

From Arbitration to Diplomacy Duterte's Approach to the South China Sea Issue

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Participants :

- Speaker : **Dr Aries A. Arugay**, Associate Professor, University of Philippines-Diliman.
- Chair : **Capitaine de Frégate Marianne Péron-Doise**, Researcher at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), and Associate Fellow at Asia Centre.

From the start of his administration, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared bold changes in the country's formerly conservative and predictable foreign policy.

The contempt for the West, admiration toward unlikely allies such as Russia and China, and indifference toward international law and norms were all essential departures from the nation's previous positions.

This paper uses the concept of performative populism to analyze Duterte's foreign policy, particularly toward the South China Sea dispute. It argues that as a specific political style of conducting foreign policy, populism can reorient established positions and biases but in turn generates uncertainty and erosion of credibility in the face of weak institutions and domestic distractions.

It also traces the changes that Duterte's government instituted on the issue by embarking on more diplomatic and multi-faceted approach that includes trade, defense cooperation, joint development, infrastructure, and others. In the end, the sustainability of populist performances on foreign policy depends on reconciling the tensions and overlaps between the populist's multiple audiences and constituencies. By way of conclusion, this paper examines the prospects of Duterte's foreign policy given existing strategic realities, bureaucratic politics, and domestic political stability.



Introduction

Much in the vein of Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has often been included in the new cohort of populist leaders. But unlike his nationalist South American counterparts, who remained focused on domestic policy, “Mayor Duterte” began his term with a strong focus on foreign policy. From the start of his administration, his contempt for the United States and his apparent admiration for such unlikely allies as Xi Jinping’s China and Putin’s Russia were widely seen as a radical move away from the country’s historical position, marking a possible end to its “Special Relationship” with the US and the West. Through his fiery rhetoric, unorthodox manners and controversial declarations, the firebrand president has arguably been using his performative form of populism as a political style to reorient foreign relations and the national interest in ways that would benefit ordinary Filipinos – “the people”. Aiming at pursuing what he calls an “independent foreign policy”, the new chief architect of the country’s geopolitical strategy has indeed shown a desire for independence from any single major power while nurturing an interest in deepening relations with new partners – an approach known as “hedging” in international relations, that can have short term gains but carries the risk of long term credibility losses. Taking into account the Philippines’ geostrategic environment as the de facto gateway between the South China Sea and the Pacific, and its historical role in US geopolitical strategy, Duterte’s “populist pivot” and hedging strategy have had far-reaching impacts for the Philippines and the wider Asia-Pacific region, dragging Philippine diplomacy into uncharted territories.

In his presentation, Dr Aries Arugay analyses the impact of this new approach to foreign policy amidst the rising tensions surrounding the South China Sea dispute, questions its sustainability and raises concerns over its long-term credibility costs. With the Permanent Court on Arbitration (PCA) ruling in favour of the Philippines, Duterte’s reshaping of the country’s foreign policy and his perceived friendlier approach towards China has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the already turbulent Asia-Pacific region. *What is Duterte’s strategy on the South China Sea? What are the implications of his remodelling of Philippine foreign policy? How sustainable is his position?*

