

The Duterte method: A neoclassical realist guide to understanding a small power's foreign policy and strategic behaviour in the Asia-Pacific

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Abstract

In the contemporary Asia-Pacific context, the fault lines leading to the Thucydides trap can be attributed to the continuing strategic competition between a seemingly declining United States and a rising China. Failure to circumvent this trap can ultimately result in a war of all against all. Against this backdrop, this article investigates how a small power re-evaluates its foreign policy and strategic behaviour using neoclassical realism theory. In particular, I examine President Rodrigo Duterte's method which is characterized by four key elements: cultivating a more favourable image for China; moderating the country's American-influenced strategic culture; mobilizing state-society relations supportive of 'Sinicization'; and reorienting the country's Western-based institutions to better accommodate Chinese pressures and incentives. Does a China-centric approach give a small power an indispensable strategic capital to successfully navigate and exploit both the challenges and opportunities of the impending new order? Do the Philippines' shifting rules of engagement under the Duterte administration represent a forward-thinking strategic outlook rather than a defeatist and naïve stance? The article answers these questions by examining the factors and dynamics underpinning the conception and construction of the Duterte method, as well as its implications a vis-a-vis a small power's foreign policy and strategic behaviour.

Keywords

China, Duterte method, foreign policy, neoclassical realism, Philippines, United States

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Navigating through shifting tides of power

The changing distribution of power has significant consequences for the foreign policy and strategic behaviour not only of the competing great powers but also of the smaller and weaker players in the international system. Due to their limited capacity for acquiring the necessary level of security to guarantee their own survival, and even much lesser capability for shaping the conduct of international politics to work to their advantage, the strategic choices of small powers are being restricted to either neutrality or alliance (Mares, 1988; Toje, 2010; Rothstein, 1968). This underscores the rather dispensable role that small powers play vis-a-vis the great powers' wide range of political and military resources, and which in turn makes them highly dependent (Mares, 1988; Toje, 2010). Consequently, the majority of small powers are bent on maintaining the existing order, preferring to operate within the given status quo instead of attempting to alter the order itself. As Vital (1967: 134) argues, the policy choices of small powers are primarily designed to modify the external environment not by challenging the status quo per se but by 'reducing an unfavorable discrepancy in strength, broadening the field of maneuver and choice, and increasing the total resources on which the state can count in times of stress'. Their scarce resources, peripheral positions and the international system itself compel small powers to rank their security goals and priorities. Based on this hierarchy, the existing security issues are individually assessed, and 'globalize' those threats which they perceive to undermine their security interests the most (Toje, 2010).

Meanwhile, in efforts to fortify their vulnerable positions, small powers utilize all available multilateral institutions. These instruments benefit the small powers by easing the cost of conducting foreign relations, and adding greater weight to their otherwise feeble foreign policies (Barston, 1973; Elman, 1995; Keohane, 1969). Understandably, small powers play an active role in adopting and propagating the principles, norms and rules of various international organizations. By engaging in concerted efforts with other actors, the small powers are able to lobby for the institutionalization of laws and regulations intended to control the behaviour of great powers (He, 2008). The defensive (as opposed to offensive) approach preferred by small powers highlights their generally risk-averse nature which helps them avoid the possibility of extermination, especially when discussing their grievances towards powerful states (Archer et al., 2014; Toje, 2010). The focus is on minimizing the uncertainties created by the risks they have identified, and ensuring that their uncontrollable impacts are effectively reduced (Magcamit, 2016). Accordingly, while great powers rush to project their authority and influence on a worldwide scale, the small powers are primarily motivated by the demands they can extract from their immediate environment (Fox, 1959; Toje, 2010).

In the case of the Philippines, however, the country's foreign policy rhetoric and action – specifically those concerning its geopolitical and maritime territorial disputes with China – seem to go against these general rules. Under the current Duterte administration, the Philippine government has been more vocal in challenging the Western-dominated status quo and has even threatened to reconsider its longstanding alliance with the world's superpower. Duterte has fiercely criticized both the US and the European Union (EU), insisting that while the former continues to treat the Philippines as its colony, the latter as a whole represents the last vestiges of imperialism in Asia. This behaviour is in stark contrast with the security-maximizing, pro-establishment approach of many small powers. In addition, rather than being a strong advocate of the key principles, norms and rules being promoted by major international organizations, the Philippine government has openly criticized the hypocrisies, double-standards and inefficiencies of these actors. In defending

his offensive language towards these intergovernmental institutions – from the United Nations (UN), to the International Criminal Court (ICC), to Human Rights Watch (HRW) – Duterte has emphasized that these non-state actors cannot coerce sovereign states into adopting their codes of conduct, and has speculated that these groups are merely conspiring with each other to shame him and his government.

Against this background, this article examines the Philippines' foreign policy and engagement strategy vis-a-vis the regional security conditions and dynamics being engendered by this transitional moment. President Rodrigo Duterte's strategic preferences are interesting to study precisely because they go directly against the two most common features of small powers' dependence-based strategic behaviour: (1) that small powers tend to favour the existing status quo and prefer to operate within the prevailing order as opposed to attempting to subvert and revise it; and (2) that small powers tend to be staunch supporters of international laws and institutions, as these instruments reduce the cost of facilitating international relations and add greater weight to their foreign policies (Archer et al., 2014; Keohane, 1969; Magcamit, 2016). Thus, while most leaders of functioning market democracies in the East will not hesitate to seek protection from the US should China decide to directly contest the status quo, Duterte had threatened to sever ties with Washington in an effort to cement his pivot to China. Similarly, while many in the international community view the 2016 Hague Tribunal's ruling on the West Philippine Sea as testament to the salience of international laws and institutions, the Duterte administration refused to celebrate the occasion, and instead announced it was setting aside the decision to secure better economic relations with China.

