

Pivot Toward China: A Critical Analysis of the Philippines' Policy Shift on the South China Sea Disputes

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This article investigates the Philippines' puzzling reversal of its position against China following its victory in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on maritime claims in the South China Sea. Instead of asserting its *de jure* sovereign rights, which were reaffirmed by the PCA's decision, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte instead opted to build stronger relations with China. Proposing a burden sharing analytical approach, the article argues that the Philippines is using China as leverage in its alliance with the United States. By exploiting the "China Card" and downplaying the arbitration case, the Philippines has extracted concessions from Beijing and Washington. In capitalizing on the Sino-American rivalry, Manila has reaffirmed its strategic value within the U.S.–Philippines alliance while benefitting more visibly from Chinese foreign aid and investment pledges. However, the Philippines' policy posture vis-à-vis China reflects short-term diplomatic and economic tactics rather than an enduring strategic reorientation away from the United States.

Key words: Permanent Court of Arbitration, Philippines–China relations, Rodrigo Duterte, South China Sea, UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

战略重心偏向中国：一项关于菲律宾南海政策转变的批判分析

本研究审视了常设仲裁法院（PCA）就南海海事主张判决菲律宾赢得胜利后，菲方在反对中国立场上出现的令人困惑的反转局势。与宣称其法定主权（由PCA判决再次确认）相反的是，菲律宾总统罗德里戈·杜特尔特选择与中国建立更强的外交关系。本文就压力分担提出一种分析法，主张菲律宾通过中国对其与美国的联盟关系施加影响。通过利用“中国这张牌”，同时对仲裁案加以轻视，菲律宾已从北京方面和华盛顿方面获取了让步。通过利用中美之间的对抗，马尼拉方面已再次确认了其在美菲联盟中的战略价值，同时从中国的外交援助和投资承诺中获得更多可见的利益。然而，菲律宾对待中国的政策态势反映了短期的外交策略和经济策略，而不是持久的战略调整（远离美国）。

关键词：常设仲裁法院，菲中关系，罗德里戈·杜特尔特，南海，《联合国海洋法公约》

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El giro hacia China: Un análisis crítico del cambio de política de Filipinas con respecto al mar del sur de China

Este estudio investiga el desconcertante cambio de posición de Filipinas contra China luego de su victoria en la Corte Permanente de Arbitraje (PCA) sobre reclamos marítimos en el Mar Meridional de China. En lugar de afirmar sus derechos soberanos de jure, que fueron reafirmados por la decisión de la PCA, el presidente filipino Rodrigo Duterte optó por construir relaciones más fuertes con China. Al proponer un enfoque analítico para compartir la carga, argumenta que Filipinas está utilizando a China como palanca en su alianza con los Estados Unidos (EE. UU.). Al explotar la "Tarjeta China" y minimizar el caso de arbitraje, Filipinas ha obtenido concesiones de Beijing y Washington. Al capitalizar la rivalidad chino-estadounidense, Manila ha reafirmado su valor estratégico dentro de la alianza entre Estados Unidos y Filipinas, mientras se beneficia más visiblemente de la ayuda exterior china y las promesas de inversión. Sin embargo, la postura política de Filipinas frente a China refleja tácticas diplomáticas y económicas a corto plazo en lugar de una reorientación estratégica duradera fuera de los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: Corte de Arbitraje Permanente, relaciones Filipinas-China, Rodrigo Duterte, Mar del Sur de China, Convención de las Naciones Unidas sobre el Derecho del Mar

Introduction

Upon assuming power in 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was immediately confronted with a major foreign policy decision that will have far-reaching implications on the geopolitical realities in the Asia Pacific—how to handle the South China Sea disputes. A few months before his election, Duterte made the bold claim that he would ride a jetski and set foot on the disputed islands to assert the Philippines' territorial sovereignty against China's exaggerated nine-dash line claim (Marcelo, 2016). This became one of the most publicized campaign rhetorics straight from the Duterte playbook. However, after the highly anticipated verdict from the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague was handed down, the strongman from Davao City pursued the unthinkable.

Despite the Philippines' overwhelming victory at the PCA concerning its territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea (or West Philippine Sea), the Duterte government downplayed this decision. Instead, it pursued stronger economic and strategic relations with China. The landmark court decision made clear that China's historical claims over these disputed seas have no legal basis. Rather than invoke the arbitration case to put diplomatic pressure on China, the Duterte administration opted to instead project "sobriety and patience" (Heydarian, 2017, p. 229). Unwilling to pursue China-ASEAN multilateral negotiations, Duterte adopted a bilateral *modus vivendi* with China (Heydarian, 2017).

This constitutes a policy puzzle—why would Manila transform its traditional diplomatic posture, this time supported by a court decision sanctifying international law in its favor, so radically? These puzzling developments in the Philippines foreign relations prompt the main questions this article poses: To what extent has the Philippines really pivoted toward China? What are the implications of the Philippines' pivot toward China?

This article argues that the Duterte government's "pivot"—characterized by downplaying the arbitration ruling in exchange for economic investments and distancing itself from the United States—employs a burden sharing approach. However, contrary to the conventional premise of burden sharing, the study advances a slight modification which will be elaborated in greater detail in the next section. In the original conception of burden sharing, the smaller ally develops a tendency to free ride with the larger ally due to the latter's disproportionate share in the alliance partnership. The study contends that smaller allies can remedy their free riding tendencies by leveraging on external actors as an alternative source of strength. Applied in this study, by pivoting toward China, the Philippines under Duterte's leadership could ease its overreliance on the United States for the provision of public goods. Therefore, through its calculated pivot toward China and use of the "China card" against the United States, within the context of increasing U.S.-China power competition, the Duterte government has extracted benefits and support from both countries toward its advantage.