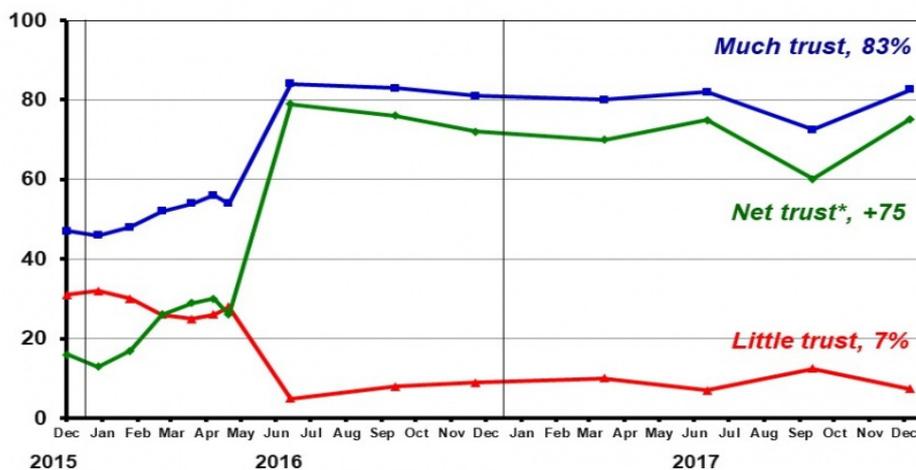


Performative populism and Duterte’s approach to statecraft and foreign policy

Historically, the Philippines have always acted as a smaller power, with a strong posturing against revisionist states and a general compliance to the rule-based order of the Asia-Pacific region. With an underfunded military and over 10 million citizens overseas – a third of them in the US –, the country’s foreign policy has thus consistently relied on its “number one ally”, multilateralism and international law. However, Rodrigo Duterte’s rise to power in 2016 considerably reshuffled the country’s traditional position on the regional and world stages as the country’s new chief executive threatened to abrogate its long-standing defence agreements with the US while seemingly getting cosier with its Chinese neighbour following the PCA ruling. By showing an increasing indifference towards international law, norms and orders, this radical departure from the nation’s previous conservative and predictable position has widely been seen as a manifestation of populism applied internationally – “a foreign policy embellished with populist performances”. In fact, due to the country’s weak bureaucracy and its dysfunctional party system, statecraft and foreign policy have always been strongly determined in the personalised authority of the head of state.

According to Dr Aries Arugay, to understand Duterte’s “populist” approach to domestic and foreign policy, one must look at populism more as a political style than as an actual political ideology. Defined by Moffitt and Tormey in *Rethinking Populism* (2013) as ‘a repertoire of performative features, which cuts across different political situations that are used to create political relations’, this performative approach to politics underpins Duterte’s style of populism and helps us make sense of his controversial antics. Through his appeal to “the people”, his “bad manners” and coarse political language, and his perception of crisis, breakdown and threat, Duterte’s fiery rhetoric is indeed a performative populist showpiece. By bypassing traditional political parties and institutions, and bridging the divide between different social classes and political families by pitting the “worthy” against the “unworthy”, Duterte has developed an almost hallucinogenic appeal. If movie star-turned-politician and former president Joseph “Erap” Estrada has equally been described as a populist in his day, he was mainly elected by the rural and working classes through his anti-elite rhetoric. While Duterte’s rise to power was also strongly supported by the urban precariat and the rural poor suffering from poverty, inequality and injustice, his support base has since grown to also include the more affluent classes yearning for law and order as well as a large portion of overseas Filipinos longing to see a stable and prosperous country they could return to. As a matter of fact, Dr Aries Arugay has met some of the most fervent supporters of the firebrand leader amongst the Philippine diaspora abroad.

TRUST RATINGS OF RODY DUTERTE: PHILIPPINES, DEC 2015 TO DEC 2017



* Net figures (% Much trust minus % Little trust) correctly rounded.



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Needless to say, Rodrigo Duterte is not the typical Filipino Head of State. From conflict-ridden Mindanao, he has what has often been described as a city mayor mentality, earning him the nickname “Mayor Duterte” even as he ascended to the presidency. From forcing a smoking tourist to swallow a cigarette butt, to patrolling around Davao City on his motorcycle, “Mayor Duterte” was widely seen as the antithesis of Filipino oligarchy, a “man-of-the-people”. Applying this local mentality nationally and internationally to the presidency, Duterte has managed to earn the respect and admiration of many Filipinos, across all social classes and political families. As petty as it might seem, a good example of President Duterte’s mayor mentality was his executive order limiting the use of fireworks in the Philippines – he had previously banned firecrackers as mayor of Davao City. This led to a staggering decrease in fireworks-related injuries in 2018 and was widely seen as a demonstration of the strongman’s power and the extent of his reach.



“Megaphone diplomacy” and Duterte’s pivot to China

While most populists tend to focus on domestic policy, populism has led leaders to abide by an anti-status quo discourse. Embodied by a disdain for multilateralism and international law, often seen as limiting the power and independence of the state they govern, this populism-driven foreign policy is often accompanied by an oversimplification of international relations and a distortion of debates. This “megaphone diplomacy” driven by personality and charisma, rather than by strategy and policy, has thus led scholars to distinguish between what populists say and what populists actually do – for example, it is pretty obvious Duterte was never really going to ride a jet ski out to the Spratlys to plant the Philippine flag. Dr Aries Arugay argues in fact that populism has emboldened leaders to carry out their political ambitions and use the world stage to further their domestic agenda and increase their leverage against their enemies at home. According to him, to truly understand Duterte’s thought-process and discourse, one must then look at the “true” audience of his actions, which is not always the one we think. If “all the world’s a stage” and “politics is a performance”, then the audience must matter, even more now, in the increasingly mediated and stylised political arenas of media-saturated societies.

