

HORIZONS

Philippines: Duterte's contested 'China policy'

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"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," warned philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. "With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."

This Emersonian principle is especially poignant in matters of geopolitics, when the impact of intractable uncertainty demands constant scrutiny and adjustment.

This brings us to President Duterte's almost de rigueur flip-flopping on our West Philippine Sea policy. Is this about a "great soul" shunning the trappings of "foolish consistency," or is this simply a tragic case of foolish inconsistency by an amateurish mayor-turned-president?

What was, for instance, behind his recent decision to emphasize before the United Nations (UN) General Assembly the finality of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling at The Hague that favored the Philippines over China? After all, in international law, the words of a head of state, who happens to be the constitutionally-designated chief architect of foreign policy, carry immense consequence.

After years-long research and numerous interviews with top officials, I believe the best way to understand our tempestuous foreign policy is this: What we have is a spontaneous "two-level balancing" strategy, whereby there is no single center of gravity but instead multiple veto players shaping our actual foreign policy, particularly toward China.

The upshot of this is the seemingly wild swings in our policy disposition, but in fact this tempestuous surface is simply the symptom of a more fundamental struggle over the soul of Philippine foreign policy. This framework of analysis is partly inspired by American scholar Robert Putnam's "Two-Level Games" theory.

On one hand, Mr. Duterte has sought to pivot away from the West, both for strategic-ideological as well as increasingly personal reasons, notably the prospect of personal sanctions over human rights issues hounding his administration. With Mr. Duterte facing global isolation, China, which has vehemently defended his controversial drug war, has proven to be an irresistible strategic patron.

Concomitantly, the Sino-skeptic defense establishment and broader Philippine public are resisting any alignment with China, with growing success. In his fifth year in office, Mr. Duterte has yet to finalize a single major defense deal with Beijing, while our military conducted close to 300 joint military activities with the United States last year.

In a preliminary 2018 survey conducted with professor Charithie Joaquin of the National Defense College of the Philippines, we found out that a significant number of emerging leaders within the Armed Forces of the Philippines view China as a leading external security threat, even if they welcome greater engagement with Beijing.

Far from unique, these views reflect the broader institutional mindset of the military, which has

consistently emphasized its “constitutional duties to protect our sovereignty and maintain our territorial areas.”

As for the Philippine public, surveys consistently show that nine out of 10 Filipinos favor a tougher stance against China in the West Philippine Sea. Thus, both the armed forces and the Filipino people don’t want us to become a de facto “province of China.”

A strongman populist, Mr. Duterte has had to grapple with both public opinion and, even more crucially, the views of the defense establishment, which he dearly values as a matter of realpolitik. In short, our foreign policy is a contested realm, whereby Mr. Duterte, no matter how popular or authoritarian he is, is bereft of unilateral power.

From Mr. Duterte’s suspension of the Visiting Forces Agreement termination to the shocking “absolute pardon” granted to Joseph Pemberton and, most recently, his UN speech, the signs are there that the tide is shifting.

Here, we see the convergence of three factors. First, Mr. Duterte doesn’t have much to show for his extra-friendly policy toward China, which is yet to build a single big-ticket infrastructure project in the Philippines, nor has made any meaningful concessions in the West Philippine Sea. Forget about the Chinese “debt trap,” since it appears Beijing prefers to take Mr. Duterte for a ride.

Second, the President is nearing his lame-duck year in office, hence his diminishing ability to radically reshape Philippine foreign policy. And lastly, more traditionally-minded elements are taking over our foreign policy, with Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr., who likely penned Mr. Duterte’s UN speech, leading the way.

Thus, what we have is sub-optimal inconsistency, which is admittedly preferable to the hobgoblin of pro-China consistency. And there you have it—the tragedy of “small power” politics.

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P.S.

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