

## THE PHILIPPINES' "PIVOT" TO CHINA: A REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES

by *Edcel John A. Ibarra*

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte surprised some observers when he announced during a state visit to China in October 2016 that he has "separated" from the US to be "dependent" on China "for a long time." Considering the rather bellicose tone of the previous administration toward China, why is Philippines suddenly making a foreign policy shift or "pivot" to China?

### *Foreign policy decision-making on the "pivot"*

Focusing on the president as the decision-maker, [some analysts](#) believe that Duterte is a rational actor who understands realism and geo-strategy. Moving away from the US would allow the Philippines to forge security partnerships with other centers of power in a multipolar world. It would also help the Philippines avoid becoming a collateral damage following an intensified China-US rivalry in the South China Sea.

The US, albeit a treaty ally, has failed to give an unequivocal assurance that it will back the Philippines in the event of a conflict with China, especially in the wake of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff. American hesitation has been apparent in other instances abroad, such as when it retreated from its red line in Syria; seemingly grounded the pivot to Asia to a halt because of issues in Ukraine, Iran, and the Islamic State; and showed low commitment to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. On the economic front, the US has also been largely inactive in the global infrastructure market, a sector where China now presents itself as a key investor. China has already demonstrated a capacity to accomplish major infrastructure projects, like those in Africa and Central Asia. Duterte also realizes that the Philippines cannot rely on ASEAN for diplomatic support on the South China Sea issue.

In sum, therefore, China's economic offerings present an acceptable alternative to US reluctance in both security and economic matters and to ASEAN's fragmented support, thus prompting the "pivot." In doing so, the Philippines would simply be mirroring the careful balancing the other Southeast Asian countries have long been doing with the two great powers.

In contrast, [other analysts argue](#) that the president is acting on bounded rationality, that is, limited understanding and inadequate information. The geopolitical situation between China and the Philippines has not changed: asymmetry remains in terms of military and economic capabilities, and China still maintains artificial islands in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. In fact, with the "pivot," China could get all it had wanted from the Philippines post-arbitration: lack of hype on the ruling, possible reduction of joint patrols in the EEZ, return to bilateral negotiations in managing the disputes, and distance from the US.

These could, in turn, eliminate Philippine leverage against China. Even considering economic relations, [data](#) from the [Philippine Statistics Authority](#) shows that China is only the Philippines' second largest trading partner. Meanwhile, Japan, the US, and Singapore, which are Philippines' first, third, and fourth largest trading partners, are keen to counterbalance an aggressively rising China. The same data reveals that only about 10% of Philippine exports goes to mainland China (a larger percentage goes to Hong Kong), while about 43% goes to Japan, the US, and Singapore. Moreover, only around 16% of Philippine imports come from China, while nearly half come from the US and its allies.

With regard to socio-cultural ties, most Filipinos in China are in Hong Kong rather than in the mainland. As of June 2015, according to data from the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, there are around 1,998 Filipinos in mainland China and

198,794 in Hong Kong. Moreover, based on a [Pulse Asia survey report](#), most Filipinos remain largely pro-US and wary of China. Finally, on defense, the Armed Forces of the Philippines have more extensive working experience with their US counterparts than with their Chinese peers.

Like the “pivot” to China, the simultaneous shift to Russia may also seem [odd](#) because the Eurasian great power [accounts](#) for less than 1% of the Philippines’ total trade and is a statistically insignificant source of foreign investment.

Meanwhile, another group of [analysts emphasizes](#) the president’s anti-neocolonial ideology and domestically-oriented thinking. Duterte grew up with a worldview blaming the US for a colonial legacy that brought the Philippines many of its problems today and for continued covert control over the country. The “pivot” would simply realize a desire to be independent; therefore, it is more appropriately a “pivot away from the US” than a “pivot to China.” Indeed, the simultaneous shift to Russia would make sense as a component of a broader movement away from the US.

In addition, Duterte’s background as a city mayor figures in his agenda as president, with domestic issues, particularly communist and separatist insurgencies and drug trafficking (which had been prevalent in his home city, Davao), placing in higher priority than foreign policy concerns that can tend to be abstract (like China’s unlawful infringements of the Philippines’ maritime rights). Thus, the president has also reoriented national defense away from maritime security toward counterterrorism and anti-illegal drugs. Specifically, China’s support on Duterte’s flagship war on drugs, which the US cannot match because of its stance on human rights, makes the “pivot” more attractive. This domestic orientation [does not mean](#) that Duterte is indifferent to the South China Sea issue, but that he is mostly interested in functional cooperation with China, especially the utilization of fisheries and oil and gas resources.

### Conclusion

There is seemingly no consensus on the Philippines’ foreign policy shift to China. Analysts disagree on whether the “pivot,” essentially a revitalization of relations with China, is an approach to manage the South China Sea disputes or a means to become independent from the US, or both. Some analysts take the official line of an independent foreign policy as a signal that the motive is really to distance away from the US. But for other analysts, the timing of the move – just three months after the Philippines won a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea arbitration case against China in July 2017 – suggests a connection to the South China Sea disputes.

The differing perspectives may be pinned on one question: What problem does the “pivot” intend to address? As in all rational policymaking, the issues that the policy addresses and the outcome that it wants to achieve must be clear. This is important to ensure that the policy is understood by those who will execute it and to facilitate policy monitoring and evaluation. Going through rational policymaking is admittedly demanding, but it is necessary to determine if the “pivot” is indeed the Philippines’ best option to pursue its national interests. 🌸

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