The overall argument of this study unfolds in three parts: first, it will canvass the prevailing approaches in the Philippines' policy toward the South China Sea. This will provide the backdrop against which the burden-sharing lens is proposed in analyzing the Philippines' recent shift on its South China Sea policy. But the article advances a modified version of the conventional burden-sharing framework, noting the dynamics of two critical factors mentioned: (i) Duterte's calculated "pivot" based on his skepticism toward the United States and the (ii) looming U.S.-China competition. The interplay of these variables provided the Duterte government-conducive ground for policy maneuvering. The next section then illustrates how the Philippines employed the proposed burden sharing approach to gain advantage in relation to the United States and China, during the height of the post-arbitration period from 2016 to 2017. This section will demonstrate how the two external and internal factors mentioned above aided the Philippines to extract concessions and benefits to its advantage. To further drive the burden sharing argument, the third section exposes how the Philippines capitalized on the U.S.-Sino rivalry during the Marawi uprising. It pays attention to how the Duterte government leveraged its long-standing alliance with the United States, while simultaneously capitalizing on China's attempts to play a bigger role vis-à-vis the United States, to crush the global threat posed by the ISIS-linked fighters. This article concludes that the Philippines' pivot to China was motivated by the Duterte administration's intent to use the China connection as a leverage against Manila's defense burden sharing relations with its traditional American ally. Amidst Duterte's claims of his country's reorientation to China, exemplified by the current government's de-emphasis of its maritime claims in the South China Sea, the Philippines pivot is only limited to diplomatic and economic policy rather than extending substantially into the strategic realm.

The Philippines' Evolving South China Sea Approach

The South China Sea has always been a critical touchstone in the Philippines' foreign policy agenda. To address this external security issue, various Philippine government administrations have adopted wide-ranging policy options from

balancing, hedging to equibalancing. Equibalancing aims to neither balance nor bandwagon with major powers, but instead engage them through multilateral institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN + 3 (Simon, 2008). Equibalancing was certainly the strategy of choice during the term of former Philippine President Gloria Arroyo. To offset the decline of U.S. military and economic assistance precipitated by the withdrawal of Philippine troops from Iraq, Arroyo adopted an equibalancing strategy that focused on expanding relations with China (Heydarian, 2017).

In further accounts of balancing and hedging in terms of how these strategies pertain to Sino-Philippine relations, a prevailing hallmark is the Philippines' deliberate invocation of its security alliance partnership with the United States as well as utilizing multilateral forums. The security alliance of the United States and the Philippines is underpinned by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (De Castro, 2009, p. 404). Since then, the U.S.-Philippines alliance has gone from "breakdown, impasse, revival, to revitalization" (De Castro, 2003, p. 971). In 1991, U.S. troops ended their permanent presence in the Philippines after a new base treaty agreement was not ratified, yet the recurring developments in the South China Sea, particularly China's occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995 and the diplomatic row between Manila and Beijing over the Spratlys, prompted a revival in U.S.-Philippine strategic relations (De Castro, 2009, p. 405).

During the Fidel Ramos administration, the Philippines employed security reforms as well as bilateral and multilateral balancing to counter Chinese aggression (Heydarian, 2017). In 1999, the Philippines and the United States signed the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that serves as a legal framework facilitating the institutional footing of U.S. forces in defense-related activities (De Castro, 2009, p. 405). The agreement was also devised to help develop the Armed Forces of the Philippines amidst an evolving "China threat" (De Castro, 2009, p. 405). Similarly, the Benigno Aquino III administration adopted a balancing policy that led to the signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States in 2014. EDCA allows the U.S. forces to construct facilities and utilize five military bases in the Philippines on rotational basis; enhance the interoperability and the modernization of the AFP and; undertake joint security cooperation exercises and capacity building activities in humanitarian and disaster relief activities (<http://officialgazette.gov.ph>, 2014). Internally, Aquino led the modernization of the AFP's naval defense (De Castro, 2014). Aquino's balancing policy also included the "liberal-legal approach" which relied on ASEAN and United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to confront China's assertiveness (De Castro, 2015, p. 73).

In contrast to his immediate predecessor, the Duterte Administration is believed to be pursuing a hedging strategy (Baviera, 2016, p. 205). Hedging is defined as a middle position comprising of multiple strategies that aim to maximize long-term opportunities while minimizing threats (Goh, 2007). Through hedging, states aim to "offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects" (Kuik, 2008, p. 168). In the context of the Philippines, Duterte is not keen to assert the PCA's landmark ruling and instead wishes to pursue bilateral talks with China to resolve the territorial disputes (Baviera, 2016, p. 205). By compartmentalizing issues relating to

economic opportunities on the one hand and territorial disputes on the other, the Duterte government appears increasingly determined to reap the rewards of high growth and investor confidence through China's One Belt, One Road initiative (Baviera, 2017). However, the future of the U.S.-Philippines security alliance remains unclear; contrary to previous Philippine governments, Duterte is personally skeptical about the United States and is more open to working with China (Baviera, 2016, p. 203).

