

Consistency amid Seeming Shifts: Philippine Foreign Policy between the United States and China

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The Philippines' foreign policy is anchored on three pillars: the protection of territorial integrity and sovereignty; economic development; and the protection of overseas Filipinos. Since these tenets were first enunciated by the Ramos administration (1992–98), they have remained constant despite perceptions that subsequent presidents have gravitated towards a closer partnership with the United States or China. Alternatively, it has been said that Manila partners with a particular foreign power to advance a particular pillar, thus creating a de facto division of roles: the United States is an ally that protects the Philippines' territorial integrity and sovereignty, while China is a partner that advances economic development. However, the notion of a division of responsibilities is somewhat superficial. In reality, the Philippines' relations with both the United States and China contribute to all three pillars.

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As in any country, foreign policy in the Philippines is primarily formulated by state bodies, with powers notionally shared between

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the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. As advised by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the president is directly responsible for foreign policy and has the authority to sign treaties and other international agreements. However, such agreements must be approved by a two-thirds majority vote in the Senate, the upper House of Congress, while the judiciary can also review foreign policy matters.

This system may sound commonplace, with the customary checks and balances that one would find in most presidential democracies. However, the Philippines is somewhat exceptional because the president (or *pangulo* in the Filipino language) has oversized influence over foreign policy. In 1999, the academic Remigio E. Appalo dubbed this the “Pangulo Regime”.¹ According to Appalo, its defining characteristic is that it “operates on the principles of the supremacy of the executive”.² Interestingly, this is enshrined in Philippine jurisprudence. According to a 2005 ruling by the Supreme Court, in the Philippines’ system of government,

... the President, being the head of state, is regarded as the sole organ and authority in external relations and is the country’s sole representative with foreign nations. As the chief architect of foreign policy, the President acts as the country’s mouthpiece with respect to international affairs. Hence, the President is vested with the authority to deal with foreign states and governments, extend or withhold recognition, maintain diplomatic relations, enter into treaties, and otherwise transact the business of foreign relations. In the realm of treaty-making, the President has the sole authority to negotiate with other states.³

The personality-orientedness of Philippine political culture further reinforces the influence of the president. According to Carl Lande’s seminal work from 1965, in contrast to the United States’ presidential system, in which political parties are the dominant means by which politicians acquire political power, it is the opposite in the Philippines: Filipino politicians wield tremendous political power *vis-à-vis* political parties.⁴ As the saying goes, political parties come and go, but the politicians stay. Therefore, the political preferences of the president have a significant bearing on foreign policy, which explains why Manila’s external relations are perceived as significantly shifting under different administrations. According to the popular narrative, President Benigno Aquino III (2010–16) was close to the United States. For instance, his administration signed the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allowed more US

troops to be rotationally deployed at Philippine military bases. However, President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22) swung Manila's foreign policy away from the United States and much closer to China. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (2022–present) has oscillated the Philippines back towards the United States.

This article proceeds as follows. It begins with a section exploring how successive presidents have interpreted the Philippines' constitutional commitment to an "independent foreign policy" and the "three pillars" of foreign policy. It then investigates, in sequential sections, each of those pillars—the preservation and enhancement of national security, the promotion and attainment of economic security and the protection of the rights and the promotion of the welfare and interest of all Filipinos overseas—and how they relate to domestic politics. It ends with a brief conclusion.

Foreign Policy Orientations

The Philippine Constitution explicitly states that the country "shall pursue an independent foreign policy".⁵ However, an "independent foreign policy" only really became a household term in the Philippines during the Duterte presidency because of accusations that he was too pro-China at the expense of the United States, a treaty ally. In response, Duterte stated that he was improving relations with China *in order to* pursue an "independent foreign policy".⁶ According to Prashanth Parameswaran,

While there have been various explanations offered on what precisely this slogan means in the Duterte administration, an independent foreign policy is most often expressed as one based on cultivating a diversified set of relationships solely based on Philippine national interests, designed to maximize the country's autonomy, security, and prosperity.⁷

