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What Duterte Portends for Philippine Foreign Policy

By Richard Javad Heydarian

Synopsis

Contrary to his reputation as a foul-mouthed provincial statesman, the Philippines' incoming president Rodrigo Duterte may very well end up as a sophisticated and nuanced geopolitical player over the South China Sea disputes and oversee the revival of Philippine-China relations.

Commentary

DESPITE HIS tough-guy image and penchant for off-the-cuff comments, even those laced with profanity, the Philippines presumptive president is not the "Trump of the East" as the Western media has put it. Though broadly known as a "loose cannon", Duterte, however, will most likely adopt a more pragmatic and constructive foreign policy, especially towards South China Sea disputes.

Similar to the Ramos (1992-1998) and Arroyo (2001-2010) administrations, the incoming president is expected to adopt an equilateral balancing strategy vis-à-vis America and China, offering cooperation with each superpower, depending on the issue at hand and the Philippines' national interest. In this context, his election could well portend a shift in Philippine foreign policy posture towards China, though how significant a change this will be is still a matter of speculation given his unpredictability.

An Unlikely Winner

Over the past few years, the Philippines has emerged as one of the most vociferous critics of China. Under the Benigno Aquino administration, the Southeast Asian country has fortified its security alliance with America and Japan, sought to mobilise

ASEAN against China, and made the unprecedented decision to take Beijing to international court in order to settle the maritime disputes.

Duterte, the firebrand and controversial mayor of Davao City, was the leading choice of a large plurality (38.5 per cent) of voters. He comfortably edged out his closest rival, seasoned technocrat Manuel "Mar" Roxas, by more than five million votes. Pleased with the smooth and unequivocal process of democratic transition, the Philippine Stock Exchange hit a nine-month high after months of nail-biting anticipation. Major political parties have also begun to bandwagon behind the new leader, giving him a strong grip over the legislature.

In fairness to Duterte, unlike Donald Trump, he actually boasts more than two decades of executive experience, having transformed, albeit with an iron fist, the southern city of Davao from 'no man's land' into a the 'Singapore of Mindanao'. A self-described "socialist", with both Christian and Muslim roots, he is also credited for launching various progressive programmes to protect the interests of minority groups in Davao.

Long dismissed as a political outsider with limited resources, Duterte emerged as a popular choice amid a climate of "grievance politics", promising swift, decisive solutions to endemic concerns such as crime, drugs, and corruption.

Duterte also benefited from his opponents' pitfalls. Vice-President Jejomar Binay, who was a stellar mayor of Makati City, the country's financial hub, struggled with corruption scandals, which alienated many voters. Roxas, the anointed successor of incumbent President Benigno Aquino, faced a growing public outcry over the lack of inclusive development and collapsing public infrastructure in the country, especially in the vote-rich national capital region.

Neophyte Senator Grace Poe, a former American citizen and a perennial leader in surveys, struggled with legal challenges over her eligibility. She also alienated many middle-class voters by associating with reviled oligarchs and establishment politicians. In response, Duterte was able to effectively portray his opponents as either incompetent or corrupt or puppets of the ruling establishment. The media-savvy Duterte presented himself via a sleek social media blitzkrieg as an "authentic", independent candidate with the requisite political will to address law-and-order concerns in the country. He also promised more political autonomy and fiscal resources to peripheral regions. It was a winning strategy.

The Geopolitical Realist

To appease domestic and international critics, Duterte has promised to become more statesmanlike, shun profanity and provocative language, and assemble a highly competent and inclusive presidential Cabinet. His presidential cabinet mostly fields long-time allies, technocrats and stalwarts from the Ramos (1992-1998) and Arroyo (2001-2010) administrations.

With the Philippines slated to assume the chairmanship of ASEAN next year, the Duterte administration is under pressure to prove its geopolitical mettle. Duterte will

have to transform from campaign-trail brawler into a predictable and dignified head of state.

Duterte's pragmatic streak is most evident in his foreign policy outlook. He has consistently expressed his willingness to hold direct dialogue with the Chinese leadership and, if conditions are right, negotiate a joint development agreement in contested waters. For Duterte, development imperatives trump deterrence, thus his explicit welcoming of massive Chinese investments in the Philippines' infrastructure landscape. In fact, the Chinese ambassador was among the first dignitaries that Duterte met after his stunning election victory.

In one of his speeches, the incoming president went so far as telling China to "just build (the Philippines) a train around Mindanao, build me a train from Manila to Bicol ... build me a train (going to) Batangas. For the six years that I'll be president, I'll shut up (about sovereignty disputes)." Outlining his differences with the incumbent, Duterte has even shed doubt on the utility of the Philippines' arbitration case against China, raising the possibility that he may simply snub (a likely favorable) verdict as an advisory opinion in order to re-open high-level communication channels with Beijing, paving the way for a modus vivendi across disputed waters.

Relations with the US

Despite his well-known association with leftist-communist groups, and his efforts to reach out to China, the incoming president cannot afford to alienate America, which exerts huge influence on the Philippine security establishment. Thus, Duterte will most likely maintain robust security relations with America, particularly in the realm of counter-terrorism.

President Barack Obama was the first head of state to congratulate Duterte upon his victory, underlining Washington's interest in preserving warm relations between the two allies. Nonetheless, Duterte, who has often expressed reservations vis-à-vis American security commitments to his country, is expected to drive a harder bargain, especially compared to the Aquino administration, before granting Americans more basing access under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

The Duterte administration's priority will be to maintain balanced relations with both China and America, refusing to jump into one camp against the other. Ultimately, the controversial provincial mayor could end up as a more adept player in the regional geopolitical landscape than his aristocratic predecessors.

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