Burden Sharing

Based on the survey of existing accounts on the Philippines' strategic balancing and hedging, this study seeks to explore a more nuanced approach. It contends that hedging or balancing is insufficient to examine the current policy shift in the Philippines' approach in the South China Sea. Hence, this article shall employ burden-sharing framework to investigate Duterte's pivot toward China.

Two key factors influenced the article's consideration of the burden-sharing approach, which fundamentally shaped the dynamics of the Philippines' current stance in South China Sea dispute. First is the internal factor represented by the Duterte government's calculated approach toward the United States and China. Personally, Duterte is skeptical regarding the reliability of the United States and sought to lessen Philippine dependence on its traditional American ally (Lacorte, 2015). A year prior to his presidential run, Duterte had been very vocal about his stance regarding America's inaction in the South China Sea: "If America cared, it would have sent its aircraft carriers and missile frigates the moment China started reclaiming land in contested territory, but no such thing happened" (cited in Lacorte, 2015). Consequently, Duterte's deep-seated personal bias against the United States (Kurlantzick, 2017) translated to his approach toward the near century-old alliance, cementing his hardcore belief that America will never die for the Philippines (Lacorte, 2015).

Second, another significant external factor reverberating in the geopolitical landscape of the region that should not be ignored is the escalating great power competition between the United States and China. China's rise is challenging the U.S.-led rules-based order by offering differing approaches on several pressing issues, including trade, regional security and sovereignty, and rules of navigation (Mishra, 2016). Central to its growing political and economic ambition is the Belt and Road Initiative that offers debt-financed infrastructure among the rapidly growing ASEAN economies, including the Philippines (Wong, 2017c). Meanwhile, the United States, which considers China as a revisionist power and a threat to its hegemonic status, is gradually consolidating its network of allies and like-minded states including the Philippines, to counterbalance China's rise (Blaza et al., 2016).

As mentioned briefly beforehand, the proposed burden-sharing analytical approach here is a modified version of Mancur Olsen. According to the original framework of Olsen's alliance burden sharing, the "costs of common initiatives or the provision of "public goods" should be shared between states" (Thielemann, 2003, p. 253). It emphasizes that "co-operation produces positive-sum benefits which in turn creates the will to share burdens/costs among actors as benefits of the contribution exceed its costs (Thielemann, 2003, p. 253). At the international level, "co-operation is thought to produce a level in the provision of valued

public goods which an individual state cannot attain on its own.” (Thielemann, 2003, p. 255). However, Olsen (1965) argues that in any burden-sharing system, larger allies will have a disproportionate share in the provision of public goods compared with weaker or poorer allies. This develops the tendency among smaller allies to free ride on the contribution of major powers, which is referred to as the “exploitation of the great by the small” (Olsen, 1965, p. 29).

This reality is very much reflected in the U.S.-Philippines alliance, where Manila has always invoked its security agreements with Washington to seek assistance for its internal and external security threats. As a smaller ally, the Philippines has enjoyed the aid extended by the United States for modernizing its defense capabilities and engaging the Philippine army through capacity-building exercises and intelligence-sharing (De Castro, 2003, p. 43).

Based on the burden-sharing approach, the smaller ally has a systemic tendency to exploit the larger ally. However, this study advances a rather different scenario, where the smaller ally can tap external and alternative economic and security collaborators as leverage to decrease its dependence on its burden-sharing relationship with its formal ally. This articulation is evident in Duterte’s skepticism whereby he has challenged the long-standing relevance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance. His wariness about the continuing presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines reflects his concerns about residual colonialism. As the chief architect of the Philippine foreign policy, Duterte’s innate bias has prompted his administration to diversify its policy options, by charting an independent foreign policy that aims to distance Manila from Washington and explore potential collaboration with Beijing (Bautista, 2016).

This study contends that the Duterte government’s calculation to tap external sources for economic investments and aid expenditure relieves the Philippines from relying too heavily on its traditional American ally. The Duterte government has capitalized on China’s willingness to engage the Philippines in ways that Manila could then leverage against its defense burden-sharing relationship with the United States. By moving closer to China, Duterte acquires a viable alternative that grants him greater policy-maneuvering ability. With Duterte’s desire to intensify economic and political ties with China, the Philippines could hypothetically depend less on its burden-sharing relationship with the United States. Conversely, by capitalizing on Chinese support, Duterte has mitigated the freeriding tendencies of the Philippines to the United States in the provision of public goods. In effect, this has forced Washington to rethink the Philippines’ strategic importance in the Asia Pacific. This becomes highly evident in the proceeding sections as the United States continues to provide, and has even increased, foreign assistance to the Philippines amid the Duterte government’s renewed ties with China.

Moreover, the looming competition between the United States and China in the region is a springboard for the Philippines’ to further push its burden-sharing approach. As the great powers compete for dominance in the region, the Philippines is exploiting the conducive geopolitical environment to pursue its inherent interests. Therefore, the Philippines, under the Duterte government, gained an upper advantage which led to extracting benefits from two competing powers. In the succeeding parts, this proposed burden-sharing analytical approach will be demonstrated through empirical evidence examined in significant events within the post-arbitration period from 2016 to 2017.

Having established the backdrop for Duterte's marked policy shift and the proposed burden sharing analytical approach, we now turn into a series of critical events within the post-arbitration period from 2016 to 2017. This section looks more closely at key areas where the Philippines capitalized on China to lessen its burden sharing with the United States. This is highly demonstrated in the following developments: China's inclusion of the Philippines in the BRI as well as the support for Duterte's war on drugs. Interestingly, as the Philippines renews ties with China, evidence suggests sustained and even increased foreign aid allocation from Washington toward Manila.