PUBLIC SATISFACTION WITH PRESIDENT RODRIGO DUTERTE: JUN 2017 TO DEC 2017 (page 1 of 2)

	Satisfied			Undecided			Dissatisfied			Net*		
	Jun17	Sep17	Dec17	Jun17	Sep17	Dec17	Jun17	Sep17	Dec17	Jun17	Sep17	Dec17
Total PH	78%	67%	71%	10%	14%	15%	12%	19%	13%	+66	+48	+58
NCR	77	68	73	10	7	9	13	24	18	+63	+44	+55
Bal. Luzon	73	59	64	12	17	22	15	23	14	+58	+36	+50
Visayas	83	64	72	7	15	10	10	21	18	+73	+43	+53
Mindanao	83	82	84	9	12	11	8	6	5	+75	+76	+80
Urban	79	68	76	10	12	12	11	20	13	+68	+48	+63
Rural	77	65	68	10	16	18	13	18	14	+63	+47	+54
ABC	65	70	80	29	17	7	6	13	14	+59	+57	+66
D	78	68	70	10	14	17	12	18	13	+66	+49	+57
E	80	61	78	7	13	9	13	26	13	+67	+35	+65

*% Satisfied minus % Dissatisfied correctly rounded. Ignores Dont Know and Refused to Answer responses. Question. Please tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are in the performance of RODRIGO DUTERTE as President of the Philippines. Are you very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, undecided if satisfied or dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied?



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New partners, old allies and the risks of Duterte's hedging strategy

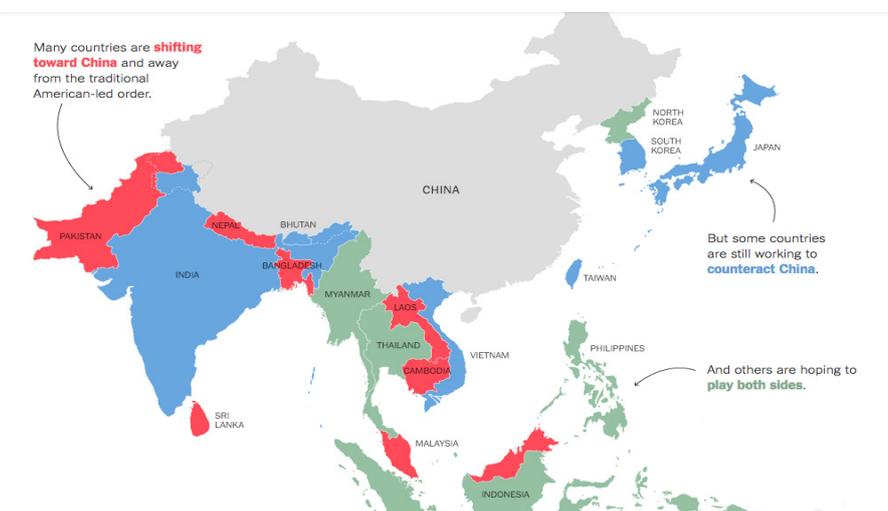
With Duterte's apparent "pivot" to China, one would be forgiven to believe that he was indeed realigning himself with the People's Republic, merely replacing Washington by Beijing as its number one ally and benefactor. But Xi Jinping and Putin have not been the only ones to be courted by the Philippine president's charm offensive – US allies working to counteract China's growing influence in the region, including India's Mohdi and, especially, Japan's Shinzo Abe, the first and only world leader to be received in Duterte's home in Davao City, have both been wooed by the charismatic commander-in-chief. Instead of fully shifting away from the traditional American-led order towards a Chinese-dominated one, Duterte is instead playing a much more subtle diplomatic balancing act by hedging his interests – a strategic playbook drawing similarities with Vietnam's post-Cold War "omnidirectional diplomacy" and Thailand's historic "bamboo diplomacy", by bending whichever the wind blows and remaining solidly rooted to the ground.

