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Selling "independent foreign policy" amid the US–China rivalry: populism and Philippine foreign policy under the Duterte government

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Philippine foreign policy under the Duterte government (2016–2022). During this period, Philippine foreign policy is widely acknowledged to have undergone dramatic shifts, with the government making friendly overtures towards China at the cost of its traditional alliance with the US. From a foreign policy analysis perspective, this paper explicitly focuses on the role of political leadership in guiding national foreign policy. This paper argues that the Duterte government made strategic use of political marketing in promoting its populist foreign policy. Thus, political marketing is used as an analytical lens with which to examine much of the rhetoric and behaviour of the Duterte government, particularly in regard to its response to the US–China rivalry. By engaging in this supposedly diplomatic game, the Duterte government tried to sell its foreign policy promises and outcomes as products even when its rhetoric was at times disconnected from its actual performance. Overall, this paper develops an alternative perspective from which to add to our understanding of the role of populist foreign policy initiatives in a fragile democratic setting.

KEYWORDS Duterte; Philippine foreign policy; political marketing; populism; Sino–Philippine relations

Introduction

Under the leadership of Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), the Philippines government positioned the country as a small/weak state in its foreign policy dealings with the two major global political powers, China and the US. Although Philippine presidents and their governments have long looked to the US for security and political support, the Duterte government distanced

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itself from the Philippine–US alliance, which had until recently been considered almost sacrosanct. In particular, Duterte took the unprecedented step of announcing that the government intended to separate diplomatically from Washington (Bautista, 2016) to pursue a more ‘independent foreign policy’ (Heydarian, 2017b). In contrast, the Philippines has traditionally perceived China as a long-term threat, especially in terms of its influence in Southeast Asia (Parrenas, 1990; Shekhar, 2012). Under Duterte, however, the ties between China and the Philippines began to improve, as reflected in the Philippine government’s changing positions on the ongoing territorial and trade disputes and other forms of political engagement.

International relations scholars generally perceive these dramatic changes in Philippine foreign policy as mainly attributable to the systemic transformation of the power dynamics between the US and China, particularly in the wider Indo-Pacific region. As such, the current situation in the region is best described in terms of uncertainty, dynamism, volatility and insecurity (Jackson, 2014; Liff, 2019). Faced with the systemic imperatives stemming from the competition between the global powers, smaller states in the region have had to respond in a corresponding fashion. The political scientist and sinologist Aileen Baviera observed that ‘great powers want to have a bigger say on the regional order, but small and middle powers—the Philippines included—cannot afford to be silent’ (Baviera, 2016b, p. 16). International relations scholars have argued that by this logic, the Duterte government’s policy shift should be regarded as a form of hedging (e.g. Goh, 2005) and thus as a pertinent strategic move in response to the increasing tension between the US and China. While generally agreeing with this proposition, this paper examines whether any domestic factors influenced this major foreign policy shift, which remains a key unanswered question in the literature.

The question of how the Philippine government’s foreign policy has been influenced by and responded to the systemic changes that have occurred in Southeast Asia in recent years remains largely unclear. Informed by the neoclassical realist school, some scholars suggest that domestic factors may have influenced Philippine foreign policy by acting as intervening variables. In this light, analysts tend to interpret the nationalist sentiment promulgated by the Duterte presidency, a populist-driven administration, as a significant domestic factor. However, while the ideology of nationalism is often used to support the thin ideology of populism, this nationalist explanation is less convincing in the Duterte case. In fact, the preceding Aquino III presidency was strongly nationalist-driven and took a strong hard line stance towards China. Although Duterte’s populist government also undoubtedly had a strong attachment to nationalism, the nationalist sentiment did not appear to play a compelling role in Philippine foreign policy,

particularly with regard to China. If nationalism is not the main driving force of the Philippine government's foreign policy changes, then the puzzle is what other domestic factors have contributed to the changing foreign policy stance? In other words, what are the connections between the populist foreign policy of the Duterte government and its relations with China?

Despite the significant policy shifts, challenges, setbacks and crises it faced during its tenure, the Duterte government continued to voice the same populist rhetoric. How can we account for the disconnect between the rhetoric and actual performance of the Duterte government's foreign policy initiatives? In a similar vein, analysts have raised the question, 'what did voters find so appealing about Duterte?' (Bajar, 2022, pp. 45–46). In many ways, Duterte presented himself as a typical populist leader. His image was a departure from the 'traditional image of Filipino politician: Someone usually seen wearing white and intricately embroidered barong giving widely applauded speeches in which they speak in a formal and dignified tone' (Bajar, 2022, p. 45). Duterte's rhetoric contradicted the norm of appropriate decorum as expected from a public figure (Webb & Curato, 2019). Reliant on radical nationalism, the Duterte government also resorted to other forms of rhetoric. Therefore, the domestic influences on the Duterte government's populist foreign policy need to be examined to gain a broader understanding of this topic. Accordingly, this paper examines the various sources of the Duterte government's China policy, especially the tone and content of the rhetoric and the various influences apart from nationalism that shaped this policy. This paper also seeks to account for the disconnect between the government's rhetoric and actual performance and to understand why the government was so keen to maintain its rhetorical swagger despite encountering various policy challenges and setbacks.

From a foreign policy analysis (FPA) perspective, this study uses the analytical framework of political marketing (Ormrod, Henneberg, & O'Shaughnessy, 2013) to explore the motivations behind the Duterte government's populist foreign policy. While the FPA approach focuses on individual or group leadership as the agent of foreign policy change (Kaarbo, 2015), it also incorporates external systemic and domestic factors within the analytical framework. Specifically, FPA examines why and how political leaders use rhetoric to promote their policies and why they often need to overcome the disconnect between their policy rhetoric/promises (driven largely by populist and nationalist sentiments) and actual performance (constrained by political and international realities). In this regard, populist leaders typically exploit two strategies: diversion which is about blaming others often for its own problems and capacity which is about demonstrating one's competences and resources (Sagarzazu & Thies, 2019). The political marketing framework in this context can thus provide additional insights

into the effects of leadership on foreign policy, particularly in terms of motivation and strategy.