Belt and Road Initiative

On July 12, 2016, the PCA rendered its decision under Annex VII of the United Nations UNCLOS concerning the arbitration case filed by the Philippines against China (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The tribunal found no legal basis for China's overarching historical claims under its nine-dashed line in the South China Sea (PCA, 2016). The ruling also confirmed that the Chinese had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in its EEZ (PCA, 2016). Following the Philippines' sweeping victory at the Hague, the country's foreign affairs secretary at the time, Perfecto Yasay, called for "restraint and sobriety" in response to the landmark ruling (Esmaquel, 2016). Yasay offered a rather vague and lukewarm affirmation of the case by saying that it would be subject to further examination by experts. He also reiterated that the Philippines remained committed to a peaceful resolution of the territorial dispute with China (Esmaquel, 2016).

Duterte made a series of similar statements echoing his desire to downplay the arbitration case, in favor of strengthening relations with the Chinese. Instead of using the arbitration case as a potential catalyst for pressuring China, Duterte seemed to look the other way by considering the ruling a major deterrent that could forestall the potential economic benefits he could derive from that country. During his "historic" four-day state visit to Beijing from 18 to 21 October 2016, he made his intentions very clear: he represented the arbitration case as a "piece of paper" and one that would "take a back seat" (<http://abc.net.au>, 2016). Duterte added that he would not make a hard imposition of the award and would instead wait for President Xi Jinping to bring up the territorial dispute (Lim, 2016). A joint statement from Manila and Beijing released at the end of Duterte's China visit confirmed that both countries would seek to resolve their maritime dispute through bilateral talks.

Setting aside the South China Sea issue, Duterte's four-day visit to Beijing from October 18 to 21, 2016 generated deeper economic and diplomatic engagement with China. Duterte attained US\$24 billion worth of funding and investment pledges, and Philippine Trade and Industry Secretary Ramon Lopez subsequently listed the funding deals: US\$9 billion for soft loans, including a US\$3 billion credit line with the Bank of China, and economic investments worth US\$15 billion (Calonzo & Yap, 2016). The US\$9 billion in soft loans were earmarked for development programs, and a US\$15 million package was designated for drug rehabilitation programs (Ranada, 2016b, 2016c).

Lopez noted that there were also preliminary agreements pertaining to infrastructure in mining and energy investments between Filipino and Chinese firms worth US\$11.2 billion (Calonzo & Yap, 2016). Additionally, thirteen bilateral

cooperation agreements were also signed by the Philippine and Chinese governments. Duterte and Xi agreed to increase cooperation, not only in terms of trade, but also in the areas of cultural, tourism, and maritime affairs (<http://bbc.com>, 2016).

The bilateral dialogue in Beijing also resulted in the Philippines inclusion in China's BRI. The BRI is the centerpiece of China's foreign and economic policy, and involves establishing a trade and infrastructure network inspired by the ancient Silk Road trading route (<http://ndrc.gov.cn>, 2015). It is projected to eventually link Asian markets with their European counterparts (<http://ndrc.gov.cn>, 2015). Duterte returned to Beijing on May 15, 2017 to attend the first BRI summit. In his speech at that forum, he confirmed that the BRI dovetails with the Philippines' infrastructure plans under its "Build, Build, Build" program, for which China has guaranteed its support through donating billions of dollars (Ranada, 2016c, 2017a).

According to Philippine Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez III, the infrastructure project between China and the Philippines would cover ports and airport construction and contribute to lowering shipping costs. Dominguez observed that this development would benefit the growing market of Philippine electronics industry (Yi, 2017). During the summit, the Philippines received a US\$7 million grant from China for the construction of two bridges in Metro Manila. However, this amount pales in comparison with the US\$9 billion loan pledged by China during Duterte's first state visit on October 19, 2016 (Manhit, 2017).

The Duterte government also used its chairmanship of ASEAN during its 50th anniversary summit to emphasize the value of BRI for the regional organization (Xinhua, 2017). As the rotating chair of ASEAN in 2017, Duterte persuaded his fellow ASEAN leaders, advocating that the BRI complements the ASEAN integration to "stimulate growth and improve market access as it facilitates connectivity" (<http://news.abs-cbn.com>, 2016b).

China also extended its support for Duterte's highly controversial war on drugs and urged the broader international community to do the same (Agence Frances-Presse, 2016). Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang even enjoined the United Nations Human Rights Council to reverse its decision to condemn extra-judicial killings in the Philippines. Geng called on the international community to respect the Philippines' sovereignty regarding its own narcotics issue (Flores, 2017). Through its official news service, Xinhua, China acknowledged Duterte's keenness to repair previously strained relations between the two countries and recognized such move as a sign of policy pragmatism. Further, Xinhua highlighted Duterte's opposition to colluding with "external meddlers" in regional territorial issues, alluding to the United States (Phillips, 2016). In contrast to the criticisms levied by the United States and EU against his war on drugs, Duterte insisted that China "does not go around insulting people" (Ranada, 2016c).

