Tragedy of Small Power Politics: Duterte, Philippines & the South China Sea Disputes

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Outline

- Anatomy of PH foreign policy-formulation
- Why PH filed the arbitration case
- How PH responded to the arbitration case
- Duterte’s emerging China strategy
- Strategic Risks and Economic Opportunities
Theoretical Framework

- Moravcsik Liberal Theory:
  1. Significance of domestic political leadership & their strategic preferences
  2. Balance of power configurations frame foreign policy responses
  3. Pursuit of absolute gains for utility-maximization

- Putnam’s ‘two-level’ game:
  1. Role of domestic constituencies
  2. Optimal point of convergence in possible zones of compromise.
Philippine Foreign Policy

- Focus on internal security, outsource external security to the United States

- Constitutional restriction on defense spending: shall not exceed education budget.

- Reactive rather than proactive

- Susceptible to interest groups, lobby pressure & media scrutiny

- Shaped by medium-term considerations of specific administrations, not long-term national interest

- Weak foreign policy bureaucracy
Republic of the Philippines
Military Expenditure 1988-2013

Data: SIPRI

JS chart by amCharts
Post-Cold War: Strategic Swingers

- Cory Aquino (1986-1992) – tilt to US, normalize with China
- Gloria Arroyo (2010-2010) – From balancing to bandwagonign, but ended up equi-balancing
- Benigno Aquino (2010-2016) – (Soft) counter-Balancing
- Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022) – Bandwagoning/decoupling?
PH Lawfare strategy

- Born out of desperation after the Scarborough Shoal crisis in mid-2012

1. Backdoor channel backfired
2. US commitment questionable
3. China didn’t honor mutual disengagement
4. Aquino under domestic pressure
5. No clear support from the ASEAN
Repercussions of the PH Lawfare

- Collapse of high-level bilateral institutionalized dialogue
- De facto siege on Chinese large-scale investments in the Philippines
- More explicit PH tilt into the US strategic orbit (e.g., EDCA)
- Heightened Tensions in the South China Sea
Revolt of the Periphery

- Duterte as ‘political outsider’ *par excellence*:
- Ideological-formation during the Vietnam-war period
- Close to revolutionary thinkers such as Joma Sison (Communist) and Nur Misuari (Moro nationalist)
- Spent bulk of his political career outside the Manila Metropolis
- Strongman of Davao City, self-described ‘socialist’
- Won a ‘landslide’ election victory, riding on grievance politics against the establishment
- Promised decentralization, ‘war on drugs’, and end to ‘imperial Manila’ rule
- Developed ‘Anti-Fragility’?
Foreign Policy Position

- "I will be chartering a [foreign policy] course [for the Philippines] on its own and will not be dependent on the United States,"

- "They [US military] could not use any other place [in the Philippines] without the knowledge or until there is advice from the [Philippine] Armed Forces,"

- If China will "build [Philippines] a train around Mindanao, build me train from Manila to Bicol... Build [for us] a train [going to] Batangas, for the six years that I'll be president, I'll shut up [on the South China Sea disputes]."

- "I will not go to war because we will not win it. It will be a massacre. I will not waste the lives of Filipino soldiers and policemen. Ano ako, gago? Patay lahat iyan [What am I, a fool? All will die,"
Duterte’s Foreign Policy

- Uncompromising domestically, pragmatic abroad
- Direct engagement with China rather than confrontation – appointed Ramos as special envoy, met Chinese ambassador several times, including before The Hague verdict came out
- De-multilateralize the South China Sea disputes, focus on bilateral track
- PH-US relations important, but not so special like before – broken one taboo after the other, provoked unease in Washington
- Important to revive bilateral ties, bring in Chinese infrastructure investments, particularly in Mindanao
Prospects and Challenges

• Duterte rapidly emerging as the new strongman, most powerful president since Ferdinand Marcos –

• Taking a strategic leap of faith to engage with China, but not clear if there will be any breakthrough

• Still maintaining the EDCA, and existing security ties with America, but diplomatic friction over human rights and the South China Sea strategy

• Could switch back to a counter-balancing if diplomatic outreach to China backfires, considering strong anti-China sentiment in the country
NET* TRUST IN IN CHINA, AUG 1994 TO JUN 2015

* NET trust = % Much trust minus Little trust correctly rounded. Don’t Know and Refused responses are not shown.
Watch Out For...

- If China imposes an ADIZ in the Spratlys...

- If China & the Philippines fail to secure a agreement on joint exploitation of fisheries in the Scarborough Shoal...

- If clashes in high-seas, accidental or intentional...

- If domestic political conditions in the Philippines deteriorate (i.e., HR, martial law), and response from the West..

- Duterte popularity plummets, need for rallying round the flag...