This paper argues that amid the US–China rivalry, the Duterte government’s strategic realignment was largely stylistic and symbolic. In contrast with conventional observations, the Duterte government took few concrete steps back from its firm stand on the South China Sea (SCS), and its alliance with the US remained strong. Moreover, the government’s overtures towards China were more tactical and aimed to alleviate the tension that had developed between the two countries during the Aquino III years. This rapprochement also brought more tangible benefits from China. Overall, this foreign policy stance was guided by the Duterte government’s political marketing strategies. In this regard, the dramatic symbolic image of China being hugged by the Duterte government can be regarded as the result of a self-conscious ‘policy-as-product logic’ in domestic politics (Pugliese, Ghiretti, & Insisa, 2022, p. 4). In other words, the Duterte approach reorganised the traditional Philippine foreign policy in relation to the new environment with the aim of conveying the government’s newly adopted ‘independent foreign policy’ to its domestic audience and, to a lesser extent, the wider world. Thus, the case study of the Philippines presented in this paper can enhance our understanding of populist foreign policy in general. In particular, this paper endeavours to show how the political rhetoric used to present foreign policy for domestic political consumption has become increasingly used by political elites (especially strongmen and demagogues) even though it is often divorced from reality and frequently used to compensate for real foreign policy setbacks/weaknesses.

This paper uses a qualitative approach with a focus on the narratives of major actors, including Rodrigo Duterte and other major politicians and opinion leaders in the country. Several events are examined over the period 2016–2022, which covers the presidential campaign and the entire duration of the Duterte presidency. The manner in which these actors tell stories to create meaning and build relationships is then examined in relation to the intended policy goals and political endeavours. The analysis is based on data collected from various sources, including transcripts of political speeches, official documents and secondary literature and policy analyses. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with selected academics and policy analysts.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section formulates the analytical framework for examining populist foreign policy based political marketing. The following section discusses the Duterte government’s domestic political marketing strategies. The next two sections examine foreign policy issues as products and cover the two major themes of downplaying the security challenges relating to the SCS and highlighting

the benefits of economic pragmatism. The paper concludes by emphasising the role, consequences and implications of political marketing in populist-driven foreign policy.

Political marketing of populist foreign policy

For a long time, domestic factors were neglected in the field of international relations. As a result, scholars overlooked the significance of foreign policy as the 'black box' of national policymaking. Robert Putnam (1988) was among the earliest in the international relations field to unravel the 'entanglements of domestic and international politics' (427–430). Following Putnam, scholars from the neo-realist school (e.g. Fearon, 1998) began to offer foreign policy explanations and predictions and to provide structural analyses of international events. Ever since, domestic politics has been a much studied area in foreign policy research (Kaarbo, 2015), and the literature in this area has greatly improved our understanding of foreign policy. For example, national governments often have to contend with domestic pressures rather than rational and unitary actors when formulating their foreign policies, both vertically (between elites and masses) and horizontally (among elites). Although studies have shown that these domestic conflicts can affect foreign policy decision making and foreign policy behaviour (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012), more research is needed on the domestic influences on foreign policy to further bridge the gap between the international and the domestic in international relations and foreign policy.

The foreign policy of a state is conditioned by the structural composition of the international political system and further shaped by a constellation of domestic factors. Thus, the development of a national foreign policy occurs within a complex network of international and domestic contexts. The domestic political sphere is composed of governmental organisations, individual leaders and the cultural characteristics of the state. In addition to the political environment and domestic politics, the leaders' mind-set can have a significant influence on policy development and strategy implementation. Swinkels (2020) argues that political leaders are 'sense-making machines' who, when faced with challenges, threats or crises, tend to turn to their personal beliefs to make the tasks at hand more 'explicable, manageable, and actionable'. (1163–1164). Thus, political leaders' skills in effective communication and resolving strategic conflicts have a significant effect on their capacity to implement political change.

Situated in the domestic national context, the FPA perspective treats foreign policy leadership as a conduit 'for other international and domestic factors' (Kaarbo, 2015, p. 190). Without ignoring the significance of external

international influences, FPA recognises the 'difference between domestic policy and foreign policy' and when necessary treats domestic political and decision-making factors as 'equal to or more important than international factors' (Kaarbo, 2015, p. 191, 204). FPA also presupposes a more contingent view of the relationship between domestic and international politics as it views leaders' responses to various pressures as being conditioned by numerous factors, including the leader's own beliefs and perceptions (Kaarbo, 2015). Thus, the FPA approach pays particular attention to the personal traits of national leaders.

With the growth of populism in the West in recent years, the issue of political populism as a domestic factor has attracted increasing scholarly attention in the field of foreign policy studies (Destradi, Cadier, & Plagemann, 2021). The literature mostly conceptualises populism as a 'thin centred ideology' that needs to be bolstered with the ammunition of 'thicker ideological traditions' and further reorganised in terms of the elite--people divide (Mudde, 2004). Moreover, partisan politics can enter populist foreign policy as the competing political parties pursue policies that reflect their ideological traditions and preferences (Rathbun, 2004). Although right-leaning populist parties' foreign policies are more exclusive and interest-driven, their counterparts on the left are more inclusive and values-driven. In the case of right-wing populism, the thicker ideological traditions that leaders typically draw on mostly include 'nativism, opposition to immigration, focus on national sovereignty, and rejection of economic and cultural globalization' (Chrissogelos, 2017, p. 1). In recent years, this has been evident in the populist foreign policy espoused by the Trump government in the US and the emergence of Trump's populist style in the new technological context (i.e. Twitter diplomacy) (Boucher & Thies, 2019; Hall, 2021).

The scholarly literature on political populism is largely based on empirical case studies based in Western countries. However, a growing body of research can now be found on political populism in the Global South. For example, the rise of Chavismo in Venezuela represents a classic model of populism in every respect, with a charismatic leader, the image of the people versus a corrupt elite and the conception of populist politics as an 'ostensibly democratic pursuit' (Hawkins, 2003, p. 1157). Thus, in recent years, much of the research on populism in developing countries has focussed on populist foreign policy. For example, Sagarzazu and Thies (2019) examined the factors that determined the foreign policy rhetoric of Hugo Chávez. They found that Chávez was more likely to use anti-imperialist rhetoric and portray himself as a protector when the price of oil was high, whereas when the government was better resourced, he depicted himself as a saviour of the common people. In contrast, the populism of Narendra Modi's BJP government in India relates more to the 'style' and

process of foreign-policy making than the 'substance' of foreign policy (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019, p. 297). In line with the political differences across the developing world, populist foreign policy appears to vary according to the unique traits of individual leaders and countries (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Thus, more empirical studies on populism in developing countries are needed to enrich our understanding of this important foreign policy area.