The United States Increased Aid Allocation

While in Beijing during his state visit on October 20, 2016, Duterte advanced the even more startling announcement of the Philippines' "separation" from the United States to align with China and Russia (Blanchard, 2016). Duterte

announced his country's "separation" from the United States in terms of military and economic relations (Ranada, 2016c). He explicitly observed that the Philippines would be economically dependent on China for a long time, and argued his preference for "the oriental way," which he believed differed greatly from a U.S. or pro-Western approach (Ranada, 2016c). Immediately after these remarks, Philippine cabinet officials downplayed Duterte's statements emphasizing that economic relations with the West would continue (Ranada, 2016c) and the term "separation" only meant that the Philippines would seek to establish linkages with other Asian neighbors alongside the United States (Reuters, 2016c). In the same vein, U.S. Department of State spokesperson John Kirby confirmed that cooperation between the two states' military forces continues as government-to-government contacts remain stable (Fonbuena, 2016), while then Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay subsequently confirmed that the Duterte administration is committed to the EDCA and that no review plans were underway—seemingly contradicting his own president (Brago, 2016).

On October 21, 2016—one day after his pronouncement of separating from the United States—Duterte attempted to further spin what he meant by his remarks during his four-day state visit to Beijing. According to Duterte, "separation" did not equate to severance of diplomatic ties, but rather was a departure from the usual Philippines foreign policy, which dovetails with that of the United States (Morales, 2016). For him, the U.S.-Philippines alliance remains a vital relationship for his country. Duterte's spokesman, Ernesto Abella, explained that the president's remarks on "separation" for the Philippines meant charting a more independent Philippine foreign policy. Abella added that Duterte sought to rebalance the Philippines' foreign policy by depending less on its traditional U.S. ally and establishing more intensive economic and military links with China, Japan, and South Korea (Morales, 2016).

Amidst Duterte's strong tirades against the United States and conciliatory statements toward China, U.S. provision of foreign aid continued. In fact, the Philippines received US\$120 million worth of foreign assistance—its largest allocation from the United States since 2000 (Dancel, 2016). The US\$120 million allocation is comprised of the annual military aid of US\$79 million with an additional US\$42 million from the US Southeast Asia Maritime Initiative (Dancel, 2016). The trend in increasing aid allocation to the Philippines further affirms that the South China Sea remains a core strategic interest to Washington (Hamzah, 2016).

Minor adjustments, however, have been made in the security arrangements between the United States and the Philippines. Defense Secretary Lorenzana noted that some changes have occurred in ongoing joint military exercises between the Philippine army and their U.S. counterparts, where these have become less combat-focused (Reuters, 2016a). In addition, annual naval exercises such as the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training and Marine Amphibious Landing Exercise called PHIBLEX will be discarded (<http://abc.net.au>, 2016). Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder), a war-game exercise, would continue, but will refocus on "humanitarian, engineering, and civic action activities," (Reuters, 2016a). Small-unit exercises that include "special operations, counterterrorism, and anti-narcotics" would persist but more selectively. Amid Duterte's threat of ending joint military exercises, only one joint patrol exercise within the Philippines' twelve-mile territorial waters has been officially canceled (Reuters, 2016a).

The change in leadership in the United States after Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential campaign also signaled a reset in relations between the United States and the Philippines. With President Trump's ascension to power, the United States also changed its tone from criticizing Duterte's controversial war on drugs, complete with extra-judicial killings, to at least tacitly supporting this policy. In a leaked conversation which transpired in May 2, 2017, Trump reportedly openly praised Duterte's war on drugs, congratulating the latter in doing an "unbelievable job" (Scahill et al., 2016). In contrast to Obama, Trump expressed his support for Duterte, thus projecting signs of a potential revival in U.S.-Philippines cooperation (Cook, 2016b).

The Philippines' Burden-sharing Strategy

By charting a more independent foreign policy for the Philippines in relation to the United States, it is apparent that the Duterte government is employing an opportunistic ploy to extract benefits from China while distancing itself from Washington. The three significant areas mentioned above: Belt and Road Initiative, U.S. foreign aid, and War on Drugs clearly demonstrated how the Philippines lessened its burden-sharing with the United States by leveraging on a very open and willing China. Recognizing that the institutional mechanisms that would otherwise enforce the PCA ruling are lacking, and that the Philippines' weak defense capabilities would do little to deter China from pressing its sovereign claims in the South China Sea, the Duterte government has instead resorted to embracing China's preference for bilateral talks. This has afforded the Philippines the chance to diversify its policy options by normalizing relations with China, and consequently benefitting from bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries. But obviously, China is very interested in offsetting the imposition of the PCA's landmark ruling so it can resume its reclamation activities in the South China Sea (Wong, 2017b). In this context, China seeks to appease Duterte's whims by supporting his war on drugs to ease past Sino-Philippine strains that developed under the rule of his immediate predecessor.

However, establishing relations with China has not extended to completely terminating Manila's security arrangements with Washington. Notwithstanding Duterte's confusing views of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, Former Department of Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario argues that the Philippines must continue to recognize that the close relationship still ultimately guarantees its protection from potential Chinese aggression (<http://abs-cbnnews>, 2016). But a new trend in Philippine foreign affairs has also started to emerge. By welcoming China's preference for bilateral negotiations, Duterte has found an alternative to relieve the Philippines' from its burden sharing with the United States. In leveraging the "China card" cast on the heightened U.S.-Sino rivalry, the Philippines has bolstered its critical role in Washington's counterbalancing strategy against Beijing.