At this watershed moment in the history of international politics, does a Sino-centric approach give a small, weak state like the Philippines indispensable strategic capital to successfully navigate and exploit both the challenges and opportunities the impending new order might bring? Contrary to what his critics claim, does Duterte's preferred attitude and behaviour towards China in fact reveal a more calculated and forward-thinking strategic outlook rather than a defeatist and naïve stance? Or are the president's rhetoric and actions meant to prepare the Philippines for the proverbial embrace of the serpent? The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, I provide an in-depth review of neoclassical realism, focusing on the systemic stimuli and domestic intervening variables that guide and influence the development and actual implementation of states' foreign policies. I then examine the system-level and domestic-level contexts confronting the Philippines to expose the underlying factors driving the conception and construction of the Duterte method. After this, I proceed to comparatively assess the Philippines' current relations with China versus the US/West to illustrate the implications of the Duterte method vis-a-vis small powers' foreign policy and strategic behaviour amidst a shifting distribution of global power. Finally, I summarize the article's key findings and conclude that while the medium-to-long-term impact of the Duterte method remains ambiguous, nonetheless it signifies a bold paradigm shift for any small power that is attempting to sail its own ship.

A neoclassical realist guide for foreign policy and strategic behaviour¹

Neoclassical realism links together internal and external variables that drive the creation of foreign policy as defined by classical and structural realism respectively. Proponents of the theory set out a

¹ This section is based on the author's previous literature review of neoclassical realism theory that appeared in the article, 'The fault in Japan's stars: Shinzo Abe, North Korea, and the quest for a new Japanese constitution.'

two-pronged assumption: first, that the country's foreign policy is primarily a function of its relative position in the international system, particularly by its relative material power capabilities (i.e. *realist*); and second, that the effect of such power resources on foreign policy is neither direct nor simple since systemic pressures must be decoded via intervening variables present at the unit level (i.e. *neoclassical*) (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2003, 2004). There are three main rationales underpinning neoclassical realism's thrust. First, adhering to Thucydides' mantra, that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must', neoclassical realists assert that it is the relative material power of the state that determines the fundamental limits of its foreign policy (Rathbun, 2008; Rose, 1998). Nevertheless, neoclassical realists emphasize that there is no instantaneous transmission belt that automatically connects the state's material capabilities to its foreign policy strategy and behaviour (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998). Since decisions concerning foreign policy preferences are made by actual state officials, therefore, how they view and perceive the relative power that they own is just as crucial, if not even more crucial, than the level of relative power per se (Rose, 1998; Wohlforth, 1993). This implies that a country's foreign policy choices do not always reflect its pursuit of objective material power patterns in a continuous manner, especially over the short and medium term.

Second, neoclassical realists stress that the power and freedom of state leaders and elites to extract and mobilize national resources is limited (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, 2006, 2009). This means that in examining relative material power, both the structure and strength of states vis-a-vis their respective societies are also significant factors to consider because they influence the amount of national resources that can be allotted to foreign policy. Hence, while countries may more or less have the same amount of capabilities, it is possible for them to behave and act differently due to their structural differences (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998). And third, supporters of neoclassical realism argue that while systemic stimuli (incentives and pressures) may affect the overall pattern and course of foreign policy, however, the effects are not always robust or explicit enough to reveal specific details and information about state behaviour (Rathbun, 2008; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004). To this extent, neoclassical realism situates itself in between pure structuralism and constructivism. While structuralism asserts that there is a clear-cut connection between systemic constraints and unit-level behaviour, constructivism rejects the idea that there are any objective systemic constraints in the international system, claiming that these so-called 'realities' are mere social constructs (Rose, 1998; Wendt, 1992, 1999).

Thus, although neoclassical realism accepts the objective reality of relative power and its significant role vis-a-vis the outcomes of inter-state relations, nonetheless it does not presume that state actors are able to capture perfectly and understand correctly this reality on a daily basis (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2003). By emphasizing the predominance of relative power over domestic politics, and stressing that the consequences of such power on foreign policymaking are neither straightforward nor unambiguous, neoclassical realists are able to distinguish themselves from the *Innenpolitikers* and structuralists respectively (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998). Adherents of neoclassical realism identify two major intervening variables that shape a country's behaviour and response towards constraints and opportunities in the international system: the perceptions of a country's decision-makers through which systemic stimuli are filtered and processed; and the strength of a country's state machinery and its relation to the immediate society (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2003). For neoclassical realists, Aaron Friedberg's (1988: 13) structuralist formulation of 'a reliable but invisible transmission belt connecting objective material change to adaptive behaviour' is flawed and misleading. There are no compelling reasons to believe that state officials are able to comprehend the distribution of power

accurately, and that these understandings would somehow be automatically translated into national policy. In practice, the conversion of capabilities into behavioural responses is often vague and erratic precisely because the global distribution of power can steer a country's behaviour and conduct only by influencing the decisions of its state leaders and elites (Lobell, 2009; Ripsman, 2011).

Furthermore, neoclassical realists argue that aggregate estimates of global power distribution are insufficient due to the fact that state leaders do not always have absolute access to a country's total material power resources (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, 2006, 2009). In order to provide a systematic analysis of international power, the governments' effective capacity for acquiring and controlling the resources of their societies needs to be considered. The underlying neoclassical realist argument here is that since foreign policy is developed by the government and not the entire nation per se, what matters is state power rather than national power. Whereas Fareed Zakaria (1998: 9) defines state power as 'that portion of national power the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decision-makers can achieve their ends'; Thomas Christensen (1996: 11) refers to this as the national political power or 'the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives'. Notwithstanding the nomenclature differences, both concepts represent a major intervening variable between international pressures confronting the nation and the strategies pursued by the state to address those pressures.

In contrast to the structuralist position that an invisible albeit perfectly functioning transmission belt interlocks a state's material capability and strategic behaviour, the neoclassical realist interpretation highlights the defects that prevent states from flexibly modifying their foreign policies to fit the changing international strategic landscape. That this imaginary transmission belt is defective implies that a country's foreign policy elites are or can be: (1) prone to acquiring inaccurate and flawed perceptions of systemic stimuli; (2) susceptible to adopting unsound decision-making procedures; and (3) ineffective in mobilizing the national resources necessary for implementing policies (Lobell, 2009; Ripsman, 2009, 2011; Taliaferro, 2006, 2009). Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell (2016) identify four main factors behind these problems which underscore how systemic constraints and opportunities are intervened or filtered through domestic-level factors in influencing a state's strategic behaviour. First, states, unfortunately, cannot always accurately perceive systemic stimuli. This is largely due to the neoclassical realist view that power influences the course of international politics mainly through the perceptions of those elite actors who are making the decisions on behalf of the states (Wohlforth, 1993: 2). But like all other people, these state leaders are prone to making mistakes such as miscalculating the relative power at their disposal and/or misjudging the consequences of their choices, which ultimately result in misperceptions (Blainey, 1973; Jervis, 1976).