A similar permutation of an "independent foreign policy" was enunciated during the Aquino III administration. According to then Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario, that administration sought "a principled and independent" foreign policy.⁸ This meant that "we refuse to be bullied by China, and we refuse to be subservient to the Americans".⁹ Likewise, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has also sought to define what an independent foreign policy means. According to him, it is "always looking for ways to collaborate and cooperate with the end goal of mutually beneficial outcomes and working to develop consensus in case of differences".¹⁰

Although presidents have an oversized role over foreign policy in the Philippines, they must balance their desires with the opinions of domestic institutions. For instance, the Department of National Defence plays a vital role in matters impacting the country's defence and territorial integrity, often leading to a complex interplay between the president and the defence apparatus. Although the Duterte administration seemingly sought to move Manila closer to China—even announcing the possible termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that allows US troops access to Philippine military bases—ties between the defence departments of the Philippines and the United States remained warm throughout the Duterte years. For instance, in April 2023, the Marcos Jr. administration granted US troops access to four additional military bases on top of the five listed under the EDCA. However, talks over expanding the number of bases could not have commenced when the Marcos Jr. administration entered office in mid-2022. Indeed, such discussions would have taken months, even years, to negotiate—it took two years for negotiators to agree on the original EDCA text, for instance. Therefore, it could be surmised that negotiations about the expanded EDCA started between the two countries' defence institutions during the tail end of the Duterte administration.

The Senate also plays a key role in foreign policy, chiefly to constrain the president. In 1991, for instance, it refused to pass a proposed extension to the 1947 Philippine-US Military Bases Agreement, the original document that allowed the United States to maintain military bases in the country after independence. Because the Senate refused to continue this policy, the US military was temporarily forced to leave the Philippine bases that it had previously rented since the 1987 Constitution states that “foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred by the Senate”.¹¹ Large-scale combined military exercises with the United States could also not be undertaken without such a treaty. Eventually, the Senate accepted an alternative agreement (the VFA) in 1998, paving the way for resuming large-scale military exercises with the United States.

To put the matter simply, to understand the Philippines' foreign policy at any given time, one must understand the interplay of three variables in domestic politics: the president; the Philippines' personality-oriented political culture; and the dynamics between various government agencies.

Given a choice between the United States and China, Filipinos view the United States more positively. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Institute in 2017, 78 per cent of Filipinos held positive views of the United States, down from 92 per cent two years earlier.¹² A 2019 survey by Pew, conducted three years into the Duterte presidency, which was perceived as friendly to China, found that 54 per cent of Filipinos had unfavourable views of China, compared to 42 per cent who saw it favourably.¹³ A 2022 survey by Pulse Asia, a local polling firm in the Philippines, found that Filipinos trusted the United States more than any other country, and trusted China the least (alongside Russia).¹⁴ However, the Philippines' foreign policy establishment must make more difficult choices between an ally thousands of kilometres away (the United States) and a close neighbour (China). The United States, a treaty ally, is generally perceived as the security guarantor of the Philippines' territorial integrity, while China has become a significant trading partner since the 1990s and is the main partner for economic development.

Because this article explores how these domestic imperatives have shaped successive presidents' engagement with both superpowers in the contemporary era—defined in this article as beginning with the Ramos administration, which entered office in 1992 after the first general elections held under the 1987 Constitution—one should start by referencing the Constitution. According to Article II Section 2, “The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy, adopts the generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law of the land and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, and justice.” Unless the Constitution is amended, this will remain the foundation of the Philippines' foreign policy. However, beyond this constitutional provision, the Ramos administration crafted three “pillars” of Philippine foreign policy: protection of territorial integrity and sovereignty; economic development; and protection of overseas Filipinos.¹⁵ In 2011, during the Aquino III administration, then Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo stated, “Through the years, the [Department of Foreign Affairs] has been guided by the Three Pillars of Philippine Foreign Policy.”¹⁶ The succeeding Duterte administration maintained accordance with these pillars,¹⁷ and they remain the reference points for foreign engagement today.¹⁸