As China continues to gain a foothold in the contested seas through its expansive reclamation efforts, the United States has deemed it critical to prevent China from having further access through the Luzon Strait that lies between the Philippines and Taiwan (Cook, 2016a). If Chinese nuclear submarines successfully transit in this path, their missiles can launch for a first or second strike on the continental United States (Cook, 2016a). This critically highlights the Philippines'

indispensable geostrategic position in the first island chain that guarantees the preservation of America's security interests and deterrence capabilities from any attack, both in the Pacific and within its territory. Also, this strongly supports the contention that despite Duterte's outbursts against key U.S. officials and his pro-China leanings, Washington continues to value its alliance with Manila even if it comes with the hefty price of downplaying its critical tone regarding the alleged human rights violations of the Philippine government's anti-narcotics policy. Thus, based on the proposed burden sharing analytical approach, one may reasonably conclude that the Philippines has been successful in maximizing economic benefits from China, while reaping the rewards of increasing U.S. engagement.

The Marawi Uprising

The Marawi uprising is a significant event within the review of the post arbitration period that further demonstrates the Philippines' burden sharing toward the United States. It illustrates the viability of the decades-long experience of U.S.-Philippine alliance in fighting terrorism that led to the liberation of Marawi City from the ISIS-linked Maute brothers. This section illuminates how the well-established counterterrorism intervention of the United States has provided swift military assistance and humanitarian aid to the AFP. However, the Marawi crisis also cemented the growing role of China as viable alternative to the United States. Noteworthy here is the Chinese involvement not just in the realm of humanitarian aid but also in the provision of arms and weapons.

Testing the U.S.-Philippines Alliance

On May 23, 2017, clashes erupted between elements of the Filipino military and a local terrorist group that labelled itself "Maute" in Marawi City, the capital of Lanao del Sur province in Mindanao, the Philippines (Fonbuena & Bueza, 2017.) The military had previously launched a joint operation involving the AFP and the Philippine National Police to capture high-value targets affiliated with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Maute group. Clashes erupted as the military approached the target area. As firefights continued, the Maute group gradually laid siege on the city. The media reported that the Maute group held the entire *Amai Pakpak* Medical Center hostage, while some news outlets speculated that *Dansalan* College Marawi was burned to the ground (Hincks & Manos, 2017).

As the clashes unfolded, Former Philippine Press Secretary Abella, accompanying Duterte on a press briefing in Moscow, confirmed that the president had declared martial law throughout all of Mindanao (Reuters, 2017a). Foreign Affairs Secretary Allan Peter Cayetano also announced that Duterte was cutting short his four-day trip to Russia as a result of the escalating conflict at home (Reuters, 2017a). As the battle in Marawi continued to escalate, the United States immediately expressed its support for the Philippines on its counterterrorism efforts (Gutierrez, 2017). In a press statement on 25 May 2017, Former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer reaffirmed the U.S.-Philippines alliance and guaranteed U.S. support in response to the terrorist attack (Javier, 2017).

After three weeks of intensive clashes, the AFP was still grappling to take control of the besieged city. Philippine troops struggled with conducting full-scale urban warfare against the Maute group, prompting the AFP to seek U.S.

assistance (Panti, 2016). In response, the U.S. Embassy in the Philippines confirmed that U.S. Special Forces would be aiding military operations in Marawi (Lewis & Mogato, 2017). However, on June 6, 2017, the AFP insisted that U.S. military participation was limited to technical support, and that the U.S. troops would be excluded from any combat operations (Lewis, 2017). The AFP further clarified that such “technical assistance” would be constrained to dispatching drones for intelligence-gathering to identify the precise location of the armed militias and to improve operation coordination (Lewis, 2017). Nonetheless, the United States also provided weapons to AFP battalions through the Joint United States Military Assistance (JUSMAG) (Legaspi, 2017). Under the U.S. government’s Counterterrorism Train and Equip Program, JUSMAG supplied equipment and weapons that include machine guns, carbines, pistols, and grenade launchers (Legaspi, 2017).

In another press conference conducted on June 11, 2017, Duterte denied that he sought any support from Washington for the Marawi siege (Reuters, 2017b). In fact, the president asserted, he was unaware of U.S. help until the arrival of the U.S. Special Forces and clarified that he did not approach Washington for any such assistance (Reuters, 2017b). However, at the same time, Duterte pointed out that majority of Philippine soldiers wanted the assistance of the U.S. Special Forces. He observed that most Philippine troops were pro-United States, given their years of training in that country (Ranada, 2017b), and added that with decades of joint military exercises behind it, the AFP had developed a special rapport with its U.S. counterpart, leading to better coordination and high-level interoperability (Ranada, 2017b). In further defending the U.S. technical assistance that materialized, the AFP spokesman for the Army’s First Infantry Division, Lieutenant Colonel Jo-Ar Herrera, stated that there was an existing counterterrorism agreement between the AFP and the U.S. military, in addition to the Balikatan exercises, training, and technical assistance, and other elements (Mangosing, 2017).

Coming to Duterte’s defense, Foreign Affairs Secretary Cayetano argued that U.S. participation in the Marawi crisis did not need the commander-in-chief’s approval. Cayetano stated that both the United States and the Philippines were bound by the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the EDCA (<http://interaksyon.com>, 2017). Similarly, Justice Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre explained that under the EDCA, the sharing of intelligence and equipment between Philippine and U.S. forces was legal—the only prohibition under the Philippine constitution was the involvement of the U.S. troops in combat operations on Philippine soil (Punay, 2017).