Second, elite actors, like all humans, cannot always rationally respond to systemic stimuli due to their cognitive limits to competently process information, especially in times of crisis (Holsti, 1979). Consequently, even if they acquire more precise perceptions of the incentives and threats presented by the international system, state leaders can still fall victim to irrational and unsound decision-making processes. This helps explain why states often fail to react in a decisive manner or sometimes become paralysed by indecision, leading to suboptimal policies or behaviours that contradict the systemic requirements (Byman and Pollack, 2001; Jervis, 1976). Third, the international system rarely provides clear-cut signals about threats and opportunities, thereby preventing state leaders from fully appreciating their situations and determining the best approaches/strategies to handle them. If this is the case, therefore, 'a broad range of foreign policy choices

and international political outcomes must lie outside the purview of a structural theory of international politics' (Ripsman et al., 2016: 4). And fourth, the changing national economic and political conditions mean that states cannot always mobilize the resources needed to respond to the requirements of the international system. The level and type of flexibility expected by neorealism assumes that states are virtually free from all internal restrictions when crafting their foreign policy and implementing it at the domestic level. But as neoclassical realists point out, such a view of national politics could not be further from the truth given the presence of competing domestic interest groups and societal veto players influencing the legislature and other key state machineries (Ripsman, 2011; Tsebelis, 2002). Together, the presence of these factors adds layers of complexity to the decision-making context at the national level. As a result, the ability of state leaders to formulate and adopt the most optimal policy responses possible at any given time is significantly curbed. Instead, state leaders are compelled to constantly select from a wide array of policy alternatives and substitutes in order to navigate between external (systemic) constraints and internal (domestic) requirements more flexibly. Indeed, within the agent-structure debate, neoclassical realists reinforce the idea that under certain conditions, the agents play a critical role in shaping and defining the political effects of existing international structures (Rathbun, 2008; Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998). The very structures influencing the agents' preferences and political outcomes are being deciphered by the agents themselves, and responded to within domestic political institutions that bestow the agents some degree of decision-making capacity (Ripsman, 2011; Rose, 1998). Hence, a neoclassical realist guide to foreign policy emphasizes a three-way direct causal chain that links together clearly indicated explanatory, explained and intervening variables. It is precisely by bridging the *spatial divide* between the domestic and the international, the *cognitive divide* between matter and ideas and the *temporal divide* between present and future that neoclassical realism is able to mitigate the problems inherent in other approaches such as Putnam's two-level game liberalism, Moravcsik's liberal theory and Wendtian constructivism (Foulon, 2015: 635). As Christensen (1996: 252) succinctly put it: 'It does not simply state that domestic politics matter in foreign policy, but specifies the conditions under which they matter'.

Examining the contexts underpinning the conception and construction of the Duterte method

System-level context

Duterte's recent foreign policy rhetoric and actions provide important clues about how he expects the changing distribution of power to play out: that the axis of international politics will inevitably tilt towards the East. This view is supported by the prognosis of some observers that the deterioration of orthodox neoliberal economic enterprise – the system that has propelled Western power and dominance for centuries – will pave the way for the most dramatic geopolitical shift since the beginning of the industrial era (Hoge, 2015; Layne, 2012). The massive crises brought about by the previous decade between 2000 and 2010 have significantly weakened Western self-confidence, and continue to tarnish its reputation and standing in the international community. This 'decade from hell', as some pundits described it, brought severe plagues that permanently transformed and demoralized Western hegemony: the shocking terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and its after-effects; the 2003 Bush administration's imperial adventurism in Iraq; the 2008 great recession precipitated by the subprime crisis; and the current firestorm threatening to burn down the whole EU project. And, just to add insult to injury, the stagnation and decline in the West has coincided

with huge economic growth rates in Asia, particularly in mainland China (Cox, 2011; Serwer, 2009).

These series of events have contributed greatly to the perception that a new consensus is in the making. In particular, a new world order that is centred around China is about to emerge. Unlike everywhere else, 'China looks like the final house on the hill, at least able to function with an outward appearance of coherence and purpose' (Brown, 2018). The continuing decline in US standing has led to predictions that the era of Pax Americana is ending and will soon be replaced by Pax Sinica (Kugler, 2006). Westernization is out; easternization is in. The West's grandest days are over and the future clearly belongs somewhere else. And for those who see China not just as an ordinary sovereign state but as a civilization in pursuit of a grand mission, the transition from one superpower to another has major implications that go beyond simple national power calculus. As Beijing breaks free from a century of humiliation at the hands of the West to finally seize hegemony, its views and philosophies about the world are also expected to gradually build momentum until they eventually replace those that have been established by the West (Cox, 2011; Jacques, 2009).

Notwithstanding President Xi Jinping's earlier claims about not wanting to challenge American hegemony, history shows no records of passive and indifferent rising superpowers that ignored the huge opportunity created by the other actors' unfortunate decisions. On the contrary, the more Beijing accumulates power and influence, the more it will be tempted to push the boundaries of the existing order until it is able to remodel the international system in ways that reflect and reinforce Chinese values and interests (Schweller and Pu, 2011; Shiffrinson and Beckley, 2013). With the continuous rise of China, the 'West' is increasingly being reduced to an economic model that the Chinese have embraced and cross-bred into something that the world is still trying to decode and make sense of (Rapoza, 2017). In order to compete and survive in this post-Western arrangement, a highly dependent small power like the Philippines might find it strategic and advantageous to bandwagon with the rising superpower by progressively mimicking the domestic economic and political systems of China instead of the US. The expectations about the risks and benefits of a global power shift – geopolitical convergence or conflict; trade creation or diversion; financial capital inflow or outflow; and currency stability or volatility, among others – compel state leaders to rethink and recalibrate their existing politico-strategic alignments (Schweller and Pu, 2011; Shiffrinson and Beckley, 2013).