Research suggests that in less stable democracies, populist foreign policy is often developed as a 'reaction to crises of political representation' engendered, for example, by 'dislocations caused by globalization' and 'shifts in international politics' (Chryssogelos, 2017, p. 1). Accordingly, in recent years, a number of populist parties have emerged that are difficult to place on the political spectrum because of their lack of fixed ideology and willingness to respond to exigent demands. In this regard, the foreign policy preferences of populist parties can be seen to be generated not only from the interaction between thick ideological traditions and populism's thinness but also from the 'core characteristics of the logic of populist politics' (Chryssogelos, 2017, p. 5). Thus, in addition to examining the ideological dimension of populism, 'a more flexible and more broadly encompassing understanding' of populist foreign policy is needed that, for example, places analytical focus on discursive style and political strategy (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). Hence, a framework solely based on thin-centred ideology may not fit the recent empirical developments in some countries, particularly those in the Global South.

Based on the original idea of commercial marketing, political scientists and campaign practitioners have proposed political marketing as a conceptual tool for studying the strategies of political communication adopted during election campaigns. The scope of the concept has since been expanded to include the policies and rules of incumbent governments/parties/leaders. The practice of political marketing is essentially grounded in the exchange of values between political supporters and policymakers during an election campaign and during a party's term in government. This process focuses on the interactions and relationships between political actors and individual stakeholders at the micro level and primarily concerns the prioritisation of popular policies and goals during election times (Ormrod et al., 2013). At the macro level, political relationship marketing concerns the wider interplay between relationship-based campaigning and the structural and systemic nature of the marketplace. In this regard, political marketing mainly concerns building long-term relationships with key stakeholder groups, such as the media and ruling and opposition parties (Ormrod et al., 2013).

Various commercial marketing strategies are used to improve the relationship between sellers, products and buyers and focus on areas such as market segmentation, the marketing mix, brand loyalty, product development and product concept (Shama, 1975). These concepts are analogously used by political actors in political marketing. Similar to commercial marketing, effective communication is also essential to the success of political marketing. However, political marketing tends to be much more complicated and sophisticated than commercial marketing, as it does not just concern selling arguments/products but also involves values and beliefs in responding to and building relationships with stakeholders and the public. Common political marketing strategies include negative marketing, emotional marketing and delivery marketing. Delivery, for example, is very important, as it concerns fulfilling a policy commitment. Thus, from a political marketing perspective, political actors need to effectively communicate their goals and the promise of their delivery during election campaigns and convey messages of success and the capacity to manage policy failures in government.

Political marketing has also emerged as a key domain for political populists. Populist parties and actors usually base their political offerings on the needs and wants of external stakeholders such as voters and the media, whereas in terms of internal relationships, they tend to focus on implementing strategies determined by the party leadership (Ormrod et al., 2013). In terms of marketing strategies, research suggests that populist parties are more likely to use negative and emotional marketing strategies than mainstream parties. For example, whether as challengers or incumbents for re-election, populist candidates are more likely to use negative, aggressive and offensive rhetoric in addressing their rivals (Nai, 2021). Moreover, populist parties tend to use fear-arousing messages to promote division, such as the 'evil elites vs. virtuous people' (Nai, 2021, pp. 235–238). While populists are generally less committed to broader foreign policy visions, they often engage in foreign affairs if they perceive that doing so will have immediate material benefits (Chryssogelos, 2017).

Populist campaigning and communicating in the Philippines

The Philippines is a presidential democracy in which the citizens directly elect their leaders. In this fragile 'premature' and 'weak' democratic state (Banlaoi, 2004, pp. 204–206), a political culture centred on personality and patronage has emerged. Historically, the higher echelons of the Philippine government have been controlled by a few powerful political clans, such as the Macapagal-Arroyo, Aquino and Marcos families. Banlaoi (2004) argues that the Philippine state apparatus is 'constantly under the control of a

powerful family, clan or prevailing group for the primary purpose of personal aggrandizement' (205). In this environment, the Philippine political institutions have become entwined with various political dynasties, where 'members of the same family occupy elected positions wither sequentially in the same political jurisdiction [...] or simultaneously across different positions' (Mendoza, Beja, Venida, & Yap, 2016, p. 189). Consequently, this form of state system, which is part of the legacy of American colonialism, has paved the way for strong personalities, weak state institutions and even weaker political parties.

Duterte followed the long tradition of elite politics in the Philippines. Various members of the Duterte family occupy senior positions in Philippine politics, including Sarah Duterte-Carpio (Vice President), Sebastian Duterte (mayor of Davao city) and Paolo Duterte (member of the House of Representatives). Nonetheless, the rise of Rodrigo Duterte as a presidential candidate surprised the Manila-dominated political establishment. The first president to hail from Mindanao, Duterte served as the mayor of Davao City, where he governed with an iron fist and used brute-force policing strategies such as vigilante killings as well as the politics of accommodation (Curato, 2017). On the national stage, Duterte positioned himself as a leader who was 'pro-Mindanao and anti-imperialist Manila' (Capuno, 2020, p. 265). Manea (2020) refers to Duterte's brand of leadership as 'penal populism' under the guiding principle of economic pragmatism with, ironically, an emphasis on sovereignty and independence.

Although Philippine governments are typically characterised by strong political personalities, the government is undeniably marred by a weak and easily co-opted state apparatus. As a result, political personalities rather than institutions tend to dictate state strategies. Although the Philippines has long portrayed itself as a liberal democracy, in reality, the country is an oligarchical state (Teehankee & Calimbahin, 2020). In this context, political marketing is highly observable, especially given the polarisation of Philippines society, the dominant political role of political figures and the highly monopolised media. The Duterte government thus provides a typical case of political marketing in a less developed non-Western country.