Pillar One: Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty

It is important to contextualize these three pillars, starting with territorial integrity and sovereignty. According to Alberto Romulo, a former foreign minister, foreign policy and diplomacy “will remain the country’s first line of defence in ensuring the country’s national security through forward policies of good neighbourliness, regional solidarity and community-building, international dialogue and cooperation and reliable partnership with other nations”.¹⁹ While territorial integrity and sovereignty are the primordial concerns of all states, in the Philippines, they are specifically impinged on by developments in the South China Sea—where Manila and Beijing claim possession of disputed territories—and by two internal insurgencies—Muslim secessionism in the Southern Philippines and the communist insurgency that has been fought by the Communist Party of the Philippines, and its armed wing the New People’s Army, since 1969, making it one of the longest-running insurgencies in Asia.

Strategic considerations over territorial integrity and sovereignty are primary drivers for perceived shifts in foreign policy. For example, the Aquino III administration was initially considered relatively neutral between the United States and China. In fact, Aquino III paid a state visit to China in 2011, a year after he assumed office, where he received a commitment from Beijing that it would provide US\$13 billion worth of aid and investment.²⁰ However, the following year saw a tense standoff between China and the Philippines after a Philippine Navy ship—previously a Coast Guard cutter provided by the United States—accosted Chinese fishermen near Scarborough Shoal. This incident induced closer cooperation between the Aquino III administration and the United States. While this standoff with China was not the sole reason why Manila signed the EDCA with the United States in 2014, it could be argued that the Philippine government had a growing sense of insecurity because of the developments in the South China Sea.²¹

As well as signing the EDCA in 2014, the Philippines also filed a case at the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea about its maritime entitlements under the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which ruled mainly in the Philippines’ favour. At the same time, Beijing started constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea. Consequently, the Aquino III administration, which had started with hopes of improving relations with China, moved much closer to Washington and further away from Beijing,

an orientation that would be reversed by the succeeding Duterte administration.

Duterte's so-called pivot from the United States was motivated by various factors, including the president's background. According to Bruno Hendler, Duterte "grew up in a family of politicians on the island of Mindanao, lived with the violence of the guerrilla movements and witnessed the rough activities of American military forces in the region. He has used his resentment as a political tool, constantly referring to the abuses committed by the USA during the colonial period (1898–1946)."²² The United States, particularly then President Barack Obama, was also critical of Duterte's signature policy, his "war on drugs", which Washington alleged involved the use of extrajudicial murder and resulted in vast human rights abuses. In September 2016, Duterte cursed Obama as a "son of a whore" and warned him not to raise human rights concerns again.²³ Obama subsequently cancelled a meeting with Duterte. According to David Timberman, Philippine-US bilateral relations "went into a downward spiral".²⁴ Within weeks, the US State Department moved US\$4.5 billion in aid initially earmarked for Philippine law enforcement agencies towards maritime security efforts. In November 2016, the State Department suspended the sale of 26,000 military assault rifles to the Philippines' national police force. In response, Duterte suggested suspending the annual Balikatan Philippine-US military exercises that were set to take place in 2017 and even instructed the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Teodoro Locsin Jr., to notify Washington of Manila's intention to abrogate the VFA, with a formal notice made in February 2020. However, Duterte's administration ended up extending the VFA until December 2021, and it was still in force when Duterte left office in mid-2022.²⁵

According to Hendler, Duterte used anti-US tirades as a political tool.²⁶ He presented himself as a no-nonsense strongman who would not be made to kowtow to the Americans, which resonated well with the Philippine electorate. Indeed, Duterte's base of political power was not with the Philippine elites, who would prefer closer ties to the United States, but with the so-called masses. Except for Ramos, who came from the military, Philippine presidents have tended to be associated with political elites (or "oligarchs"), who generally have close personal ties with Western countries. However, Duterte projected himself as someone who did not come from the landed aristocracy or the economic elite and as a politician who wanted to dismantle the so-called oligarchy. To a certain extent, this gave him

some leeway (rare for a Philippine president) to criticize the United States and European countries. In 2017, for example, he threatened to expel 24 ambassadors of European Union (EU) states because of the vocal criticism from Brussels of alleged human rights violations committed during his war on drugs.²⁷ Duterte considered this to be interference in the Philippines' internal affairs and accused the EU of trying to have the Philippines expelled from the United Nations. No Philippine president since the end of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 dared to take as strong a stance against Western countries as Duterte.