Within this system-level context, the Duterte method, which emphasizes cultivating a softer and more positive image for China, mitigating the country's American-influenced strategic culture, mobilizing state-society relations supportive of 'Sinicization' and reorienting Western-inspired domestic institutions to adapt to Chinese incentives and pressures, might make sense. The behaviour and actions being displayed by top palace officials give the impression that as far as this administration is concerned, there is not much point for the Philippines in continuing to hold onto the past, when the US and other major Western powers could run the world unchallenged. The sooner the government can adjust to the new realities of global power relations – by adhering to Chinese remedies and prescriptions for settling geopolitical disputes, adopting Chinese norms and principles for engaging in international relations and emulating Chinese institutions and practices for managing domestic affairs – the better it will be for the entire country and its people. Thus, in sharp contrast to what critics would dismiss as naïve and defeatist, the Duterte method is deemed by the current government as a calculated and forward-thinking strategic outlook. Amid the growing systemic incentives and pressures being generated by China's rise, the president's Sino-centric statecraft is a necessity rather than a mere choice. The Duterte method is expected

to deliver the Philippines substantial strategic capital that it can utilize to successfully navigate and exploit both the challenges and opportunities of the impending new order.

Domestic-level context

Examining the current political climate in the Philippines reveals the crucial role of domestic intervening variables in crafting the country's foreign policy and understanding its strategic behaviour.² Duterte's brand of populism allows him to effectively mobilize electoral support, which in turn gives him almost uncontested access to various forms and channels of state power. A crucial component here is the president's hallucinogenic appeal to 'the people' coming from different socioeconomic strata and driven by contrasting hopes and interests. Notwithstanding the lack of consensus over the ontological question of who and/or what constitutes 'the people', Duterte's populism cuts across cleavages – the rich and the poor; the well-read and the unschooled; the expert and the untrained; the 'cultured' and the 'uncouth'. His hypnotic charisma encourages his followers to neglect their own values and principles and adapt to Duterte's preferred beliefs and norms. The president's image as an untouchable demigod has convinced his most fanatical supporters that it is their duty to obey Duterte, sometimes even going as far as comparing him to Jesus Christ (Macas, 2016).

During his first state visit to China in 2016, Duterte announced that he was cutting Manila's military and economic ties with Washington. According to him, 'America has lost now' and he has decided to realign with China's ideological flow because 'it is the only way' (Blanchard, 2016). Immediately after the president's abrupt proclamation of separation from the country's traditional ally, many of his followers quickly went to his defence by expressing their personal disdain for and grievances about the US. Prior to his scathing remarks about American hypocrisy, particularly on human rights and climate change issues, many of his supporters were expecting Washington's counter-balancing power in the Asia-Pacific to help defend and boost Manila's strategic claims in the West Philippine Sea. Yet since Duterte's string of criticisms against then US President Barack Obama, his support groups seemed to have suddenly acquired a more favourable perception vis-à-vis China, prepared to give Xi praise while waging a 'word war' against Obama after being tagged as a Duterte enemy.

To complement his enthralling charisma, Duterte has also strongly favoured the 'common sense' of the ordinary people and has often raised doubts over the expert advice of his own bureaucrats and technocrats. Accordingly, the president has habitually tossed around simple and direct solutions to a host of problems despite their lack of coherence: walking away from multi-lateral accords such as the Paris Agreement to pursue industrial programmes that can stimulate economic growth; withdrawing from international organizations such as the UN and the ICC to avoid human rights issues that could obstruct his Machiavellian war on drugs; and riding a jet ski to the West Philippine Sea and planting the country's flag over the disputed islands to assert Manila's sovereignty. Regardless of whether these have been uttered in a sincere or hyperbolic manner, these 'common sense' solutions are meant to emphasize the president's unquestionable loyalty to the interests not of the establishment but of the common people. Compensating for their lack of substance simply requires Duterte to do what he does best: endearing the people to himself and his

² This section is based on the author's previous commentary piece, 'Rodrigo Duterte and the Making of a Populist Demigod' with Aries Arugay.

cause by acting as a political outsider who never wished to become the president but is nevertheless prepared to sacrifice everything to save the country from its enemies. With his spellbinding appeal, such declarations are often enough assurance for his supporters, thus enabling them to forget their doubts and worries (Weedon, 2019).

Furthermore, Duterte's populist politics gets its momentum from his skilful framing of issues as threats, both real and imagined. By projecting himself as the only leader with the required political will to develop and implement difficult, albeit necessary, extraordinary measures, Duterte has effectively captured both the hearts and minds of his devotees. The mounting suspicion of and dissatisfaction with modern bureaucracy has made Duterte's simple and direct solutions to various problems attractive to those who want to see an immediate and resolute response. Duterte has manipulated this condition by conjuring a sense of national emergency which can only be addressed effectively by oversimplifying the terms of political debates and limiting the terrains of public discussions between the pro- and anti-government camps. In doing so, the president is bent on ignoring, deposing and demolishing those actors or institutions which he perceives to hinder his methods for preventing the crisis.

When Duterte called both Obama and Pope Francis a 'son of a whore'; when he spat swear words at Washington and called the Americans 'monkeys'; and when he lashed out at the UN, the ICC, the EU and various human rights organizations, he was in effect assessing the limit of his popularity and the extent of his state power. And if the response of 'the people' to these incidents were to provide any clue, the constraints to Duterte's state power and popularity are steadily decreasing (Fonbuena, 2019; Villamor, 2018). Indeed, Duterte's construction of issues as threats that can lead to a national crisis and eventual societal breakdown has been so compelling that his supporters are now becoming more forgiving of his decision to shelve the 2016 Hague Tribunal's ruling on the West Philippines Sea because it would plunge the country into a devastating war with China; hostile towards human rights principles because they 'impede' his war on drugs; suspicious about the role of opposition groups in a functioning democracy because they ruin Duterte's image abroad; antagonistic towards international organizations critical of his style and method; and vicious to fellow citizens who openly challenge the president's demigod status.

Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, the justifications behind Duterte's simple and direct answers to some of the most divisive national issues are neither completely wrong nor absolutely immoral. His disdain for universalist interpretations of human rights is based on his view of the concept as an arbitrary pretext being used by powerful international actors to rationalize their imperialist operations in weak states. His aversion towards multilateral treaties and institutions is based on what he thinks is an attempt by the core states to prevent the periphery and semi-periphery states from developing fully, by kicking away the very same ladder that they used to industrialize. His desire to revitalize Manila's deteriorating relations with Beijing is heavily influenced by Thucydides' image of the international system where the strong simply act as they please, while the weak suffer what they should. His confusing remarks about American values and hegemony might be reflective of the postmodernist account that there are as many stories as storytellers. But given Duterte's gripping portrayal of a crisis combined with a sheer magnitude of popularity, the president does not even have to dig deep into his intellectual faculties to secure the approval and support of the public.

Together, the systemic incentives and pressures shaping the Asia-Pacific context, on the one hand, and the domestic intervening variables influencing the Duterte administration's perceptions of external stimuli and level of state power, on the other, have given birth to a foreign policy and

strategic approach that prioritizes China's approval and interests, while simultaneously rejecting US primacy and agenda. As the following case studies reveal, the Duterte method is steering the Philippine government to recast China's image as a friend and an ally, suppress its Washington-dependent strategic culture, organize state-society relations supportive of Sinicization and overhaul its Western-defined domestic institutions to better respond to Chinese incentives and pressures.

Dissecting the Duterte method vis-a-vis China and the United States

Manila-Beijing relations under the Duterte method

If the Philippine National Security Policy (NSP) document for 2017–2022 were to be used as a primary source for examining the government's foreign policy and strategic behaviour in Asia-Pacific, one would get a sense that Duterte is a 'normal' Filipino president: pro Western international system and institutions; pro American hegemony; and pro liberal democratic values. In fact, the said document not only describes the US as 'the only superpower in the world' and a 'stabilizing force' in the region, it also points to the 'rise of China' as source of 'concerns not only among developed countries such as the US, Japan and South Korea, but also among the ASEAN nations' (NSC, 2017). The authors identify Beijing's increasing economic influence and expanding territorial claims in the West Philippine Sea as the two main causes of growing anxiety among Asian states, as evidenced, for example, by Japan's decision to boost its defensive capabilities. According to the NSP, 'the dispute over the West Philippine Sea remains to be the foremost security challenge to the Philippines' sovereignty and territorial integrity', and it is an issue that transcends national borders and threatens regional peace and stability nations' (NSC, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the NSP outlines four key policy strategies for addressing the country's security dilemmas, namely: developing defence capability through the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) modernization programme and fortifying the country's strategic partnerships with other states; promoting the rule of law in the West Philippine Sea and coordinating with other claimant states to facilitate dispute settlement mechanisms; pursuing the adoption of a Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and implementation of a Code of Conduct (COC); and negotiating maritime boundary delimitation with adjoining states and ratifying laws on archipelagic sea lanes and maritime zones (NSC, 2017). Moreover, the document also underscores the ASEAN's centrality and pivotal role in managing the anticipated impacts of brewing geopolitical rivalries between the region's great powers. Thus, for all intents and purposes, the NSP document gives the impression that Philippine foreign policy under the Duterte regime will be a continuation of the past governments' Washington-orientated approach. However, a closer examination of the government's actual conduct of its foreign policy exposes some major inconsistencies and paradoxes on the part of this revisionist president. Since his first day in office, Duterte has been gradually distancing himself from the US while steadily converging the country's foreign policy with Chinese interests. In a surprising departure from the previous administration's opposition to China's aggressive maritime expansion, Duterte appears resolute in downplaying the country's territorial disputes in efforts to establish closer economic and political relations with the Chinese (Baviera, 2017; Tiezzi, 2018). His willingness to 'temporarily' set aside the 2016 Hague Tribunal Ruling on the West Philippine Sea (a landmark case that reaffirms the Philippines' 200-mile exclusive economic zone and invalidates China's nine-dash line claim on its maps) highlights the president's perceptual bias and preferential treatment in favour of Xi. In defending his decision against critics who

accuse him of abandoning the country's sovereign and territorial rights, Duterte relayed his Chinese counterpart's 'friendly' albeit stern warning that if he forced the issue, both China and the Philippines would have no other alternative but to go to war (Mogato, 2017). Hence, rather than compelling China to accept the tribunal's decision (which the Chinese dismissed as 'ill-founded' and 'naturally null and void'), Duterte has decided to de-emphasize and compartmentalize territorial and maritime issues when negotiating with China (Baviera, 2017).

For Duterte and his supporters, untangling economic relations from the management of geo-political issues is the most rational choice that any small power can pursue. Beijing's pledge to finance 12 projects with an estimated total cost of US\$4.4 billion, and another US\$73 million in economic and infrastructure assistance, have been used by the government as concrete evidence that the president's strategy is working effectively (Malinao, 2018; Tiezzi, 2018). Instead of pushing the government to assert its sovereign rights over the contested islands, the president insists that Filipinos must 'remain humble and meek' to receive the 'mercy' of Xi (Esmaquel, 2018). Duterte has persistently sold the idea that the Philippines needs China more than China needs it. Accordingly, when news about China's transgressions came into light – its installation of missiles in Paracels, its landing of military planes on Panganiban/Mischief Reef and its plan to set up an environmental monitoring station on Panatag/Scarborough Shoal – the country's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) refused to publicly condemn Beijing. Similarly, despite the warnings by other countries that these acts are destabilizing and escalating the tensions in the region even further, Duterte chose to reiterate that there was nothing that the government could do, citing that based on his 'simple calculations', a more assertive stance would only cause a 'great loss to the nation' (Corrales, 2018a). In an apparent effort to further justify his subservience to China, the commander-in-chief had expressed serious doubts about the military's capacity and resolve to defend the West Philippine Sea should he decide to go on what he referred to as a 'suicide mission' against China (Romero, 2018). Duterte is highly convinced that the AFP will stage a coup d'état if he makes the unwise move of angering the Chinese, claiming that the military would rather choose to dispense of him than lose soldiers (Corrales, 2018b).