Duterte and his predecessor Noynoy Aquino had similar political manoeuvres, such as their use of emotional rhetoric. However, one key difference between these leaders is that Aquino III's foreign policy was typically driven by nationalist sentiments (De Castro, 2018). This was clearly demonstrated by the president's staunch defence of the Philippines' maritime interests and sovereign right in the South China Sea in response to China's growing assertiveness. In contrast, the Duterte government took a dramatic turn, aiming to earn goodwill with China so that the Philippines could benefit from the enormous amounts of aid and economic loans stemming from China's Belt

and Road Initiative. This change in policy stance is representative of a populist political culture in a country where populism has existed as a by-product of national subjectivity and the persistent anxiety associated with ordinary citizens' sense of freedom and sovereignty (Webb & Curato, 2019). In this case, Duterte's populist foreign policy is best described as a form of 'independent foreign policy' whereby the government sought to distance itself from the United States, its long-standing treaty ally, and shift its allegiance towards China. While both nationalism and populism tend to appeal to the 'people' and the terms are often used interchangeably (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017), they can be distinguished for analytical and practical purposes. Populism can be defined in relation to the antagonistic divide between the people as the down-group and the establishment as the up-group. In contrast, the nation, as an imagined community of belonging and shared fate, is constructed based on an 'in/out or member/non-member distinction' in relation to other national communities. Despite sharing some similar rhetoric, Duterte and Aquino were informed by their respective ideologies of populism and nationalism.

The Duterte phenomenon is considered by some analysts a populist revolt (Heydarian). Teehankee (2017) describes this revolt as a 'protest of the middle class who suffered from a lack of public services, endured the horrendous land and sea traffic, feared the breakdown of peace and order, and silently witnessed their tax money siphoned by corruption despite promises of improved governance' (54). Moreover, the transition from being a mayor of a city in Mindanao to becoming the president of the republic reveals much about the personal mind set of the president. As Heydarian states:

Cloistered in Davao, and constantly in contact with leftist-progressive elements and close enough to the protracted conflict in the Muslim regions in Mindanao, Duterte was almost immune to the ideological hegemony of the largely pro-American media-military-intelligentsia complex perched in 'Imperial Manila.' (p. 49)

Drawing from an opportunistic playbook, Duterte manifested his authoritarian populist tendencies by establishing us-versus-them narratives, with 'them' being the 'drug trafficker, corrupt or inept officials, oligarchs, his rival and critics in the Dilawan [yellow] camp (that is, party supporters of Roxas and Aquino) and in the media, and even the Catholic Church' (Capuno, 2020, p. 265). Against this negative marketing strategy that followed the conventional populist narrative of corrupt and incapable elites vs. the virtuous and innocent people, Duterte positioned himself as the one the people could look to for help.

Duterte's 2016 campaign was predicated on 'restoring law and order' by ending the drug trade and other forms of criminality within three to six months of taking office. Duterte's resulting 'war on drugs' campaign was

one of the most contentious issues of his presidency, attracting criticism from human rights groups, the International Criminal Court and the greater international community. Regarding the SCS dispute, Duterte promised that should China disregard the Philippine claims, he would ride a jet ski and plant a Philippine flag on Scarborough Shoal. In a televised national presidential debate, he explicitly stated:

I will ask the navy to bring me to the nearest boundary dyan sa [at the] Spratly – Scarborough. Bababa ako, sasakay ako ng jet ski, dala-dala ko yung flag ng Pilipino at pupunta ako doon sa airport nila tapos itanim ko [I will go down, ride a jet ski, bring a Philippine flag, go to their airport, and plant it there], then I would say, 'This is ours and do what you want with me'. (Inquirer, 2016)

This is a typical emotional marketing strategy whereby the candidate promises to confront the enemy and demonstrate the strength of the nationalist spirit. Nonetheless, no such occupation of Scarborough Shoal occurred during Duterte's term as president, and most if not all of his campaign promises on this aspect were unfulfilled.

Nearly all of Duterte's campaign promises and policies appeared unrealistic and impossible to implement, yet he won elections and maintained high approval ratings. This can be attributed to two factors. First, Duterte was able to tap into a latent 'grievance politics' (Heydarian, 2016) or 'politics of anger' (Thompson, 2010) in Philippine society. He used negative rhetoric against his opponents at home to communicate with the public and criticised those abroad who accused him of violating human rights in his war on drugs. Moreover, he situated himself as a messiah who could provide instant solutions to the pervasive issues of crime, illegal drugs and corruption that had long generated a strong sense of frustration among the populace. Ultimately, Duterte was seen 'as a strong leader who can restore law and order' (Teehankee, 2017, p. 52). Thus, in the 2019 midterm election, Duterte gained an even stronger mandate to rule as the Philippines' 'populist strongman president', with his endorsed candidates winning most of the 18,066 national and local positions (Teehankee & Kasuya, 2020). Having received enormous levels of support from the population, Duterte left office with a record-high approval rating (Social Weather Station, 2022).

In the Philippines, the president is considered the dominant actor in both domestic politics and foreign relations (Medillo, 2020). Under normal circumstances, members of other branches of government will intervene against excesses of the executive branch. However, under Duterte, the political opposition in the Philippines was effectively dissolved through Duterte's consolidation of power and institutional co-optation. This highlights the state of the Philippines' political institutions, which are

structurally weak and controlled by strong personalities. Foreign policy in the Philippines was one of the many areas affected by this institutional imbalance, with the Department of Foreign Affairs effectively being at the president's disposal, as he was considered the chief architect of foreign policy.

As the president is the primary architect of foreign policy in the Philippines, political parties do not necessarily have a strong influence on foreign policies. As a result, populist leaders have ample opportunity to practice political marketing for the purposes of foreign policy. By highlighting the ideology and strategies behind Duterte's rhetoric, a political marketing perspective can help explain the apparently contradictory Philippine foreign policy during Duterte's rule. Duterte exemplifies how populist leaders can use political marketing as a tool for both electoral campaigning and maintaining government rule.

From a political marketing perspective, the Duterte government's foreign policy change can be interpreted as effort to present new policy products under the rubric of 'independent foreign policy'. Independent foreign policy has special significance in the Philippines because of the country's colonial past, and the concept is enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution (Article II, Section 7). Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani (2015) referred to the concept of independent foreign policy upheld by the Constitution as a 'wake-up call' for Filipinos to defend their land. This was reiterated by top diplomats in the Duterte government, who interpreted the constitutional concept of independent foreign policy as serving the interests and welfare of the Filipino people (Cayetano, 2017). One Duterte official stated that the independent foreign policy meant that Filipinos must keep their wits about themselves in light of the 'tough world out there' (Locsin, 2019). Thus, the foreign policy communications of Duterte's government conveyed heavy populist sentiments.