As military operations in Marawi intensified, Duterte met privately with former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Manila on August 7, 2017 (Newman, 2017). Tillerson was in the Philippines to meet ASEAN community officials for the U.S.-ASEAN economic and security dialogue (<https://state.gov>, 2017). In contrast to his previous tirades against U.S. officials, Duterte called himself Tillerson’s “humble friend” (Lema, 2017). In reaffirming enduring U.S.-Philippines security cooperation, Tillerson promised that the United States would be providing the AFP with Cessna tracing aircraft and additional drones to improve the AFP’s surveillance and intelligence-gathering for the Marawi crisis (Williams, 2017).

Aside from offering security assistance, the United States also extended support by delivering humanitarian aid to Philippine civilians and communities affected by the ongoing fighting in Marawi. According to U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim, the United States' continuing coordination of assistance toward the Philippines was predicated on the two countries long-standing alliance (<https://ph.usembassy.gov>, 2017). Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States provided critical health and education services to address the immediate needs of affected residents (<https://ph.usembassy.gov>, 2017). On September 5, 2017, the USAID committed approximately US\$14.3 million for emergency relief and recovery assistance. This aid was also intended to coordinate humanitarian relief operations and contribute to the long-term rehabilitation of Marawi (<http://inquirer.net>, 2017).

The Chinese Alternative

Attesting to the deepening of Sino-Philippine relations, China also expressed its support for the counterterrorism efforts in Marawi. On June 28, 2017, the Chinese government confirmed the shipment of sniper rifles and ammunition worth US\$7.35 million (<http://shanghaidaily.com>, 2017). Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Zhao Jianhua stated that a second batch of Chinese military equipment was also projected. According to Zhao, this aid marked a new era of military relations between China and the Philippines (<http://shanghaidaily.com>, 2017). He also added that this new chapter in Sino-Philippine relations could lead to the possibility of exploring joint Sino-Philippine counterterrorism exercises and intelligence-sharing (Ranada, 2017c).

During the ceremony to turn over the initial Chinese contribution of military equipment at former Clark Air Base in Pampanga on June 28, 2017, Duterte asserted that China's military aid was a result of the two agreements, amounting to Php590 million, that the Philippines had signed with China after the eruption of the Marawi crisis (Ranada, 2017d). But Duterte's gestures during the ceremony were in stark contrast to his reluctant recognition of the technical assistance provided by U.S. Special Forces in Marawi (Fonbuena, 2017).

In addition to military equipment, China also extended rehabilitation support for the Marawi crisis. In July 28, 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid a state visit to the Philippines under the invitation of Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Cayetano. According to Wang, his visit signaled the "high-level serious commitment in order to build mutual trust and expand all areas of cooperation and support for the Philippines" (Philippine News Agency, 2017). Wang also announced that China would assist the Philippines in rebuilding Marawi after peace and stability was restored (Wong, 2017a, 2017c). The Chinese government had already donated Php15 million for rehabilitation efforts in the war-torn city (Ranada, 2017b); that donation was intended to supplement the government's health and welfare initiatives (Morallo, 2017).

Over the subsequent months, China's provision of aid continued. On September 13, 2017, Chinese Ambassador Zhao provided Php65 million to medically assist wounded AFP troops (Macas, 2017). This added to the previous donation of Php15 million for rehabilitation efforts and another Php5 million to rehabilitate wounded AFP soldiers (Macas, 2017).

Marawi Showdown: The United States versus China

On October 23, 2017, Defense Secretary Lorenzana, confirmed that the battle in Marawi was over (Ng & Mogato, 2017). A few days before, Duterte already announced the liberation of the city even though combat operations were still ongoing. Lorenzana thanked the United States and China for the support they extended in crushing the Islamist rebel (Ng & Mogato, 2017).

The trends assessed relating to the Marawi crisis revealed that compared with previous eruptions of terrorist- or insurgency-related attacks in war-torn Mindanao, the case of the Maute group signifies a new chapter in the Philippines' strategic relations. The Marawi crisis presented the country with a new opportunity to forge strategic collaborations beyond those already in place with the United States. A willing and accommodating China has emerged: one keen to seize every opportunity to maintain its growing partnership with the Philippines. Based on its involvement with the Marawi crisis, China is not only aiming to extend strategic or humanitarian assistance, but also to establish links with the Philippine military. This manifested in a series of high-level diplomatic visits from Chinese Foreign Ministry officials emphasizing that their country's financial donations for the crisis also sought to address the health conditions of the AFP troops wounded in the Marawi uprising.

An evaluation of the Marawi crisis confirms that the existing U.S.-Philippines alliance underpins the preservation of the current Philippine political system and serves its national security interest. Acting as a litmus test, this case further underscores that the strategic alliance between the Philippines and the United States remains intact. Even with Duterte's contempt toward the United States, the Philippines still depended on its American ally when it needed to address its most serious internal security threats. Through the invocation of EDCA and MDT and the deeply entrenched pro-U.S. culture within the AFP, Duterte understood the concrete limitations to aligning strategically with China or forging closer geopolitical ties with Russia.

Although the emergence of the Maute group and its subsequent destruction has emphasized the indispensable value of the U.S.-Philippines security alliance, it would be short-sighted to ignore China's growing support for Philippine counterterrorism efforts. China is making a persistent effort to engage with the Philippines by taking calculated steps to intensify its participation in the Marawi crisis. Notwithstanding the U.S.-Philippines alliance agreements that allow the United States to deploy technical military support, China's growing humanitarian aid and weapons provision highlights its determination to exploit political opportunities afforded by Duterte's skepticism regarding the United States when the opportunity arises.