Despite the Duterte administration's oversimplification of maritime and territorial disputes into a zero-sum game in which small powers have virtually no other choice but to submit to the whims of great powers to avoid greater sufferings, alternative measures are available for the government to explore. Among these are the recommendations outlined by Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio and former DFA Secretary Albert Del Rosario: filing a strong formal protest against China's building activity, which is the least that any sitting Philippine president can do; commanding the Philippine Navy to patrol Panatag Shoal and, in an event of Chinese attack, invoke the Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT); requesting the US to declare Panatag Shoal as part of Philippine territory for purposes of the MDT, similar to how the Senkakus have been declared part of Japanese territory under the US-Japan MDT; agreeing to Washington's standing offer to hold joint naval patrols in the West Philippine Sea to demonstrate the two countries' joint determination in preventing Beijing from building on Panatag Shoal; and avoiding any act, statement or declaration that cedes Philippine sovereignty over its territories in the West Philippine Sea in order to preserve the national birthright of the future generations of Filipinos (Fonbuena, 2017).

However, for a leader who professes that China is 'a very important ingredient' to the realization of his reforms and that Xi is the only leader who understands his problems and is willing to help, these options are seen more as stumbling blocks rather than solutions to the security conundrum. This can be reflected in the way Duterte handled his ASEAN chairmanship in 2017 that has further solidified China's leverage over the organization's key agendas. With the Philippines

acting as chair, the ASEAN member states evaded any reference to Beijing's militarization of the West Philippine Sea. With the relegation of the maritime issues to the back seat, the 31st Chairman Statement released under Duterte's watch took a significantly softer stance despite its purported adoption of ASEAN-China framework COC (ASEAN, 2017). The DFA had, in fact, admitted that the Philippines was among those members who decided against the mention of China's aggressive behaviour in the said statement. From being the most aggressive claimant state and Beijing's most resolute geopolitical rival, Duterte has transformed Manila into one of China's vassal capitals, along with Phnom Penh and Vientiane, within a span of two years.

To demonstrate just how far the president is willing to take his courtship of China, he seems to be voluntarily falling victim to China's infamous debt-trap diplomacy. The growing proliferation of this Chinese practice across the globe has prompted US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to point out how Beijing 'encourages dependency using opaque contracts, predatory loan practices, and corrupt deals that mire nations in debt and undercut their sovereignty, denying them their long-term, self-sustaining growth' (Fernholz, 2018). In essence, what Beijing is doing is 'commercial and strategic penetration', that is, ensnaring a country in a debt trap by ensuring that its government is 'caught in a cycle of interest capitalization or taking on new loans to pay off interest or principal repayments' (Chellaney, 2018). By offering small, weak powers 'the honey of cheap infrastructure loans with the sting of default coming', the leaders from these countries become even more indebted to China, thereby undermining their capacity for crafting and exercising independent foreign policies (Fernholz, 2018).

Indeed, the intensifying financial Sinicization of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and now the Philippines is severely undermining ASEAN unity and cohesion vis-a-vis China's maritime and territorial ambitions. By penetrating the national economic and security agendas of individual ASEAN member states with the use of predatory loans, Beijing is able to dictate and impose its most preferred rules, norms and procedures concerning Asia-Pacific's maritime affairs. While the adoption of a non-binding COC has been hailed by ASEAN governments as a significant step towards the creation of more amicable and peaceful relations in the region, it makes small claimant states more vulnerable to China's geopolitical Sinicization, hence leaving them with no other viable option but to capitulate. Although some well-managed countries can potentially reap substantial economic benefits from these projects, however, for a country ruled by a leader who unabashedly proclaims his love and devotion to Xi, and everything that China stands for and represents, this could all lead to further subservience and acquiescence to China's grand strategy.

Manila–Washington relations under the Duterte method

During his first state visit to China in 2016, Duterte inevitably revealed parts of his world view. In what appeared to be an indirect jab at the US, one of the Philippines' former colonial rulers, Duterte claimed that 'China is good' for 'it has 'never invaded a piece of my country all these years' (GMA News, 2016b). He further added that during the Cold War, 'China was portrayed as the bad guy . . . and all of these years, what we have read in our books in school were all propaganda produced by the West' (GMA News, 2016a). In stark contrast to his extremely gracious treatment of China, Duterte's attitude towards the US and the West in general has not been particularly convivial. For example, whenever he is being criticized by Western leaders and organizations for his authoritarian style of leadership, the president does not hesitate in reminding the world about Washington's own history of human rights violations, stressing that 'it would be good for the US Congress to start with their own investigation of their own violations of the so many civilians killed

in the prosecution of the wars in the Middle East' (Phillips, 2017). Such statements underscore the extent of Duterte's efforts to reconfigure Manila's diplomatic alliances, a dramatic shift from the staunchly multilateralist approach pursued by his predecessor Benigno Aquino Jr, who brought China to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague over its hostile militarization of the West Philippine Sea.

In return, Chinese nationalists have praised the president's China pivot, pointing that it is a vital opportunity 'for redesigning Philippine foreign policy based on Philippine interests, after centuries of being treated as a pawn by Washington' (GMA News, 2016b). As far as China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang is concerned, the administration's programmes have 'effectively protected and promoted the Philippine people's fundamental rights to security and development' (GMA News, 2016b). But are Duterte's hopes and predictions about China's second coming warranted? Or is it premature on his part to begin writing off the West? When using the 'rise of China' phenomenon as an impetus for the Duterte method, the president will be wise to maintain some perspectives.

Several scholars have argued that while economic power is moving towards the East, Washington and all other major Western capitals have sources of power which are not available to Beijing. To begin with, the Duterte method must take into consideration the fact that despite the hype surrounding China's huge economic success, overall the country remains underdeveloped and a work in progress. Amid the expanding number of Chinese middle class and multimillionaires, at least half a billion people in China continue to live on less than two dollars a day without access to basic welfare safety nets (UNDP, 2018). The enormous social inequalities and severe environmental problems engendered by the country's export-orientated economic model (which the US has called 'unfair' and has threatened to oppose) create massive pressures on domestic peace and stability (Cox, 2011). Despite the economic troubles confronting the US, the Chinese still have a long way to go before they can catch up with their American counterparts in per capita terms (World Bank, 2018). Interestingly, Washington's closest economic rival turns out to be the EU, another major member of the 'weakening' West. Together, the two Western partners control over 40 per cent of the world economy, a substantial fraction for an alliance in decline. America's global advantages are being sustained by the size of its market, the wealth per capita of its citizens and its influence over global finance, as opposed to China's reservoir of cheap labour, undervalued currency and harsh political controls (Norrlof, 2010). This structural advantage enables Washington to incur enormous fiscal and trade deficits without driving the world into panic and collapse, which is a sign of continuing American strength rather than decline.