Overall, Duterte maintained his anti-imperialist stance against the United States throughout his presidency and his disdain for the pro-American/-colonial historical seat of power in the Philippines, Manila. Curato (2017) observes that Duterte used the Davao template of brute force and political accommodation as a model of governance that he applied on a national scale. With the traditional allies of the Philippines alienated and disturbed by the president's dismantling of the liberal democratic institutions, Duterte turned to other states for support and legitimacy. In his state visit to the PRC in October 2016, for instance, Duterte proclaimed that he was distancing himself from the US to establish stronger ties with its peer competitors, China and Russia (De Castro, 2018). From a FPA perspective, Duterte's personality as a leader highlights the implementation of the Philippines' independent foreign policy. Duterte's deep suspicion of the West kept him

closely within China's orbit and he further realised that it was strategically more appropriate to turn towards China and away from the West (Magcamit, 2020). Thus, his foreign policy rhetoric generally emphasised his pro-China position and anti-West sentiment (Balboa, 2020).

Selling foreign policy as products: downplaying the security challenges

The dispute with China over the SCS was undoubtedly the primary foreign policy challenge for Duterte and his government once they came to power. Duterte's strategy allowed for China to reassess its extremely assertive approach without necessarily acknowledging its loss in the Aquino-initiated Permanent Court of Arbitration (Kreuzer, 2018). The relative stability of the issue has been acclaimed as a major achievement of independent foreign policy during Duterte's presidency. Although the situation in the SCS has not been fully resolved to the satisfaction of all claimants, incidents that could lead to full-blown conflict have been greatly reduced. Thus, the SCS issue was a valuable asset in the Duterte government's game of political marketing. Specifically, the security situation provided a scenario in which Duterte could demonstrate how his capable government succeeded in stabilising the tension handed over from his predecessor.

Tensions between China and the Philippines increased rapidly following the Scarborough Shoal incident in April 2012 during the Aquino III presidency (Tolentino & Ham, 2015). This incident precipitated a host of responses that influenced Sino-Philippine relations such as Beijing's stricter quarantine on Philippine bananas, the renaming of the South China Sea to the West Philippine Sea in official communications as ordered by Malacañang Palace and the Philippines' lawsuit against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Although both countries agreed to withdraw their vessels from the disputed area, China refused to comply. Duterte inherited the favourable Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling from the previous presidency, but his government intentionally downplayed the arbitration victory against China as simply 'a piece of paper' that led to nothing (CNN, 2021). This puzzling drama can be seen as evidence of the Duterte government using China as leverage in its alliance with the United States. By capitalising on the Sino-American rivalry, the populist government was able to claim concessions from Beijing and Washington. Domestically, the government reaffirmed its strategic value in the US-Philippines alliance and was able to show visible benefits from Chinese in terms of foreign aid and investment pledges (Manantan, 2019).

Recently, another confrontation occurred between China and the Philippines, although with significantly less tension. In March 2021,

approximately 200 Chinese vessels occupied Whitsun Reef, which alarmed the Philippine authorities. Although this was another show of force from China in asserting its claims in the SCS, it did not result in a standoff like what transpired in 2012. The Philippine government quickly lodged diplomatic protests against China, and most of the vessels soon dispersed (Stashwick, 2021). After his foreign and defence secretaries criticised Beijing over its assertive behaviour, Duterte began to downplay the issue. Duterte later claimed that his order not to send in the navy should not be interpreted as weakness and stated that the Philippine maritime patrols should continue in the disputed areas. In a statement, Duterte emphasised that 'Our agencies have been directed to do what they must and should to protect and defend our nation's interest' and that 'we will not waver in our position' (Aljazeera, 2021). During this event, Duterte showed great restraint with China while simultaneously appealing to the brewing nationalist sentiments in the Philippines.

The lack of an enduring solution to the SCS dispute encouraged intermittent shows of force from the claimant countries. While China and the Philippines engaged in a diplomatic confrontation over the Whitsun Reef, Duterte's approach led to a 'significant reduction of Sino-Philippine tensions' in the SCS (Storey, 2017, p. 3). China could have easily kept its vessels in the Whitsun Reef, similar to its refusal to cede control of Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Thus, China's non-confrontational rhetoric can be seen to have communicated a positive outcome regarding Duterte's rapprochement with China. Although Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana raised the alarm regarding the presence of Chinese vessels in the disputed territory, Duterte made light of the situation and rejected the possibility of seeking US assistance. He subsequently emphasised to the public that 'China remains a benefactor' and renounced his 2016 campaign promise of reclaiming the contested parts of the SCS (Dancel, 2021). The difficulties that Filipino fishermen face in accessing areas of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in the SCS no doubt demonstrate the ongoing seriousness of this matter, especially given the provocations from Chinese vessels. Moreover, a lingering distrust of China remains among the public in the Philippines (Seah, Hoang, Martinus, & Pham, 2021). Overall, although positive changes have occurred in Sino-Philippine relations, notably the reduction in bilateral tensions, there is still much more to be ironed out.

While sending overtures to China, the Duterte presidency downplayed its traditional alliance with the US.¹ This shift may be attributable to Washington reneging on its defence obligations when it had the opportunity to affirm its commitment to the security of the Philippines. Furthermore, based in Mindanao, Duterte was generally immune to the US-influenced political establishment in the capital (Heydarian). Nonetheless, the Mutual

Defense Treaty remains the hallmark of the US–Philippine security alliance. The treaty requires both countries to come to aid of the other in the event of external aggression. The US originally took the position that the Mutual Defense Treaty did not apply to the Philippines’ reefs. During the Obama administration, Washington even refused to clarify whether the Mutual Defense Treaty would be activated in the event of Sino–Philippine conflict (Heydarian, 2017a). Duterte used the initial uncertainty of the US in committing defence support to the Philippines as a reason to reduce the Philippines’ reliance on Washington.

