Hermann, Preston, Korany and Shaw, 2001). His leadership, however, depends on the strength of the country's institutions or his charismatic appeal to the people. Moreover, it does not necessarily follow that his public pronouncements are acceptable by all Filipinos. In a pluralistic society, the tendency to monopolize decision without public hearings and consultations may lead to confusion or public dissatisfaction. Local and international media can exploit and sensationalize such public sentiment. To minimize this, the public must be informed of the local context or cultural nuances of the leader's statements. Studying the political psychology of leaders is crucial in understanding their statements and decisions (Levy, 2013). Their domestic and foreign policies are greatly influenced by their psychological make-up.

It is unwise for a leader to make a totalizing influence in policymaking. In a democratic society, such behaviour can incite reactionary actions or be taken as undermining personal security, values and traditions. Filipinos, for instance, would associate themselves with American values and interests rather than the Chinese or even

Russian values. The continued popularity of Duterte rests on assuring the nation that friendship with China brings not only economic incentives, but also safeguards the country's territorial integrity. This requires effective communication with the general public who will expect that his trip to China would yield positive results for the country's poverty and unemployment problem. They will also expect him to defend and protect the country's territorial integrity (National Security Policy of the Philippines, 2011-2016) in the strongest possible terms. The ability to articulate policies with other nations and to communicate clearly with the people are two paramount considerations of the country's leadership. Failure to do so generates a negative public opinion. Public opinion also shapes the government's policies. Whether emanating from inside or outside the country, public opinion helps define a country's domestic and foreign policy direction.

The ability of a country to develop and expand externally in various areas are based not only on what leaders have defined as national interests. It is equally important to see how the external environment suits that expansion. This requires an assessment of the internal and external environment by the decision-makers to ensure that the move to expand fits the total attribute of the nation's interests. In addition, decision-makers may have difficulty filtering multiple information. This affects not only decisions but also choosing the best ones. In some cases, the soundness and acceptability of the decision depend on the reaction of the intelligentsia or the openness of the public to accept a decision (no matter how unconventional).

Duterte's announcement to distance from a traditional ally, the United States, and to open up a fresh milestone with China may sound new to some Filipinos. A former senator, Manny Villar, described this action of the President as "unorthodox" because many of the country's leaders and intellectuals have not been uttering this kind of statement for decades now (Villar, 2017). Nevertheless, Duterte's 'unorthodox' foreign policy statements have generated public criticisms. This suggests how Filipinos still identify themselves with American values.

The Filipinos have always been branded as the "little brown Americans" (Yasay, 2016) in Asia and the Pacific. Filipino politicians, civil society groups, including leftists have been calling for independent foreign policy since the Philippines gained its independence from the US.

Likewise, the 1987 Philippine Constitution states that "the State shall pursue an independent foreign policy. In its relations with other states, the paramount considerations shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interests, and the right to self-determination" (Philippine Constitution, 1987).

Even after independence, however, the Philippines remains attached to the American's way of life. It aligns with the US on issues of security and defence. The foreign policy direction of the country forms part of the US global strategic vision and security network in the Asia Pacific. During the Cold War, the Philippines served as an important ally of the United States in the region. The U.S. had maintained military bases in the country until 1991 and it has Military Defense Treaty with the Philippines signed on August 30, 1951. These agreements were originally aimed at aiding the United States 'global strategic fight against communism'.

The Philippine state has always regarded the presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region as "a positive stabilizing force" given the growing complexity of security challenges in the region (Philippine National Security Policy, 2011-2016). The 1951 RP-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) is the affirmation of this security and defence relations with the United States.

Relations with the US have been a source of pride for the Philippines. But it has also put the country in an *obliged dependency* with the US for decades now. Obliged dependency is an idea in which an independent country like the Philippines cannot exercise an independent decision natural to a sovereign state due to mental and psychological conditioning that it is only the United States who can help the Philippines in times of hostility. Such condition is supported with military aid as well as bilateral agreements entered by both countries. In the process, the Philippines have been dragged by the US into its global and regional security adventurism. Nevertheless, the Philippines remains the closest ally of the US in the Asia Pacific. Duterte, therefore, could not simply dismiss the US in favour of China if he wanted to diversify the country's foreign policy options. Diversifying markets and opening up political and security cooperation with non-traditional allied countries like China and Russia would contribute to a robust Philippine foreign relation. These two countries could set aside problematic political and security issues and focus more on trade and socio-cultural concerns as areas of cooperation.