In terms of hard power, the Duterte method must consider the absolute hard power advantage that the US maintains over all other great power contenders, including China. Washington's defence budget in 2017, for instance, was roughly 36 per cent of the world's total military expenditure and was larger than the next seven highest-spending states combined (SIPRI, 2018). The supremacy of US military power is expected to reach new heights under the Trump administration, with a proposed defence budget of US\$686 billion for 2019 (*Agence France-Presse*, 2018). As reported by the *Economist* (2014), 'Chinese commanders talk about not being able to match American hard power until 2050 at the earliest'. Not only is the US military artillery bigger and better, the American troops also have a lot more experience with the actual use of their hard power compared to their Chinese counterparts (Beckley, 2012). Unlike Beijing, who has significantly fewer friends, Washington has allies in all parts of the world, which compels it to spread its forces broadly albeit thinly. History does suggest that countries with allies tend to win over those without. Based on these parameters, the US is expected to be the only major

international player that will be capable of projecting a global military power for the succeeding several decades (Beckley, 2012; Layne, 2012).

Furthermore, the Duterte method must consider the fact that Western soft power remains robust despite the significant blows it has suffered (and continues to suffer) since the September 11 attacks (Beckley, 2012; Cox, 2011; Layne, 2012). Although authoritarianism has often been championed by the fiercest critics of liberal democracy as a potential alternative, the actual number of states under communist regimes suggests that the future does not look so bright for China's soft power ambitions. The tide of history does not seem to be moving towards that direction, and China does not enjoy the advantage of having international imitators. While it may be the case that the political systems currently in place in China are the most suitable as far as its economic growth trajectory is concerned, it is not difficult to imagine how the Chinese model could eventually implode as the number of people trying to trade off their wealth in exchange for greater socio-political privileges expands. This helps explain why the US and Europe continue to be the only two great magnetic points of emigration (Cox, 2011).

The international society in the 21st century continues to be dominated by the principles and behaviours which have been originated and maintained by Western state and non-state actors (Beckley, 2012; Cox, 2011; Layne, 2012). To gain access to this gated community, prospective members will have to model themselves based on the norms, rules and practices of the existing residents – mirroring rather than supplanting the Western systems and institutions that constitute contemporary international society (Cox, 2011). Indeed, Duterte needs to realize that even his Chinese role model Xi has been compelled to restructure China's domestic economy in order to adapt to the prevailing global economic system and therefore has vested interests in the preservation of its principal architects and operations. Cognizant of the distrust harboured by many in the international system, and particularly by China's Asian neighbours, Xi has been vocal in expressing his desire to avoid the Thucydides trap. Indeed, the Chinese appear to have a more profound discernment of the realities and complexities surrounding international politics than their Western counterparts would admit.

Despite its efforts to accumulate more influence and power within a Western-designed system, Beijing has remained largely circumspect towards its interactions with Washington. China recognizes the huge catastrophe it will face should it attempt to balance the US and overhaul the prevailing Western-made structures that have enabled the country's exponential growth over the last 40 years (Christensen, 2006; Schweller and Pu, 2011). Altering China's relatively pacifist US approach (which enables it to compete peacefully with the world's reigning superpower) will not only be disastrous for its export-based economy but could also trigger the entire Western alliance, along with the other powerful players in the Asia-Pacific, to take decisive action against the Sino grand strategy (Cox, 2011; Schweller and Pu, 2011).

Nevertheless, Duterte's lingering distrust and cynicism towards the West keeps him within China's orbit of influence despite his seemingly warming attitude towards the US since President Donald Trump's tenure at the White House. At a time when the chief architect and defender of the liberal democratic world order is adopting strategies that weaken the very foundations of this arrangement, Duterte sees no reason to continue to adhere to and operate based on these US-defined principles, norms and rules of engagement. Trump's 'America First' doctrine, which is primarily designed to protect US interests and reverse its decline, helps rationalize the government's growing alignment with Xi (Magcamit, 2017). Why should the Philippines continue to give its loyalty to an old ally if, rather than promoting and defending the values of a Western-configured

international system, it is now trying to walk away from its commitments in the hope of making America great again?

Trump's so-called 'principled realism' – a fancy, more palatable term for the American tradition of exceptionalism, isolationism, unilateralism and revisionism – has only reinforced Duterte's views about the prevalence and damaging impact of American hypocrisy (Magcamit, 2017). The US administration's exceptionalist stance on human rights and climate change issues; isolationist approach to free trade and migration problems; unilateralist response against 'rogue' states and sovereign leaders perceived to sponsor terrorism; and revisionist interpretation of fundamental democratic principles and liberal ideals all highlight the widening cracks within the once cohesive and impenetrable Western realm (Magcamit, 2017). These fractures can cause irreparable damages to the West's influence and control over the management of the world economy, the distribution of global military power, the agenda-setting in various international institutions and the spread of anti-West soft power, thereby irreversibly diminishing its dominance and status. Hence, instead of crafting a foreign policy that is anchored on some hollow multilateral principles and/or is dependent on deteriorating multilateral institutions, Duterte figures that it would make more strategic sense to start pivoting towards a hegemonizing China and away from the collapsing West while there is enough time to manoeuvre.

What the Duterte method could mean for the Philippines and other small, weak states

Does the Duterte method represent a forward-thinking strategic outlook and provide a small, weak state such as the Philippines with an indispensable strategic capital at this watershed moment? The answer to this question ultimately depends on three key factors. First, the Duterte method may or not have perceived the systemic stimuli correctly. International politics is influenced by power primarily through the perceptions of leaders who are making the decisions on behalf of the states (Wohlforth, 1993). Being the humans that they are, leaders frequently make mistakes when calculating relative power and strength of resolve, determining viable options at their disposal and evaluating the likely outcomes of their decisions, among other things (Jervis, 1976; Stoessinger, 2005). Any leader can be prone to miscalculations and misperceptions, especially in the absence of complete information. In fact, many wars had been fought in the past because the leaders had either underestimated the cost of war or overestimated their capacity to fight to a glorious ending (Stoessinger, 2005). Moreover, as Robert Jervis (1976) has noted, these errors can also emanate from the inherent biases in the leaders' collections of images and perceptions which constitute cognitive filters used for processing and assessing both available and incoming information. To this extent, the country's foreign policy and strategic behaviour were perhaps more closely linked to Duterte's personal character and conduct rather than the objective incentives and threats created by the international system.