In a way, Dr Aries Arugay asks if this change in foreign policy does not imply that the Philippines has now started behaving like a "normal" Southeast Asian country. This risky hedging strategy has been all the more apparent following Duterte's recent pivot back towards America, offsetting his growing dependence on China. For to Dr Aries Arugay, the United States role in providing military equipment and aid during the five-month long Battle of Marawi against ISIS-aligned Abu Sayyaf and the Maute group has led Duterte to tone down his anti-US rhetoric and strongly influenced his decision to seek stronger economic ties with its former "number one ally" after a year spent on the side-line. The election of Donald Trump to the White House, another "lucky" aspect of Duterte's presidency according to Dr Aries Arugay, also contributed in the smoothing of the bilateral relations – the new American President seen as less keen and likely to meddle, moralise and criticise as his predecessor.

Conclusion

Dr Aries Arugay believes that despite short-term gains, in popularity at home mostly, Duterte's diplomatic balancing act and hedging strategy could carry long-term credibility costs and damage the Philippines position within the Asia-Pacific region, especially regarding the South China Sea dispute. Indeed, by relying solely on distorted debates, "fake news" and oversimplified solutions, "megaphone diplomacy" tends to have little transformative ability in sustaining coherent and consistent foreign policy changes, with the strategic realities eventually imposing themselves to a point where colourful promises and fiery speeches can no longer be taken at face value.

Concerning the South China Sea, Dr Aries Arugay argues that Duterte and the Philippines will need to tread carefully or they will violate the PCA ruling that was initially awarded in their favour. For him, keeping the ruling as an ace for too long might be a risky strategy that could backfire and compromise the Philippines position in the debate. With opportunities to leverage the award at international forums diminishing as time goes by, an emphasis on bilateral consultative mechanisms will also tend to draw the issue away from multilateral discussions. In the meantime, despite a general improvement of Philippines-China relations, operational communications network give China unparalleled surveillance capabilities as the People's Republic is starting to achieve maritime dominance and air superiority over the South China Sea.





Concluding Remarks – Questions and Discussion

Concluding Dr Aries Arugay's comprehensive presentation, CF Marianne Péron-Doise pointed out that Duterte's diversified and unorthodox domestic and foreign policy has been so far *successful on the domestic front*. With its GDP growing at average of roughly 6.5 percent, the second most populous country in the ASEAN region is indeed its fastest growing economy.

Opening the floor to questions, Eva Pejsova, of the EU Institute for Security Studies, first raised concerns over China's research antenna being built in Scarborough Shoal, drawing similarities with the territorial disputes over Mischief Reef in the mid-90s. She then asked what was *Duterte's position towards the EU* and how was the institution to interpret what she perceived as mixed signals.

According to Dr Aries Arugay, Duterte remains "ultra-sensitive" regarding the criticisms of his war on drugs and thus, the EU-Philippines relations are bound for failure as long as the European Union keeps pushing Duterte on Human Rights issues and that its aid remains with strings attached. Dr Aries Arugay also encourages the EU to look more at the way local governments implement county-based governance.

Questions were also raised regarding what is known as the Duterte's "*Davao method*" to which Dr Aries Arugay admitted that academics had failed to properly study Duterte while he was still a mayor and that they were all surprised when he was pushed on the national stage. Duterte's admiration for Japan and China and his initial anti-US stance could in fact partly be tracked back to his days as City mayor when Japanese aid played a big part in Davao's economic and human development.

Dr Aries Arugay concludes by arguing that, *in the end*, populists like Duterte, much like Thaksin in Thailand, are politicians who want to be part of the elite but who were rejected for not being "polished" enough. But a picture is worth a thousand words: Dr Aries Arugay reminds us that a colourful metaphor for this image of Duterte as a political outsider is the picture of the then Davao City mayor watching former president Aquino's last State of the Nation Address sitting alone outside on a plastic chair, far away from the political elite in body and in mind.

Finally, Dr Aries Arugay ends this lively discussion by wondering if the firebrand president isn't "biting more than he can chew" by trying to change the constitution to make the Philippines a federal government. With Philippine politics now in uncharted waters, only time will tell.