However, even though Duterte moved the Philippines further from the United States and closer to China, as explored in more detail later, he stressed that this did not mean foregoing the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea. He repeatedly said that "he would eventually raise the arbitration ruling with [Chinese President] Xi Jinping, but needed first to strengthen relations" between the Philippines and China.²⁸ Duterte also claimed that forging closer ties with China ensured the integrity of the Philippine territory. According to him, Manila could not afford a war with Beijing as the "Philippines cannot win a battle against China" and that Filipino soldiers should not be made to "fight a war they would lose".²⁹ Duterte was particularly sensitive to domestic criticism about this matter. In late 2021, a few months before the end of his presidency, he was criticized for failing to fulfil his (jocular) promise to ride a jet ski to Scarborough Shoal to assert Philippine sovereignty, as he had vowed to do during a presidential debate in 2016.³⁰ He eventually admitted that this was just a campaign stunt.³¹ However, criticism of him came amid increasing domestic pressure on him to take a more rigid stance over the South China Sea disputes.³² Attempting to appease his domestic audience, Duterte said that he would not withdraw navy and coastguard boats that were patrolling the South China Sea and insisted that the Philippines' sovereignty over the waters is not negotiable.³³

Philippine territorial integrity, sometimes equated with the issue of the South China Sea, evokes strong nationalistic emotions among Filipinos, so much so that political actors have to pay particular attention to this matter, specifically during elections. According to public surveys conducted by reputable pollsters, such as Social Weather Stations (SWS) and Pulse Asia, 70 to 80 per cent of Filipinos want the government to assert the Philippines' rights to territory in the South China Sea. Filipinos' sensitivity to the South

China Sea issue helps explain their reservations about China even as an economic partner. Polls conducted by foreign entities, such as the Pew Research Centre, find that Filipinos still favour the United States over China, although the gap was narrowing.³⁴ Notwithstanding Duterte's popularity with the electorate—he maintained very high approval ratings until his last day in office—his endorsement of Chinese economic projects “did not necessarily translate” to acceptance of China by the general public.³⁵

Since Duterte left office, relations with the United States have shifted in the opposite direction under the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. One of the earliest indications came in August 2022, when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, while on a visit to Manila, stated that “any armed attack on Philippine forces, ships or aircraft would invoke US mutual defence commitment”.³⁶ This was interpreted as a direct assurance from the United States—the sort that Manila had been trying to illicit from Washington for years—that it would defend the Philippines in the event of an attack, as is expected of a treaty ally. Yet, there have long been concerns about the United States' commitment and the Philippines' ability to defend itself alone. While the Philippines did embark on a 15-year modernization programme for its military—starting in 1995 with the AFP Modernization Act and extended in 2012 through the Republic Act 10349—it remains a work in progress. In February 2023, during US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin's visit to Manila, Philippine and US defence officials announced four additional EDCA sites beyond the five existing sites.³⁷ However, a few days after the announcement, a Chinese coastguard vessel aimed a military-grade laser at the Philippines' coastguard—which reportedly resulted in some crew members experiencing temporary blindness—near Second Thomas Shoal, where a Philippine Navy ship had been deliberately run aground in 1999 as a means to assert sovereignty over the atoll.³⁸

April 2023 was another critical juncture for the renewal of bilateral ties between the Philippines and the United States. As well as the annual Exercise Balikatan combined military exercises, which involved 17,000 troops from both countries, the Philippines and the United States held their third Two-Plus-Two Ministerial Consultations, during which both countries' defence and foreign affairs secretaries agreed to modernize alliance cooperation, deepen interoperability and accelerate capability development.³⁹ These Two-Plus-Two Consultations were created under the Aquino III

administration, but none took place during the Duterte presidency. In May 2023, when Marcos Jr. visited the United States, Manila and Washington issued new Bilateral Defence Guidelines to “update the alliance without going through the tedious process of amending ... the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT)”.⁴⁰ With these guidelines, the United States took on greater involvement in the Philippine military’s modernization since they stipulate that the two allies will “coordinate closely on the Philippines’ defence budget planning, including through the development of a Security Sector Assistance Roadmap to identify priority defence platforms and force packages over the next five years”.⁴¹ According to the guidelines, both sides will also