Thus, Duterte's rhetorical call for an independent foreign policy does not mean an absolute distancing from the United States. Nor does it mean an absolute exclusionary decision without consulting other countries. It is fundamentally an exercise of sovereignty. Duterte's independent foreign policy statement, however, has been criticized. The former Secretary of Department of Foreign Affairs, Albert del Rosario, found it "very difficult to comprehend "for it seemed to favour China's stance toward the South China Sea at the expense of the Philippines right over it. Del Rosario also pointed out it was casting out the US as the country's "long-time ally" (De Callar, 2016). He stressed that a "principled and independent foreign policy is not about appearing to be driven by a possible bias or when it is advanced as a 'zero-sum game' so that a close alliance or valued partners and friends are suddenly cast aside to favour another state" (De Callar, 2016). This situation, therefore, is not only an 'unnecessary national tragedy' but also "unwise and incomprehensible" (Parameswaran, 2017).

In spite of the economic promise from the possible flow of Chinese investment and aid to the Philippines, including a potential market for goods such as bananas, a significant proportion of Filipinos do not trust China. Based on a 2017 SWS survey, 55 percent said they had little trust while 22 percent said they trusted China (Manhit, 2017). Pulse Asia generated a result confirming the high level of distrust of China (58 percent) and Russia (61 percent) among Filipinos (Manhit, 2017).

These survey results indicate that the Duterte administration would have to work harder to change the public perception of China. It would have to consider the media as playing a significant role to realize this. Public opinion, however, may change depending on the emergence of favourable variables that may help minimize the negative perception of China. Julia Coym notes how such declaration of Duterte was treated as "a sensational shift in Asian geopolitics" due to 'media's overstating' it. Further, it became 'unpopular' because of remittances from Filipinos working in the US, which "add around \$10 billion to the Philippine economy every year" (Coym, 2016).

Some Filipino analysts, however, welcome such pronouncement as it offers positive gains for the Philippines. Richard Heydarian, for instance, observes that Duterte's proposal of the "marine sanctuary" in the Scarborough Shoal is a "good step in the right direction." He adds, "It is good to set aside the issue of sovereignty

for the meantime and focus on areas of common interests." A marine sanctuary venture provides a means for "both sides to rebuild confidence and trust" that have eroded in the past years (ABS-CBN News, 2017).

Others, however, are more cautious in drawing scenarios following Duterte's statement. One must regard his declaration as a personal sentiment, which was spurred by the Obama administration's sustained criticism of Duterte's anti-drug policy. In defence, Duterte cited historical instances where Americans committed crimes against the Filipinos. Meanwhile, his supporters explained it as a way to diversify and 'expand the Philippines' pool of strategic and economic partners to minimize over-dependence on the United States' (Rabena, 2016). It could also be Duterte's way of avoiding an early confrontation with China, especially after the ITLOS decision.

Given China's "unwavering" claims of the South China Sea, Duterte has recognized that the Philippines does not stand a chance with the Chinese army. He has to strategically select a language that may give more space for consultation and dialogue even in an instance where China continues to roam over the disputed islands in the South China Sea after the ITLOS decision. In other words, Duterte has to wait for the proper timing to discuss the sovereignty issue with China. The proper timing could be the essence of Duterte's decision. This means the Duterte administration has to plan its shape and other details at the shortest possible time.

#### **CHINA, ASEAN AND DUTERTE'S PHILIPPINES**

Foreign and domestic decisions may change because the leadership and the people feel that it is necessary, especially in changing national and international contexts. An international event can direct national decisions toward a changed foreign policy direction. This could lead an independent nation to veer toward new or non-traditional routes as socio-economic forces gradually exert pressure. This is relevant to both China and the Philippines; though they have a different political system, they share the same need to cope with new economic, political and security realities within and without their territory.

China, for example, since 1978 and during its opening to the international community, has gone into several transformational phases. Liu Yongtao, in his study "Security Theorizing in China 2012" argues that such changes are apparent not just in the transformation of social values but also in economic and policy realms.

These changes also made demands on a new language and “re-thinking” of global changes. In the field of security, Yongtao notes the three phases in China’s security change. Firstly, from 1971 to 1991, China shifted from “anti-imperialism and anti-western” position to “peace and development,” which categorically focused on economic productivity. Secondly, from 1992-2001, concepts like “mutual trust, mutual benefit and equality, and cooperation” superseded the notion of unilateral security arrangement (Yongtao, 2012). And thirdly, from 2001 to the present, China started dreaming of a “harmonious world” based on “equality, common development, democratization...” (Yongtao, 2012).