Overall, the Marawi crisis confirms that regardless of challenges and differences between the Philippines and the United States, similar strategic interests—in this case, the Philippines' continued political stability and a mutual U.S.-Philippines determination to conduct war against terrorism—can persuade both states to compromise and work within their alliance framework. However, with China's greater diplomatic and economic involvement in the Philippines' affairs, the latter is also gradually gaining leverage against the United States in the area of counter-terrorism (Agence Frances-Presse, 2017)

Thus, the active roles and contributions undertaken by rival great powers that have benefited the Philippines fit within the burden-sharing argument advanced by this study. With Duterte's anti-U.S. sentiments, China seized the opportunity to enter the realm of counterterrorism—an arena where the United States has a well-established track record under its formal alliance with the Philippines (Robinson, Johnston, & Oak, 2016, p. 114). Instead of fully relying on the Americans, the Philippines also received weapons and development aid from China. Undoubtedly, defeating ISIS is considered a centerpiece to U.S. national security interests, but the pressure on the United States to demonstrate its longstanding security partnership is also quite palpable, especially under the Duterte government's willingness to afford China the spotlight.

Therefore, the Marawi siege became a "showdown" between the United States and China as their respective foreign aid apparatuses took centerstage and the Philippines emerged at the most advantageous spot. Happily exploiting the "China card" and pragmatically placing its territorial disputes with this country on the back burner, the Philippines has visibly demonstrated that under Duterte it is determined to reduce what it views as its traditional strategic subordination by the United States. The Philippines, which, according to its current president, has always been portrayed as "the lapdog of Washington," has actually reaffirmed its strategic importance within the U.S.-Philippines alliance framework by diversifying its security ties with a rival great power like China.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Philippines' pivot to China was motivated by the Duterte administration's intent to use the China connection as a leverage against Manila's defense burden sharing relations with its traditional American ally. Amidst Duterte's claims of his country's reorientation to China, as exemplified by the Philippine's de-emphasis of its maritime claims on the South China Sea issue, is the underlying reality that this shift is limited to diplomatic and economic policy sectors rather than extending substantially into the strategic policy realm. In reality, the Philippines remains committed to its security agreements with the United States. Duterte's public musings to rescind EDCA have proven to be largely rhetorical. The crisis in Marawi City perpetuated by ISIS-linked militia called the "Maute group" was a clear litmus test for the durability of the U.S.-Philippine alliance. The outcome of the Marawi uprising—a complete obliteration of the jihadist elements that spurred the temporary and failed takeover of that city—confirmed that the U.S.-Philippine security relations underpin the preservation of the Philippines political system and national security interests.

Although the United States continues to be the Philippines' key alliance partner, it would be short-sighted to ignore how Manila was able to diversify its foreign policy options as demonstrated by China's growing engagement with Duterte in the early days after he assumed office in May 2016. It is apparent that the current Philippine president exploited renewed Sino-Philippine relations as leverage against what he viewed as an unsatisfactory burden sharing relationship with Washington.

Hence, this confirms the main argument of this study that highlights burdens sharing dynamics. The Philippines' benefited in exploiting the Sino-American

rivalry to relieve traditional pressures generated by American demands that the Philippines “do more,” particularly after President Trump accentuated this aspect of alliance politics in his 2016 presidential campaign.

Ongoing events in the Sino-Philippine relations have serious policy implications. They could undermine the near-century old U.S.-Philippine alliance while President Duterte still holds power. Amidst the deeply rooted pro-U.S. strategic culture that is embedded in Philippine politics and institutions, Washington is confronted with the challenge on how to maintain the relevance of the alliance framework not only to the Philippines but also among other non-NATO allies in the Asia Pacific region. As China continues to “pursue economic and diplomatic opportunities engendered by Duterte’s skepticism against the United States, Manila gains enhanced (if not decisive) leverage vis-a-vis Washington. By leveraging on the “China card” and by downplaying the Philippines’ landmark victory on its maritime claims against China, the Duterte government challenged the Philippines strategic reliance on the United States. Concurrently, it has also prompted the United States to reassess the key role of the Philippines in projecting a continued U.S. strategic presence in the region.

In the case of China, the Philippines continues to enjoy the outcomes of an ideal case scenario underscored by Beijing’s willingness to shower Manila with investment pledges, soft loans and humanitarian donations. But if the Philippines incurs a “worse case” scenario as depicted by Chinese debt trap, it may eventually have no choice but to surrender its sovereign rights in the South China Sea.

Thus, in the face of a “China challenge” which is far from completely transparent but is clearly expedient in nature, the Philippines—even under Duterte—is best advised to find new ways for maintaining and exploiting its political, economic and strategic ties with the United States. The recent obliteration of the pro-ISIS Maute group serves as tangible evidence that this policy avenue best serves the Philippines’ national security interests. With the U.S. alliance still firmly in place, China’s strategy of opportunistically engaging the Philippines while simultaneously militarizing the South China Sea can perhaps be tempered with the passage of time without Manila losing the benefits of economic and other material gains Beijing can provide it. Such an outcome gives the Philippines a better chance to resume pressing the arbitral ruling so favorable to itself as an instrument to reconcile its territorial differences with China while still enjoying U.S. security guarantees.

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