Second, the Duterte method may or may not be able to respond rationally to systemic stimuli. Perceiving the systemic opportunities and constraints correctly does not provide an absolute guarantee that the leaders will always adopt the most rational and optimal choices consistent with the systemic requirements. As Ole Holsti (1979) has postulated, these problems are rooted in cognitive restrictions on the ability of leaders to process information, particularly during periods of crisis when stakes are high and time is limited. While all decision-makers are predisposed to make irrational choices, some are more likely to do so due to their cognitive imperfections, distinctive temperaments, historical experiences or unique peculiarities (Jervis, 1976). In this sense, critics may view the Duterte method as a reflection of the government's failure to consider

all available policy options; or as a sign of the president's general paralysis and lack of interest in taking the most optimal albeit anti-China measures. Meanwhile, Duterte supporters may choose to see it in light of the structural imperatives created by the international system – the most fitting policy response for confronting external circumstances and conditions. The international system does not always provide clear signals about incentives and threats, and therefore it is unreasonable to expect the Duterte method to accurately discern both the opportunities and challenges that the global power shift will bring. To begin with, it remains unclear whether the rise of China will indeed result in the absolute redirection of global hard and soft powers from West to East. The uncertainty of the situation further complicates the assessment of risks and threats stemming from the international system, and the formulation of appropriate mechanisms and solutions to contain them.

Third, and lastly, the Duterte method may or may not be able to mobilize the required level of domestic resources to respond effectively to the systemic stimuli. In an ideal world, a country's foreign policy framework is flexible enough to allow state leaders to precisely identify systemic incentives and constraints, and respond decisively to constantly shifting conditions. However, as George Tsebelis (2002) has observed, this flexibility is substantially undercut by the domestic constraints to the state's decision-making processes (Tsebelis, 2002). Despite the huge amount of political capital that is currently at the president's disposal, there is no absolute assurance that the implementation of the Duterte method will be immune to domestic resistance coming from various members and shareholders in the community. But even without any powerful opposition, the Duterte administration's access to the country's material, financial, human and moral resources can only be limited. Consequently, Duterte is forced to negotiate and bargain with different veto players, interest groups and societal clusters over the promotion and operation of his method's key elements. Ultimately, these limitations reject the notion that there exists a reliable albeit invisible conveyor belt that automatically connects objective material change to a state's adaptive behaviour. As the Duterte method reveals, this imaginary transmission belt is defective because state leaders can be: prone to acquiring flawed and inaccurate perceptions of systemic stimuli; susceptible to making irrational and unsound decisions; and ineffective in consolidating national resources demanded by their policies and strategies.

Conclusion

More than two centuries ago, Thucydides (n.d.) examined the dynamics that drove Sparta and Athens to an epic war that lasted from 431 to 404 BC. Based on his historical account of the events leading up to what we now refer to as the Peloponnesian War, there were two intertwined factors that ultimately decided the fate of the two ancient cities. As Athens continued to accumulate power, the Athenians' sense of entitlement grew, along with their demand for greater influence and control within the existing arrangement (Allison, 2015, 2017; Strassler, 1998). At the same time, however, Athens' ascent to power inevitably heightened the insecurity, fear and resolve of the Spartans to defend the status-quo conditions that had made them the leading land power on the peninsula for centuries (Allison, 2015, 2017; Strassler, 1998). In Thucydides' words, 'it was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable'.³ Graham Allison (2017) has referred to the unstable condition that emerges when a rising power challenges the established leader of the international order as 'the Thucydides trap'.

Fast forward to the 21st century, when the fault lines leading to the Thucydides trap are engendered by the intensifying strategic, economic and geopolitical rivalry between a rising China

and a seemingly declining United States. Three interconnected events are driving the gradual shifts in the balance of power and influence between Beijing and Washington: China threatening to end US economic dominance within the next few decades; the US squandering its unipolar moment and forever losing its superpower; and world politics retrograding eastward to the Pacific away from the Atlantic Ocean (Cox, 2011; Ferguson, 2009; Sachs, 2009). These developments are leading many to believe that the Western dominance that has characterized the last five centuries of international relations is finally coming to an end. The future can be found in the East, and obituaries of US hegemony are warranted. If not managed properly, the highly anticipated global power shift could easily result in cataclysmic conflicts. As pointed out by AF Organski (1958), the changing distributions of power resulting from different material growth rates between the great powers are typically accompanied by episodes of increased international instability. This fundamental problem of leapfrogging – when a challenger’s power overtakes that of the dominant nation – is a destabilizing force that can set the entire international system to slide almost irreversibly towards war (Organski and Kugler, 1981). Failure to effectively circumvent this trap will mean that a ‘war of all against all’ becomes more likely as the world gradually transitions towards a China-defined polarity.

Amidst these constraints and opportunities, the Duterte method has emphasized four key strategies: (1) nurturing a softer and more positive image for China; (2) mitigating the country’s US-dependent strategic culture; (3) mobilizing state-society relations sympathetic to Sinicization; and (4) modifying Western-inspired domestic institutions to better adapt to Chinese incentives and pressures. The identification of these ‘anti-status quo’ elements suggest that the states’ foreign policies and security strategies are mainly responses to the opportunities and constraints of the prevailing international system; and that these responses are significantly shaped by unit-level factors such as the leaders’ images and perceptions, forms of state-society relations, types of strategic culture and the nature of domestic institutions. These systemic incentives and pressures transforming the Asia-Pacific milieu, combined with the domestic intervening variables shaping Duterte’s perceptions of external stimuli and the level of state power, have resulted in a method that prioritizes China’s wishes and approval while relegating US interests and ascendancy to the sidelines – indeed a daring paradigm shift for any small power wanting to navigate its own ship.


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