Yongtao adds that even at the policy level, there have been observable shifts as “reflected in the adaptation of a strategy of ‘peaceful development’ to further China’s integration into the international society in positive ways. These include multilateral and constructive cooperation in resolving disputes and conflicts with other countries” (Yongtao, 2012). Thus, China positively warmed up to Duterte’s move to extend friendship. As the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying said in a press briefing, “China welcomes and appreciates the remarks by President Duterte, whose policy on the South China Sea arbitration meets the fundamental interests of the two countries and two peoples and exemplifies the increasingly deepened mutual trust and amicable relations between the two” (Viray, 2016).

If the observations of the scholar Yangtao on China were true, then there is no need for the ASEAN and the Philippines to worry about China’s rising power. They should welcome China’s OBOR as it would bring economic benefits and ‘peaceful development’ to all of them and not just to China. But despite these positive assumptions, why do the ASEAN countries continue to be wary of China’s real intention? Why do they resist China’s policy on communal development and “win-win” approach?

One striking answer to these questions is that China’s strategic economic initiative through OBOR is not well-communicated to the Southeast Asian region as well its neighbouring Japan and South Korea. Within and outside China’s neighbouring countries, talks on reviving the old silk route were not clearly understood as only a few forums were held to present it. Another possible explanation is the attempt of many regional countries to adjust to a new economic reality with China. Now the second largest economy second to the US, China has to contend with the fact that many regional countries have a

common alliance with the US. This may have contributed to a feeling of hesitation to engage with China on the part of the ASEAN. China’s consistent claim over disputed island territories in the South China Sea, which are also claimed by other Southeast Asian countries, may have intensified this feeling.

The truth of the matter, however, is that not all ASEAN member countries share the same feeling toward China. Some of them, due to territorial issues, are suspicious of China’s intention under the OBOR initiative. Those with no territorial disputes consider China as crucial to their economic growth and development.

What is common among the ASEAN countries is that they are acting in the name of what they defined as their national interests, which take priority over regional groupings like the ASEAN. Given China’s rise and expanding economic activities in the maritime route of Southeast Asia, ASEAN members are experiencing some challenges in fostering regional unity. For one, they have not yet arrived at a unified decision concerning the South China Sea. This reflects the national priorities of every ASEAN country over regional interests or China’s economic offerings.

Duterte’s new and unpopular “strategic selection” (Weigand, 2016) of partners in the region, as opposed to the traditional Philippine-US alliance, could create a new and conducive environment for China. It would reinforce China’s OBOR initiative in the region and might contribute to its success among ASEAN countries. Despite the Philippines being a US traditional ally and notwithstanding the Philippine case against China before the ITLOS, Duterte’s strategic pivot to China can enable other ASEAN member states to conduct business with China with less hesitation since the environment has become convivial and conducive to all.

## CONCLUSION

The election of Duterte as the President of the Republic of the Philippines has brought new changes in the way the Philippines conducts its foreign policy, especially to non-traditional allied countries such as China and Russia. Whether his statement on exercising a foreign policy independent of the US can be sustained is too early to know.

But what is strategic to consider is Duterte’s move to extend a friendly hand to China despite the ITLOS ruling. Such a decision might be unpopular from a domestic and international perspective. Thus, the Duterte administration must face the challenge of shifting public

opinion by articulating its reasoning persuasively and convincingly. This is quite a big task, which Duterte should prioritize to get citizens' support. He could start by emphasizing that a closer tie with a nontraditional ally would bring great economic and political advantages to the Philippines. He could also cite China's investments in the Philippines following his official visit to China.

Admittedly, critical issues such as the future of the Philippine-claimed islands and the Philippine-US military and security alliance remain unaddressed as of this time. As mentioned earlier, these could be addressed separately from economic talks.

Given Duterte's positive diplomacy with China, ASEAN countries may no longer hesitate to engage with China. They may take it as part of their national interests given the Philippines' bold initiative to extend a friendly hand despite international pressure and demonization of China. Duterte's move could signal new and more robust ASEAN-China relations.

In all honestly, Duterte's foreign policy direction is still not clear at this point. But there is no doubt a friendship with China would bring positive gains for both countries. It may, however, pose some constraints on the Philippines-US relations. But such is the uncertainty involved when the balance of power shifts. It can lead to a formation of new alliances or even a reassertion of one's sovereign right to determine its own independent foreign policy.

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