... prioritize the procurement of interoperable defence platforms in line with the MAA [Military Assistance Agreement] and sourced from various U.S. programs, including but not limited to Foreign Military Financing, Foreign Military Sales, and Excess Defence Articles in addition to the Philippines’ national defence procurement and funding initiatives.⁴²

Both countries are expected to work on dozens of projects in 2024, including upgrading several facilities belonging to the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Manila has proposed that they cooperate to repair the airstrip of a naval base on the country’s northernmost tip, while the Marcos Jr. administration is also considering building a fuel storage facility and a command centre at one of the four new EDCA sites.⁴³

Thus, as commonly understood, the United States is helping the Philippines develop its defence capabilities and would assist the Philippines in a conflict. This has driven Filipino political elites to pursue closer ties with the United States. In doing so, to a certain extent, ties with Washington have become a source of legitimacy for most Philippine political actors because US security guarantees are seen as preserving the country’s national integrity and sovereignty. One exception was Duterte, who was so popular among Filipinos that he had some leeway to lambast the United States. That said, there are still concerns within the Philippines about whether a close security partnership with the United States preserves national sovereignty and integrity. According to some observers, Taiwan would be the likely trigger of the US-China conflict in the region.⁴⁴ Instability across the Taiwan Straits would have negative repercussions not only for regional peace and stability but also for the economic prospects in the region. There are also concerns that

other countries will be drawn into the conflict, triggering a regional conflagration. Because of this, some politicians in Manila oppose closer Philippine-US ties because, they say, it will draw the Philippines into a conflict with China.⁴⁵ According to this view, because the Philippines and the United States are treaty allies, Manila would automatically have to come to the assistance of Washington should an armed conflict with China occur, such as over Taiwan. In fact, some commentators have asserted that the United States' renewed interest in the Philippines is more related to its strategic position over Taiwan rather than for the benefit of the Philippines *vis-à-vis* its dispute with China over the South China Sea.⁴⁶ Indeed, three of the four new bases the Marcos Jr. administration has given US troops access to are located in Luzon, the northernmost island of the Philippines, near Taiwan. While this argument may have some merits, the Philippine-US Mutual Defence Treaty of 1951, which outlines the obligations of each ally, remains subject to constitutional processes. Indeed, before the Philippines could assist the United States in the event of a regional conflict, there would need to be a declaration of war by the Philippine Congress—the body mandated to do so by the Philippine Constitution—not by the president.⁴⁷

Pillar Two: Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy uses government resources to “promote the growth of a country’s economy by increasing trade, promoting investments, collaboration bilateral and multilateral trade agreements”.⁴⁸ Governing a developing country emerging from the economic difficulties of the 1980s, the Ramos administration embarked on development diplomacy. According to Gina Rivas Pattugalan, this was “aimed at enabling the country to access new markets and to draw foreign investors and tourists alike to the country”.⁴⁹ While Filipino diplomats have always played a role in promoting the Philippines’ economic interests, during the Ramos administration, the role was expanded, with presidential diplomacy being leveraged to help attain the government’s development agenda of becoming a Newly Industrializing Country (NIC), a scheme called “Philippines 2000”.⁵⁰ The programme was relatively successful, so much so that *Newsweek*, in November 1996, dubbed the Philippines Asia’s “New Tiger” economy, adding that the “sick man of Asia”, as it was previously known, was “no longer the laughingstock of the region”.⁵¹ However, this was interrupted the following year by the Asian Financial Crisis.

The intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China in the 2010s has led to them sponsoring competing regional economic initiatives. The United States' Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) goes beyond the traditional trade agreements with which the region is familiar. With its four pillars of trade, supply chains, clean economy and fair economy, the IPEF is said to have a "futuristic" outlook.⁵² Seven ASEAN members—Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam—have signed up to the IPEF, which is considered a rival to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Washington has been averse to Beijing's actions in the Indo-Pacific, seeing them as attempts to dislodge it as the regional hegemon. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructure and development undertaking which "aims to build connectivity ... across six main economic corridors encompassing China with Mongolia and Russia; Eurasian countries; Central and West Asia; Pakistan; other countries of the Indian sub-continent; and Indochina".⁵³ It is often seen as China's attempt to project power. However, Washington "has struggled to offer participating governments [in the BRI] a more appealing economic vision".⁵⁴ Therefore, the IPEF could be seen as a part of Washington's efforts to counter China's growing economic influence in the region.

The Philippines signed up to the BRI during Duterte's presidency, formalized through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in November 2018.⁵⁵ According to Aaron Jed Rabena, while not all Chinese investment projects in the Philippines are automatically labelled as BRI-related, "as long as private Chinese investments and development projects promote socioeconomic connectivity and mutual dependence and advance bilateral ties between China and the [Philippines], they arguably uphold the spirit of the BRI".⁵⁶ When Chinese President Xi visited Manila in November 2018, a milestone in Philippine-China relations, 29 cooperation agreements were signed.⁵⁷ So, too, was the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation (CSC), an upgrade from the 2005 Strategic and Cooperative Relationship for Peace and Development (SCRPD).⁵⁸ Notwithstanding this apparent upgrade, China's relations with the Philippines do not have a "partnership" label, unlike Beijing's relations with most other Southeast Asian countries. On the one hand, it could be argued that, in Beijing's eyes, its relationship with Manila is a "lower-level bilateral relationship". On the other hand, it could also be argued that the Philippines is likewise hesitant to establish a formal "partnership" with China.⁵⁹

Despite the widespread perception that Chinese investments increased significantly during the Duterte administration, this was not the case. According to Jenny Balboa, despite “Duterte’s efforts to attract Chinese investors, China’s share of net foreign direct investment (FDI) remained small—sitting at 1.12 per cent in 2021”.⁶⁰ As Duterte’s term of office came to an end in 2022, commentators were sceptical about whether China’s pledged investments and assistance—Duterte had obtained pledges of US\$24 billion worth of assistance and investments from Beijing in 2018, for instance—would be fulfilled after he left office.⁶¹ The succeeding Marcos Jr. administration said it would “follow up on deliverables stemming from discussions between the previous [Duterte] administration and Beijing”.⁶²

However, Chinese investment in the Philippines is controversial in domestic politics. For instance, several big-ticket Chinese investments were in the pipeline during the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, but they did not materialize because of political opposition due to perceived anomalies. According to Alvin Camba, this was because of rent-seeking activities by Filipino elites close to the administration.⁶³ As Camba added, “foreign policy need not always be the cause of FDI flows. Regarding Chinese investments in the Philippines, rent-seeking elites and a mobilised populace can have a far greater effect.”⁶⁴

The role of the oligarchs needs to be considered. In the Philippine setting, “oligarchs” are associated with the landed elites and capitalists.⁶⁵ According to Ronal Mendoza, the term refers to a “group of people or families holding control over the economy or an entire nation”.⁶⁶ These oligarchs are often perceived to be pro-American and were the target of many of Duterte’s tirades. He called them a “cancer on society” and “illustrious idiots”, and claimed that they “flew around in private planes while the Filipino people suffered”.⁶⁷ Some of these oligarchs controlled telecommunications and water concessions that Duterte said he wanted to scrap.⁶⁸ To some political commentators, this sparked fear in local and foreign investors.⁶⁹ Although Duterte claimed he wanted to dismantle the traditional oligarchy in the Philippines, some critics asserted that he was merely “cultivating his own” set of oligarchs.⁷⁰ Indeed, several prominent Chinese businesspeople were allegedly his close friends, possibly impacting his administration’s China policy.

