

Duterte's Uncertain China Gamble

Written by Nguyen tien thinh
Thursday, 03 November 2016 00:00

Breaking with tradition, the Philippines' controversial leader Rodrigo Duterte chose China for the first major state visit of his presidency. Traditionally, Filipino leaders have visited "all-weather" friends such as Washington or Tokyo before Beijing. This time, however, the Filipino president decided to postpone a scheduled visit to Japan in favor of China, while signaling strategic "separation" from the United States.



During his stay in Beijing, the firebrand president relished the praise and warm embrace of the highest Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, who welcomed Duterte's visit as "an opportunity to push China-Philippines relations back on a friendly footing and fully improve things." The visit was specifically designed to thaw frosty bilateral relations, expand areas of economic engagement, and explore modalities for peaceful management of territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Without a doubt, however, commercial considerations dominated the agenda. The Filipino leader secured a whopping \$24 billion in economic pledges from China. Almost all of the most influential Filipino tycoons, along with hundreds of the country's most successful businessmen, joined Duterte's entourage, exploring major deals with Chinese counterparts in the realms of telecommunications, agriculture, industry, and tourism. As an additional sweetener, China announced the relaxation of non-tariff barriers on Filipino fruit exports, while also lifting a travel advisory for Manila-bound Chinese tourists.

At the end of the visit, Chinese vice foreign minister Liu Zhenmin ecstatically declared "bilateral relations have fully recovered and the two countries will return to the track of dialogue and consultation to address maritime issues." Xi also agreed to return the favor and visit the Philippines at a later time. In their joint statement, the two neighbors agreed to "make concerted efforts to cement the traditional friendship of the two peoples."

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To the disappointment of many Filipinos, however, Duterte failed to secure any substantial compromise in the South China Sea, months after the Philippines achieved a landmark legal victory at The Hague. There are indications that he may have at least secured a provisional arrangement to allow Filipino fishermen some access to the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Duterte's overly deferential speeches vis-à-vis his hosts also raised eyebrows among the audience back home, which is deeply suspicious of Chinese intentions. Lamenting Duterte's diplomatic flirtation with China, former Philippine foreign secretary Albert Del Rosario went so far as to warn of a "national tragedy."

To be fair, Duterte managed to re-normalize ties with China, reduce tensions in the South China Sea, and revive hollowed bilateral investment ties after years of bitter maritime spats. Yet, it is a risky and potentially unsustainable policy shift that may embolden Beijing's maritime assertiveness and undermine the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" strategy.

Chinese Statecraft

Almost unique among contemporary rising powers, China has proactively deployed its financial prowess to secure the geopolitical acquiescence of neighboring countries. But the so-called "Beijing Consensus" strategy hasn't been a straightforward success in recent years, especially in China's immediate neighborhood. Despite booming bilateral trade, Beijing's relations with Seoul have soured in recent years. Former allies such as Myanmar and fellow communist countries such as Vietnam have gradually pivoted to the United States. Even Laos has begun to reconsider its historical dependency on China.

The Philippines' overwhelming legal victory in the South China Sea was also a huge setback for China, not only because it nullified the bulk of Chinese "historic rights" claims in the area, but because it demonstrated the failure of the Asian juggernaut to intimidate its smaller neighbors as well as international arbitration bodies.

The election of Duterte, however, has presented an unexpected strategic prize for Beijing. To woo the Philippines' self-described "socialist" leader, who has repeatedly accused Washington of interfering in his country's domestic affairs, China has tapped into its deep pockets, offering \$9 billion in soft loans, a third of which are set to be invested in the Philippines' decrepit public

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infrastructure. Closer to Duterte's heart, China has also offered assistance to the Filipino leader's controversial campaign against illegal drugs.

Aggravated by the West's increasingly vocal criticism of his human rights record, Duterte has progressively pivoted toward China, even threatening to sever long-standing military ties with the United States altogether. But given the depth of American popularity among the Philippine populace and its indispensability to the Filipino security establishment, it is unlikely that Duterte will upend the alliance altogether. But some downgrade in bilateral ties—such as suspension of joint patrols and military exercises with the United States in the South China Sea—in exchange for Chinese concessions in disputed areas (namely a joint fisheries agreement at Scarborough Shoal) could be on the horizon.

Strategic Realities

In an astonishing turn of events, the Philippines has rapidly transformed from China's leading critic in the region into a potential ally, at least according to Duterte's rhetoric. A more careful analysis, however, suggests that we are witnessing the birthing pains of a strategic recalibration in Philippine foreign policy, with the Duterte administration favoring engagement with China as well as less dependence on U.S. military support.

Quite legitimately, Duterte has raised doubts over the extent of American military commitment to the Philippines in the South China Sea. He has also lamented the relatively limited U.S. foreign military financing to the Philippine armed forces, especially when one considers the billions of dollars of U.S. military aid non-treaty-allies such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Jordan have received in recent years.

The Philippines has also failed to secure international support over its arbitration victory, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations even avoiding mention of the award in its official pronouncements.

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