Duterte also expressed his displeasure towards the US and made his disapproval apparent in his rhetoric and policy statements. In his State of the Nation Address in 2017, Duterte criticised the US for its stance on his domestic policy and human rights record, mostly in relation to his controversial war on drugs (Baviera, 2016a). The Obama administration blasted Duterte’s anti-drug campaign, halted the sale of assault rifles to the Philippine National Police and deferred aid packages amounting to USD434 million (Bhagawati, 2017). In response, Duterte (2017) stated, ‘tignan mo ang mga puti, panahon ni Obama, una yung spokesman. Akala mo kung sino. Akala nila mas bright pa sila sa akin’ [Look at those Americans during the term of Obama, who do they think they are? They think that they are brighter than me]. Duterte’s wariness of the US stemmed from his term as mayor of Davao City, where US authorities illicitly evacuated an American undercover agent from his jurisdiction (Baviera, 2016a).

Amidst the polemics against the US, the Philippine government found an ally in China, which expressed understanding of the government’s efforts to eliminate illegal drugs. President Duterte stated that ‘China is the only country to come out freely and [sic] a firm statement that they are supporting the fight against drugs in my country’. China then reportedly helped construct four large drug rehabilitation and treatment centres in the Philippines, two in Luzon and one each in the Visayas and Mindanao. China further pledged RMB100 million (₱714.57 M) to implement anti-drug projects and law enforcement security cooperation (Mirasol, 2017). From a political marketing point of view, this was a typical strategy of capacity in which the government succeeded in extracting resources from China while using a strategy of aversion to blame the US for its critique of the domestic affairs of the Philippines.

Under the Biden administration, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken assured his Philippine counterpart Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin, Jr that the Mutual Defense Treaty was indeed applicable to the SCS (State Department, 2021). Blinken’s predecessor, Mike Pompeo, also tried to allay the Philippines’ fears by claiming that ‘any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels would trigger mutual defense obligation

under Article 4 of our mutual defense treaty' (Sutter & Huang, 2019, p. 57). However, these assurances were too little and too late. When the Philippines sued China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the US gave full support to the former. Later, it backed down and called for calm and patience rather than declaring unwavering support for the Philippines and highlighting the Mutual Defense Treaty (Bhagawati, 2017).

The other two pillars of US–Philippine cooperation are the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement and the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, both of which were constantly critiqued by the Duterte administration. There has long been a degree of disdain for US influence in some pockets of Philippine society, as was exemplified by the expulsion of US troops from Philippine bases in 1991. To remedy the situation, the Visiting Forces Agreement was ratified in 1999 by the Philippines Senate to allow US personnel access to Philippines. In 2014, during the Aquino III presidency, the US and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, which aims to strengthen US–Philippines cooperation by allowing the rotational presence of US forces in Philippine bases. Duterte's non-implementation of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement and deferral of the Visiting Forces Agreement presumably weakened US influence in Asia and helped foment the shift towards a Sinocentric regional order (De Castro, 2020). Despite threats to dismantle the US's military cooperation mechanisms with the Philippines, Duterte eventually agreed to reinstate the Visiting Forces Agreement.

The US critiques of Duterte's domestic agenda and the lack of strategic assurances from the US arguably led Duterte to downgrade the US–Philippines alliance. However, Duterte's critique of the US and friendly gestures towards China did not necessarily signify a real strategic shift. Although it may not be as conspicuous as during the Aquino III presidency, the military cooperation between the Philippines and the US remains resilient. Nonetheless, Duterte's change in stance over China did not sit well with the Philippine military institutions. Simply put, Philippine military officials who spent most of their careers collaborating with US forces in combatting Islamist insurgents were not necessarily comfortable with the sudden shift in foreign policy. At the public level, Filipinos' level of confidence regarding the US as a strategic partner and security guarantor was revealed in a 2019 survey, with 32.4% of respondents declaring that they had confidence in the US and a similar share of respondents expressing uncertainty regarding the US (Tang et al., 2019).

Duterte's rhetoric of gesturing towards an independent foreign policy has been ridiculed by some political scientists, who assert that it is more of a tactic of ambivalence and pragmatism. In this regard, the Philippines is considered to be not fully independent given that it has been very careful

not to antagonise China in bilateral and global affairs (Analyst 1, online, 2 March 2020). This so-called independent foreign policy is actually perceived to be a subterfuge for a pro-China policy, as it was dictated by how much Duterte could wean his country from its alliance with the US while avoiding resistance from the Philippines Department of National Defence (Analyst 2, online, 1 March 2020). Nonetheless, in following this independent foreign policy path, the Philippines has been able to obtain more benefits from both China and the US. The real debates now focus on where the Philippines will position itself in the on-going power struggles between the US and China (Analyst 3, online, 2 March 2020). It can be argued that the rhetoric of an independent foreign policy is a manoeuvre for maximising aid, assistance and partnership with relevant countries. From a political marketing perspective, the phrase 'independent foreign policy' can best be understood as a means of recalibrating the Philippines' foreign policy along prudent and pragmatic bilateral lines rather than ideological alignments.

Selling foreign policy as products: highlighting economic pragmatism

In the economic domain, the Duterte government marketed its China policies to the public using issues such as infrastructure development, investment, tourism and vaccine diplomacy. Although the Duterte presidency never clarified the wider vision of its foreign policy or how the Philippines should position itself strategically, the populist government was clearly enthusiastic about pursuing short-term material benefits in its engagement with other countries, such as China and Japan. This is particularly the case in its overture with China, a major security challenger in the region. Upon his return from his trip to China in April 2018, Duterte claimed victory in signing nine business agreements that would yield 'an estimated value of 9 to 8 billion dollars in investments' and were 'projected to generate more than 10,000 jobs' (Ariffin, 2018). These types of statements represent typical delivery marketing in the rhetoric of a populist leader.

While the public expressed distrust of China's motives towards the Philippines, Duterte continued to establish economic links with China to fund his domestic infrastructure agenda. He even disclosed that China would be an important partner in his Build, Build, Build programme, which was designed to improve infrastructure, enhance exports of agricultural products to China and increase economic growth (Chao, 2021; Trinidad, 2019). In 2017, during the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Manila, China and the Philippines signed a number of agreements. This enhanced cooperation with China generated a significant financial windfall for the Philippines, with the government securing USD24 billion in loan

Table 1. China-funded infrastructure projects as part of the Build, Build, Build programme.

