

Unrequited Love: Duterte's China Embrace. By Marites Danguilan Vitug and Camille Elemia. Quezon City, Philippines: Bughaw, 2024. Softcover: 309pp.

What motivated Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines between 2016 and 2022, to become the US treaty ally's first leader to "openly and unabashedly side with Beijing" (p. xviii)? How did he demonstrate his affection for China, to what extent did Beijing reciprocate and what did this seemingly one-way love affair mean for the Philippines' foreign and defence policies, as well as for Manila's long-running maritime dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea? These are just some of the questions that Marites Danguilan and Camille Elemia probe in their highly readable book.

In an effort to understand Duterte's psyche, the authors begin by tracing the origins of his anti-Americanism and his corresponding warmth towards China. His suspicion of the United States, they argue, was partly influenced by his activist mother and the tutelage of Jose Maria Sison, his university lecturer and the founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (p. 5). The youthful Duterte learnt to view Americans as arrogant neocolonialists, responsible for committing war crimes in the Philippines. On a more personal level, his views were also tainted by having been denied a US travel visa and by the United States having accidentally detonated a bomb in a hotel in Davao City, where he was mayor. By contrast, he cultivated close ties with the local Chinese-Filipino community in Mindanao, several of whom would later finance his political career. In Duterte's binary view, America was bad, and China was good. During his six years as president, he never once visited the United States but travelled to China five times. He had only terse and tense encounters with US Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, but friendly meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping on eight occasions.

How then did the Duterte-Xi bromance work out for the Philippines? *Unrequited Love* explores this question through three interrelated themes: China's political support for Duterte; Beijing's ill-fated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects in the Philippines; and the tribulations of the South China Sea dispute. Beijing did much to support its new friend in the Malacañang Palace. On his first presidential visit to China in October 2016, Duterte received a lavish reception. A few months later, when Islamic extremists laid siege to Marawi City, Beijing donated

thousands of assault rifles and millions of rounds of ammunition to the Philippine army (p. 34). During the COVID-19 pandemic, China secretly supplied Sinopharm vaccines to Filipino leaders, including Duterte himself (p. 43). In sharp contrast to Western criticism, Chinese officials publicly defended Duterte's illegal drug war, "the core of Duterte's identity and agenda" (p. 65). Meanwhile, throughout his presidency, pro-Beijing think tanks in the Philippines amplified pro-China, pro-Russia and anti-US narratives (p. 107).

Yet, as Vitug and Elemia show in great detail, Beijing failed to deliver on the two issues that might have won China more plaudits in the Philippines: infrastructure development and concessions in the South China Sea. Duterte looked to China to help realize his "Build, Build, Build" programme, a vast infrastructure initiative. But Beijing repeatedly overpromised and underdelivered. Chinese-funded projects came with high interest rates, relied almost entirely on Chinese labour, violated conservation rules and were often tainted by graft. Of the 14 BRI projects pledged, only one, the Binondo-Intramuros Bridge, was ever completed (p. 91). Ironically, the contractor for this project, the China Communication and Construction Company, was the same firm responsible for building Beijing's artificial islands in the contested Spratly Islands, the construction of which had violated the Philippines' maritime rights. To add insult to injury, the bridge did little to alleviate Manila's notorious traffic problems. In Duterte's home region, the Mindanao Railway was one of three China-funded rail projects that fell through because Chinese loans never materialized.

Duterte's overtures to Beijing also failed in the South China Sea. Almost immediately after entering office, he set aside the 2016 arbitral tribunal award that had invalidated China's expansive nine-dash line claims, found Beijing in violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and argued that China's artificial-island building violated Manila's maritime rights. In return for not pursuing the binding award, Duterte hoped that Beijing would end its harassment of Filipino fishermen and his country's coast guard and navy. It did not. China persisted with "grey zone" tactics, routinely intimidating Philippine vessels. Moreover, a proposed agreement to jointly develop hydrocarbons in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) collapsed because Beijing steadfastly insisted the areas lay under Chinese sovereignty (p. 165).

Duterte also failed to convince his country's US-leaning national security establishment to share his faith in China. His defence secretary, Delfin Loranzana, resisted closer military ties because "the

men in uniforms' gaze was still on the US, a longtime ally" (p. 192). Teodoro Locsin, his second and much more hawkish foreign secretary, allowed talks with China on joint development in the Philippines' EEZ to collapse because he deemed Beijing's demands to be unconstitutional. As Vitug and Elemia observe, "Duterte's avowed love for China was not transferable to his officials" (p. 211). Nor, indeed, was it transferable to the Filipino people. Public opinion polls consistently showed widespread distrust of China and a desire for Manila to more assertively defend the country's sovereignty claims (p. 204). Ultimately, even though Duterte was popular when he left office, he had "failed to rally the country toward China" (p. 212). His successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., promptly reversed course, adopting a much tougher stance on the Philippines' maritime disputes with China and strengthening military ties with the United States.

Today, the 80-year-old Duterte is languishing in a prison cell in The Hague, indicted for crimes against humanity related to the extrajudicial killings committed in his war on drugs. Beijing has offered him little visible support. Perhaps, like many a jilted lover, he takes comfort from the belief that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

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