

On Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte, US-bashing, and the South China Sea

Saturday 22 October 2016, by [HEYDARIAN Richard Javad](#), [MOLLMAN Steve](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2016).

Four years ago, China seized the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in an act of aggression that provoked protests by Filipinos in cities around the world [1]. A large coral atoll with a reef-rimmed lagoon, Scarborough Shoal lies about 120 nautical miles (222 km, 138 miles) from the Philippine coast. China could create a "strategic triangle" for controlling the South China Sea by building an artificial island and military base there, and the Philippine's new president, Rodrigo Duterte, seems willing to essentially let China have it [2] (formally giving Beijing sovereignty could be grounds for his impeachment [3]).

That's a dramatic policy shift from his predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, who challenged Beijing's aggression in an international tribunal and won, with a July 12 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague [4] invalidating China's sweeping maritime claims [5]. It was a huge victory for the Philippines, but by that time Duterte was in power, and he's seemed uninterested in using the result to rally international pressure against China.

In recent months, Duterte has been cozying up to Beijing while lashing out at the US, [6] along with the EU, UN, and human rights groups, for their criticism of his anti-drug war, which has seen thousands killed outside the due process of the law. This week, Duterte will make a state visit to China [7].

Duterte's shift toward Beijing looks to be a major change not only for the Philippines, but for the entire Asia-Pacific region, argues Richard Javad Heydarian, a political scientist at De La Salle University in Manila and author of *Asia's New Battlefield: The USA, China, and the Struggle for the Western Pacific*.

We asked Heydarian how Duterte is viewed by China, how his relationship with the US will evolve, and how the mercurial leader will be perceived in the Philippines after his "honeymoon period" ends. The interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Quartz: In terms of the Philippines dealing with China's aggression in the South China Sea, how might things have been different with someone besides Duterte in power?

Heydarian: I think if Aquino were still in power or his anointed successor Mar Roxas were to be elected as the Philippine president, and the arbitration outcome was as straightforward against China, then most likely the Philippines would have adopted what I call a Nicaragua option. I'm looking at the precedence of Nicaragua vs. the US in the 1980s [8], where the US, similar to China, boycotted the whole arbitration case at the International Court of Justice and then rejected the unfavorable outcome. Then Nicaragua went every single year to the UN in different international fora, embarrassing the US, calling it a bully, and trying to mobilize the international community to force the US to comply with it. Eventually the US complied in an indirect, partial way.

I think that would have been the option of the Philippines, that immediately after the release of the

arbitration outcome, the Philippines would have released a very strongly worded statement in the ASEAN, in the G-20, in the G-7 summit, in the UN General Assembly. Of course China could turn it down right and left, but the accumulative impact would have been huge for China.

In fact, the Chinese were somehow worried about that scenario, that the Philippines would have been on this very aggressive diplomatic offensive. Not to mention the Philippines would extend assistance to Vietnam, Indonesia, and other countries in terms of their own potential legal warfare. The Philippines could have called on other countries to join it in a class suit, like legal warfare, and also use arbitration to give a legal pretext for the United States, Japan Self-Defense Forces, the Royal Australian Navy to conduct more aggressive and sustained so-called freedom-of-navigation operations close to artificially created islands in the Spratly chain of islands.

All of these options were on the table and then Duterte said, "None of them." Duterte very clearly said, "This is a purely bilateral issue. It's between the Philippines and China, I'm not going to raise it in any international forum, including the ASEAN."

What has been the impact of Duterte's heated rhetoric against the US?

It looked like Duterte was pivoting away from the US toward the Chinese camp. This is where a lot of countries were caught off guard. Suddenly now you have this strange situation whereby it's Singapore, the most economically exposed country to China, that is calling for compliance to the arbitration outcome. Of course, you know that they're having their own tiffs with China over the issue [9].

Duterte's saying, "I'm going to get out of the US Alliance and I'm going to build a new alliance with China and Russia." This was a huge, huge swing from the Aquino period of counter-balancing against China, of siding with the US and Japan against China, to now suddenly saying, "I don't want to be with the US. I want to join the Chinese and Russians." Even if this is so far just pure rhetoric, if not bluster, it has had huge short-term impact.

The most immediate was that Duterte single-handedly undermined America's plans of using the legal warfare as a pretext to step up its military footprint, along with France, to constrain China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. [US] president [Barack] Obama wanted to use the arbitration outcome ... to call upon the international community to pressure China to comply with it. But because of Duterte's 180-degree shift on the position, president Obama looked isolated during the ASEAN summit. Some of the EU officials also told me, "Why should we take the hardline position when the very country that initiated the case is suddenly sounding completely different?"

There was definitely huge short-term shock to all those prepared for a "containment" strategy against China—not a containment, because China is too important and too economically integrated to contain. You can constrain China by mobilizing diplomatic pressure, by conducting more multilateral exercises among like-minded countries. [But] Duterte essentially cleared the deck so the poker game had to start from scratch.

How will Duterte's relationship with the US evolve?

There's this huge commotion that perhaps under Duterte the Philippines is going to be the next Venezuela, that Duterte is a Hugo Chavez and he's going to extract the Philippines out of the US camp and jump into bed with the Chinese and Russians. I think that's going a little bit too far. I think the more likely scenario for Duterte is that he's going to go the Erdogan or Turkish way. If you have noticed Turkey, they have a very colorful strongman, too, called Mr. Erdogan.