Infrastructure project	Type of funding	Project cost in millions of PhP
Camarines-Catanduanes Friendship Bridge (Nationwide Island Provinces Link Bridges)	ODA	22,030.16
Davao City Expressway Project	ODA	24,500.00
Mindanao Railway Project (MRP Phase 2)	ODA	71,631.63
Mindanao Railway Project (Phase 3)	ODA	To be determined
Ambal-Simuay River and Rio Grande de Mindanao River Flood Control Projects	Loan	39,219.68
Beata – F. Y. Manalo Bridge	Loan	1,386.61
Blumentritt-Antipolo Bridge	Loan	1,103.64
East-West Bank Bridge 2	Loan	3,176.25
North and South Harbor Bridge (Robinson Bridge)	Loan	8,029.53
Palanca-Villegas Bridge (Ayala Bridge)	Loan	1,595.49
PNR South Long-haul Project	Loan	175,318
Subic-Clark Railway Project	Loan	50,301
Binondo-Intramuros Bridge	Grant	4,607.04
Chico-River Pump Irrigation Project	Loan	4,372.90
Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge	Loan	1,367.04
New Centennial Water Source – Kaliwa Dam Project	Loan	12,200.01

Note. The data for this table were sourced from the Philippines' National Economic Development Authority through Pitlo (2021).

commitments and investments (Nilsen, Amador, Rolandsen, Baladjay, & Carrozza, 2021). Table 1 shows the China-funded projects under the Duterte administration.

According to the Philippines' National Economic Development Authority, China funded 16 projects during Duterte's presidency: four through official development assistance (ODA) grants, 11 through loans and one as a grant. Both China and the Philippines consider the Belt and Road Initiative to be 'a vital cooperative framework in Philippine development strategy' (Rabena, 2018, p. 692). Duterte also linked the Build, Build, Build programme to the idea of a new golden age of infrastructure development in the Philippines. However, some sectors of Philippine society remained critical of Duterte's domestic agenda, citing the possibility of a debt trap. The Philippine government subsequently sought to allay the public's fears by asserting that only 30–35% of infrastructure funding would be sourced overseas, with the rest being domestically financed (Baviera & Arugay, 2021). While the popular discourse tied the Build, Build, Build project to Chinese funding, it should be noted that Japan and South Korea were also key partners in this endeavour (Esquivias, 2021).

China and its territories also increased their levels of foreign direct investment in the Philippines. During the Aquino III administration, Chinese foreign direct investment in the Philippines declined, which can possibly be attributed to the heightened tensions between China and the Philippines

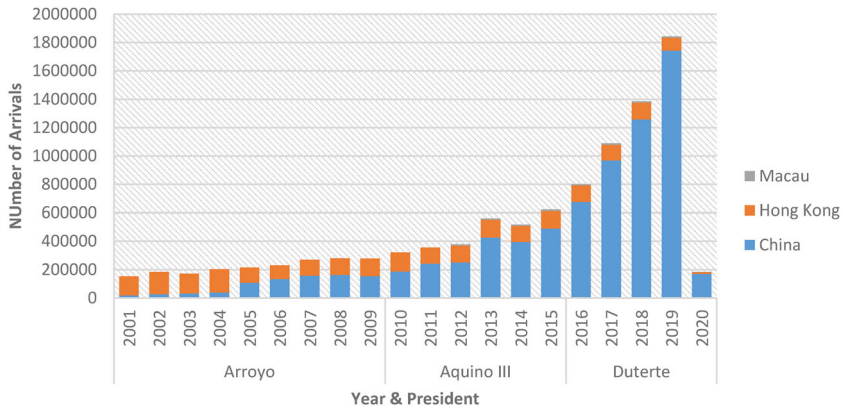


Figure 1. Philippine arrivals from China and its special administrative regions.

Note. The data used in this figure were sourced from the Philippine Department of Tourism through CEIC Data.

over the SCS. However, the downward trend was reversed when Duterte came to power with his less combative stance towards China. As a result of his rapprochement and pragmatic preference for China, Chinese foreign direct investment in the Philippines increased during Duterte's presidency (Camba & Jiang, 2022).

Camba and Magat (2021) argue that the territorial disputes in the SCS have had a significant influence on the volume of Chinese foreign direct investment in the Philippines. Specifically, compromising with China on the SCS issue has led to Chinese investment gains for the Philippines. As a manifestation of this improved trade relationship, the Philippines' Department of Trade and Industry (2021) highlighted China's status as the country's largest trading partner and the largest source of foreign direct investment in Asia. In his keynote speech at the China International Fair for Investment and Trade in 2021, then Department of Trade and Industry Secretary Ramon Lopez emphasised the close ties between China and the Philippines and expressed appreciation for Chinese investors for continuously investing in the Philippines (Department of Trade & Industry, 2021).

Another outcome of the improved relations between China and the Philippines under the Duterte administration is the increased arrivals of Chinese nationals in the Philippines. Figure 1 shows that in 2001, there were only 18,937 arrivals from the Chinese mainland compared to 134,408 from Hong Kong. However, that trend was soon reversed, with arrivals from the Chinese mainland soon far outnumbering the arrivals from Hong Kong and Macau. Tourism is one of the most important industries in the Philippines, accounting for 13% of total GDP (Department of Tourism, 2020). In 2017, the 'visa upon arrival' facility was made available to Chinese nationals in an effort to boost tourism (Reuters, 2020a). Bernadette Romulo-

Table 2. COVID-19 vaccine deliveries in the Philippines in 2021.

	Chinese vaccines	Non-Chinese vaccines
February	600,000	0
March	1,400,000	525,600
April	1,500,000	0
May	2,000,000	2,303,450
June	6,500,000	2,629,600
July	6,500,000	8,809,140
August	11,100,000	6,939,830
September	9,500,000	9,871,080
October	5,500,000	19,475,440

Note. The data in this table were sourced from Rappler through Pitlo (2021).

Puyat, then Secretary for Tourism, attributed the increased arrivals from China to Duterte's China-friendly foreign policy (One News, 2019).