Indeed, the success or failure of a foreign investment project often hinges on partnerships with a local oligarch. According to Camba, excluding other factors, such as allegations of corruption, the

only Chinese “successful big-ticket investment” during the Arroyo administration was when the State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) purchased a 40 per cent stake in the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines. This was because the deal was “pushed by the most powerful Philippine economic elites”.⁷¹ Moreover, Camba added, the SGCC project investment came to fruition because “SGCC’s decision to work with ... particular Philippine economic elites were not born from the Chinese government’s dealings with Arroyo but from its own relatively autonomous decision to work with powerful Philippine private actors and invest in a technically sound business venture”.⁷² However, some proposed Chinese investment projects, such as the National Broadband and North Rail projects, which officials within the Arroyo administration championed, were cancelled, leading to domestic opposition over allegations of corruption.⁷³ Some within Arroyo’s ruling party did not support these projects because they were perceived as deeply unpopular with local people.⁷⁴ According to Camba, the “absence of big-ticket Chinese investments” during the Aquino III presidency can also be partly explained by intense “intra-elite competition” within the president’s cabinet, which was “deeply divided over their positions on Chinese investments”.⁷⁵

Pillar Three: The Protection of Overseas Filipinos

While it could be considered an integral part of a country’s foreign affairs, the protection of overseas Filipinos became much more pronounced when it became the third pillar of its foreign policy in the 1990s. At the time, an estimated 1 million Filipinos were working abroad and remitting more than US\$1 billion annually,⁷⁶ giving them the moniker of “Modern-Day Heroes” (*Bagong Bayani*). According to a study by the International Monetary Fund, remittance inflows “increased substantially” by 2005, and the Philippines was “the world’s third largest recipient of remittances in absolute terms, behind India and Mexico” at that time.⁷⁷ The study noted that “at over 9 per cent of GDP, the level of remittances is high for such a relatively large economy and sets the Philippines apart from its Asian neighbours and indeed other lower-middle-income countries”. It added that “remittances are by some margin the largest source of foreign exchange for the Philippines”, and that these remittances “tended to act as a relatively stable source of foreign exchange compared to foreign direct investment and other private capital flows”. According to a survey by the Philippine

Statistics Authority in late 2023, there are around 1.96 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs).⁷⁸

A classic example of how the welfare of overseas Filipinos impacts foreign policy is the case of Angelo dela Cruz, who was abducted while working in Iraq in 2004. His kidnappers demanded that in exchange for his life, the Philippine government remove its troops from Iraq, where they had been fighting as part of the US-led coalition. Much to the dismay of its partners, including the United States and Australia, Manila conceded and pulled its troops out of the country. As such, when Manila decided to be part of the US-led “coalition of the willing” in fighting international terrorism and chose to send troops to Iraq, it asserted that this decision was in pursuit of its national interests. However, it subsequently claimed that national interests were being protected when it withdrew its troops. This foreign policy U-turn appeared to be because of public opinion. This author argued during a forum hosted by the University of the Philippines Diliman in 2004:

While public opposition in sending troops to Iraq may have been present (as indeed there was opposition in the Philippines’ sending of troops to Iraq at that time), such opinion was not as intense as the public opinion demanding that the troops be pulled out so that Angelo dela Cruz is saved. Thus, the government decided to pull its troops out ... because of the strong domestic public opinion demanding a pull-out.⁷⁹

During the subsequent administration of President Aquino III, Manila focused on convincing OFWs to return home and altering public perceptions to accept that finding work abroad is an option, not a necessity.⁸⁰ Ultimately, however, the repatriation of many overseas Filipinos became a necessity enforced on the Philippine government by other countries. In early 2013, for example, Saudi Arabia launched a crackdown on illegal foreign workers, which meant that Filipino nationals had until near the end of that year to prove they were officially sponsored to work in the country, or they would be expelled. Thousands of those without funds or sponsors camped outside of the Philippine Embassy in Riyadh for weeks waiting for assistance from Manila.⁸¹ In the end, more than 1,000 were repatriated by Manila. A few months later, in 2014, the Philippine government also had to repatriate more than 13,000 Filipinos from Libya over security concerns because of clashes between the Libyan armed forces and Islamic militants who helped overthrow the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.⁸² At the

same time, it also had to repatriate around 10,000 Filipino workers from across the Middle East and North Africa because of political violence resulting from the “Arab Spring”, which was the second biggest repatriation organized by the Philippine government after the evacuation of nearly 30,000 OFWs from Kuwait during the First Gulf War in 1990–91.⁸³