Erdogan has a very questionable human rights record. Whenever [he] has come under attack [for

this] by the US and EU... he just threatens them with access to military bases, or he conducts diplomatic visits to Russia and he flirts with China. But at the end of the day, military-to-military relations continue despite all the diplomatic toxicity.

I think Duterte may tinker here and there with existing agreements with the US, particularly those exercises in the South China Sea that are a sore in the eye of the Chinese. In exchange for that, [he might] ask the Chinese to give us concessions in the Scarborough Shoal, in terms of fishery access, and some sort of a non-aggression pact, whereby the Chinese will give us assurances that they will not impose or implement an ADIZ or any kind of exclusion zone within areas where we have personnel and territory.

What about the possibility of China building a military base at Scarborough Shoal?

I think the Chinese are going to have a hard time suspending any construction activities in the Scarborough Shoal forever. I think it's possible the Chinese, in the short run, may suspend any construction activities in the Scarborough Shoal to facilitate a warming-up of relations with Duterte.

How does China view Duterte?

The Chinese themselves have some legitimate worries. One is that Duterte's such a mercurial person that there's no assurance that later on he will not turn on China, for whatever reason. He may be powerful, he may be determined, but it's hard to predict him.

The second thing is, they don't know if Duterte will last. That's a problem. There's no guarantee that Duterte can last long in power if he continues to do what he's doing, which is alienating all the important external and domestic variables and forces. So I think the Chinese will think twice before making any huge agreement with him because the sustainability of that agreement is under question.

The Chinese are actually in a very tough position too. They don't know how much should they bet on this guy. He's giving them a unique opportunity—never in the history of the Philippines have you had president like this. But at the same time, the risk is too high. So let's see how wild of a gambler Xi Jinping is, especially as [the Chinese] head toward their own leadership transition in 2017.

So if China doesn't give Duterte a big concession of some sort, what might it give him?

What could happen is some sort of provisional agreement whereby China is the factor in control, but gives the Filipinos access, Philippine fisherman access, to the Scarborough Shoal here and there. If they don't give Duterte anything, then Duterte will not be able to sell any agreement with China, because the Filipino people, who are very anti-China, will say, "Oh, so genius of you, to piss off the Americans and go and beg the Chinese and get nothing in exchange."

Duterte is popular, but so is the United States. The US had a 92% approval rating last year. So maybe Duterte now can pull off this diplomatic flirtation with China, but if the Chinese don't give him anything within a year or so, then Duterte will have no choice but to pivot back to the United States.

What is behind Duterte's attitude toward the US?

His lashing out at the US is a product of three factors. One, it's partly a reflection of his conviction as a leftist, anti-imperialist guy. Second, he's irritated with the US over the human rights criticisms. He really feels this is an interference in his mandate. Third, this is part of his signaling to China that "You can deal with me as an independent leader. Don't worry, the US is not part of the equation at all."

I think he's the first Filipino president who is going to have his first state visit to China, and not to the United States. The symbolic value is huge. Practically all of his predecessors were either very close to the US or always thought twice before criticizing the United States, although they may have harbored some misgivings in private. But this guy is lashing out at the US in such an open way.

Where does Japan come into this?

The Japanese are our top trading partner, top investment partner, and top source of development aid. They're definitely the Philippines' best economic friend. They have always had a good relationship with Duterte, since his mayor days... the biggest investors in Davao were Japanese. In the long game, they will say the big difference is [they] don't have any disputes with the Philippines. [They would say] that "if the Chinese step up their economic investments, we can also step up our economic investments." Japan is very confident.

Does standing up to the US help Duterte look strong when he might otherwise be perceived as weak because of his China approach? How will he be perceived down the road?

Duterte's charisma is largely tied to his macho image. That's the Latin American *caudillos*, the tough man. But it's hard to say where his popularity is coming from. Is it his war on drugs? Is it his standing up tough to the US? It could be a combination of factors. But I think it's most of all because it's his honeymoon period—it's as simple as that. If you look at his approval ratings, it's almost exactly the same as the approval ratings of three or four of his predecessors at this stage in their careers.

Many people think this is just trash talk—this is trash talk and the guy looks tough. [But] if the US begins to downgrade development aid and military aid, and makes visa applications for Filipinos harder, that's when Duterte's going to lose support. Once they get hurt in the purse or in terms of their entry to [travel to] the US, then they're going to speak out: "Ok, maybe the president was foolish."

Steve Mollman

@stevemollman

P.S.

* China's Transition. October 16:

<http://qz.com/807203/political-scientist-richard-javad-heydarian-on-rodrigo-duterte-us-bashing-and-t-he-south-china-sea/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/11/world/asia/philippines-china-naval-standoff/>

[2] <http://qz.com/805474/under-rodrigo-duterte-the-philippines-may-hand-china-the-strategic-pie-e-it-needs-to-take-control-of-the-south-china-sea/>

[3] <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/10/14/1633564/carpio-impeachment-possible-if-dutert>

[e-gives-scarborough](#)

[4] <http://qz.com/729524/chinas-activities-in-the-south-china-sea-are-illegal-and-destroying-the-environment-an-international-court-finds/>

[5] <http://qz.com/705223/where-exactly-did-chinas-nine-dash-line-in-the-south-china-sea-come-from/>

[6] <http://qz.com/789336/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-85-days-of-of-insults-firings-and-killings/>

[7] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/824775/big-business-group-to-join-duterte-in-china>

[8] <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/?sum=367&p1=3&p2=3&case=70&p3=5>

[9] <http://qz.com/803254/amid-tensions-with-china-singapore-is-ramping-up-its-military-training-facilities-in-australia/>