De Dios (2021) highlights that Chinese tourist arrivals in the Philippines steadily increased prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the benefits from increased Chinese arrivals were overshadowed by the increase in Philippine offshore gaming operators. Opposition senator Risa Hontiveros cautioned that increased online gaming operations and an influx of illegal Chinese workers could undermine the national integrity of the Philippines (Banlaoi, 2020). In 2019, the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation recorded 60 companies operating as part of a Philippine offshore gaming operator investment scheme (Camba, 2020a). While China reached out to the Philippine government to crackdown because of the gaming operators' allies in the Philippine government (Camba, 2020b). There is no real motivation to halt the activities of the offshore gaming operators because they provide a considerable source of government revenue. In 2021, to further legitimise the existence of the offshore gaming operators, Duterte signed a law imposing taxes on the companies. Overall, the Philippine overseas gaming operators are estimated to have generated annual revenues of PhP24 billion annually (Rabena, 2019).

Duterte also favoured China's vaccine diplomacy efforts in the Philippines. As shown in Table 2, China provided the earliest COVID-19 vaccines in the Philippines. While non-Chinese vaccines currently outnumber Chinese vaccines, the timing of delivery of the Chinese vaccines was marketed to the Filipino public as a sign of generosity. Duterte even publicly praised Beijing on the early availability of China's vaccines, stating that 'the one good thing about China is you do not have to beg, you do not have to plead' (Reuters, 2020b). Conversely, he was disparaging of the vaccine commitments of the West, stating 'one thing wrong about the western countries, it's all profit, profit, profit' (Reuters, 2020b). Initially, the Philippines had limited options for accessing vaccines aside from China, especially considering how the wealthier countries amassed supplies of Western vaccines (Hung, 2021).

Although the Philippine government pushed for Chinese vaccines, its efforts were marred by allegations of overpricing (Pitlo, 2021). There was also a strong hesitancy amongst the public towards the use of Chinese vaccines. This hesitancy also had a geopolitical dimension, with Amit, Pepito, Sumpaico-Tanchanco, and Dayrit (2022) pointing out that the SCS dispute was one of the sources of vaccine distrust. According to Cook, China's vaccine diplomacy efforts were ineffective in persuading the Philippine public of its generosity. Nevertheless, Duterte went 'out of his way to publicly thank and highlight Chinese donations and purchased shipment of masks, personal protective equipment, and vaccine supplies, but rarely acknowledge US efforts' (Yeo & Gloria, 2022, p. 14).

Overall, the Duterte administration's economic pragmatism increased the benefits from China. However, these delivery marketing efforts were not necessarily well accepted by the public owing to the deep geopolitical distrust of China in the Philippines. As a result, Duterte practised a style of leadership whereby he acted as a populist domestically while acting pragmatically on the international stage. The goal of this dual leadership style was to reduce the public distrust of China while continuously receiving investment and aid from Beijing (Tenorio, Meyer, & Nurmandi, 2022). As pragmatic economic gains were at the heart of Duterte's Chinese efforts, populist manoeuvres were needed to ensure viability and continuity. As abovementioned, Duterte used institutional co-optation and power consolidation to mitigate domestic opposition to his China policies. In contrast, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's attempts to court Chinese investment capital during her presidency led to the withdrawal of Chinese-funded projects and investments due to allegations of corruption and the subsequent intervention of other Philippine government institutions.

Conclusion

The Duterte government's populist foreign policy initiatives were characterised by the tactical use of a form of political marketing that was largely devoid of nationalist sentiments. This has been exemplified by the Philippine foreign policy towards China over the past few years. In this study, several conventional strategies of political marketing are identified in the rhetoric and activities of the Duterte government, especially delivery marketing. Populist tendencies such as capacity are also documented in the Duterte government's foreign policy efforts to demonstrate the competence of the populist leader and the government in stabilising security tensions and securing tangible economic benefits. Overall, much of Duterte's rhetoric and behaviour revolves around creating and enhancing the rivalry between the elites and the people. These two groups exist apart in

Philippine society, with the people being portrayed as virtuous and innocent and the elites as corrupt and evil. The popular tropes of people's sovereignty and respect for popular demands, which are synonymous with national interests, are major concerns that were reflected in the populist foreign policy political marketing during the Duterte presidency.

As a small state, the Philippines is often forced to walk a tightrope when negotiating with the two prevailing superpowers. Nonetheless, while a challenging situation for a small state, the US–China rivalry has allowed populist leaders in the Philippines to pursue their political goals in a unique context. However, the populist game is not cost-free. Although the US alliance has survived, there have been significant strains in US–Philippine relations along the way. The situation has also given rise to implicit opportunity costs regarding actions not taken to strengthen the alliance or to respond to Chinese actions in the SCS. Although political rhetoric does not necessarily translate into substantial consequences, Duterte's rhetorical strategy served to weaken Philippine society's trust in political and government institutions. Essentially, Duterte 'generated captivating stories of discontent and outrage over an inefficient and corrupt government' (Montiel, Boller, Uyheng, & Espina, 2019, p. 522). At the same time, his opposition to the US–Philippine alliance was voiced at an extremely uncertain juncture, and had tremendous security repercussions for Manila regarding the territorial dispute with Beijing. Unless a sustainable solution is found, the Sino–Philippine dispute over the SCS will never be permanently resolved.

The most recent presidential change after the May 2022 election marks the end of the Duterte-era policies. However, Duterte's manoeuvring has clearly left the Philippines at a highly uncertain geopolitical juncture in the midst of the Sino–US rivalry. During the presidential campaign, Duterte's successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, deliberately avoided public debate on his policies. Nonetheless, Marcos Jr has to cope with various foreign policy challenges after he took office. It is plainly evident that the two leaders differ considerably in terms of their personal affinity, background, leadership style, values, belief systems, attribution bias and threat perception. This difference in leadership reaffirms the emphasis on leadership personality under the FPA perspective, whereby the new political leader can have his impact on national foreign policy. However, this impact can also be limited as the same structural dictate of the US–China rivalry remains. Indeed, the competition for influence between China and the US has considerable repercussions for all countries in Southeast Asia. The Southeast states that refuse to take sides stand between the two superpowers, as the benefits from entertaining strong relations with both powers far outweigh the advantages of choosing one side. Therefore, some foreign policy adjustment, if not strategic shift, is anticipated.

Note

1. The security alliance between the US and the Philippines hinges on three pillars: the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Disclosure statement

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