More than half of the OFWs are women, most of whom are employed abroad as domestic workers, positions that make them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. According to research by the International Labor Organisation (ILO), some 75 per cent of cases of abuse received by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration—a government agency that is part of the Department of Migrant Workers of the Philippines—involved female OFWs.⁸⁴ On occasions, Manila has had to intervene to lobby foreign governments in extreme cases of alleged exploitation. In 2010, for instance, Mary Jane Veloso, a migrant worker in Indonesia, was found by airport authorities in possession of heroin, which was allegedly given to her by her drug-trafficking recruiters. Handed the death penalty by an Indonesian court, the Aquino III administration faced intense public pressure to try to negotiate a deal with Jakarta for a stay of execution in 2015, after the Indonesian Supreme Court rejected her final appeal.⁸⁵ President Aquino III reportedly broke diplomatic protocol when he spoke to Indonesian officials and proposed that Jakarta intervene and make Veloso a state witness.⁸⁶ After her recruiters were arrested in the Philippines, Veloso received a last-minute reprieve from Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who ordered that her execution be delayed.⁸⁷ According to then Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario, this was so that she could give testimony in the court case against her recruiters back in the Philippines.⁸⁸ In May 2023, President Marcos Jr. asked his Indonesian counterpart Widodo to re-examine the case.⁸⁹ In January 2024, prior to a visit to Manila by Indonesian President Widodo, the Philippine government again lobbied the Indonesian government to offer Veloso clemency shortly, following another appeal made in 2022.⁹⁰

When Duterte became president in 2016, he promised to shield overseas Filipino workers from abuse and encouraged OFWs to report any form of abuse to the authorities, which, he said, would be met by prompt action.⁹¹ Two years later, he threatened to stop Filipino workers from moving to the Middle East in response to reports of rape and suicides, while he temporarily banned OFWs from migrating to Kuwait while the authorities investigated the death

of seven Filipino domestic workers in the country. Speaking during a press conference in Manila, he directed a barb at Middle Eastern governments: “Can I ask you now to treat my countrymen as human beings with dignity?”⁹² It was also during the Duterte presidency that the Department of Migrant Workers of the Philippines was formed in 2022, consolidating the agencies related to OFWs that had previously sat under different state departments, thus making it easier and quicker for Filipinos to attain the documents support they need from the state to relocate overseas.⁹³ According to local media, Duterte’s strong stance on improving the lives of OFWs when campaigning in the 2016 presidential elections was one major reason for his landslide victory among overseas Filipino voters.⁹⁴ Likewise, President Marcos Jr. has promised to protect the welfare of migrant workers. However, his first year in office was marked by several controversies involving OFWs, not least the decision by the Kuwaiti government in May 2023 to suspend issuing new entry visas to Filipinos following the alleged murder of two Filipino domestic workers.⁹⁵

Given the number and economic importance of OFWs, as well as the risks they face when working abroad, their welfare has for decades played a prominent role in Manila’s bilateral relations and discussions with foreign governments. Each administration has had to be constantly prepared to conduct the complex process of repatriating large numbers of OFWs because of conflicts abroad or sudden changes of policy by the governments of the host countries.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, Philippine foreign policy has been anchored on three fundamental pillars: territorial integrity and sovereignty, economic development and protection of overseas Filipinos. Changes in foreign policy, particularly regarding the country’s relations with the United States and China, have been shaped by various factors, including the sitting president’s personal beliefs and strategic considerations, particularly national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Amid an increasingly fluid regional environment, Manila has had to ensure it can leverage its ties and relations with these two regional players primarily to ensure a commitment to the three pillars. Notwithstanding their seeming differences in their foreign policy orientation, successive presidents have also had to ensure that the economy is not impacted by geopolitics and that overseas workers are protected.

NOTES

* The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the institution.

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