

PHILIPPINES FOREIGN POLICY ADDRESSING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE: A RATIONAL MODEL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the Philippines' foreign policy in the South China Sea dispute during the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. era using the Rational Model. The results show a significant transformation of the Rodrigo Duterte era to a concordance strategy with the United States during the Marcos Jr. era. The failure of Duterte's pro-China approach, which actually increased the aggressiveness of the Chinese Coast Guard and did not provide the expected concessions, became a policy lesson for the Marcos Jr. administration. The concordance strategy was shown through the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, the intensification of military exercises, the modernization of military capabilities, the institutionalization of intelligence sharing, and active participation in multilateral forums. This qualitative research, with data triangulation, reveals that the Philippines' chosen strategy reflects a rational calculation that aligning with the United States provides greater benefits for securing maritime sovereignty and regional stability than confronting China.

Keywords: Philippines foreign policy, rational model, South China Sea, Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is a maritime dispute that has garnered global attention due to its strategic location and rich natural resources, including fisheries, oil reserves, and natural gas (Son, 2025). Through the nine-dash line concept, China claims nearly 90% of the South China Sea and has carried out massive island reclamation by transforming small geographical features in the Paracel and Spratly Islands into military bases equipped with runways, fighter jet hangars, ports, and air defense systems (Kirchberger, 2025).

The claim drew a strong response from the Philippines, which asserted its sovereignty over Scarborough Shoal and part of the Spratly Islands based on geographical proximity and international law. The Philippines brought China's

claim to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on January 22, 2013, on the grounds that it was against the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Darajati et al., 2018; Nugraha, 2021). China, which continues to insist on its claims, is developing the region as a form of rejection of the PCA ruling issued on July 12, 2016, which stated that the nine-dash line has no legal force or status (Raymond & Welch, 2022).

When elected president in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte demonstrated a change in attitude toward China by reducing joint military activities with the United States, withdrawing from a confrontational stance on the South China Sea issue, and prioritizing Chinese infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative. Duterte believes this strategy will create diplomatic space, allowing China to respond positively to signals of peace and be more flexible on sensitive maritime issues (Buszynski, 2025).

However, this foreign policy did not yield results in line with Duterte's initial expectations. Not only were Filipino fishermen still prohibited from accessing Scarborough Shoal, but they also experienced escalating harassment and intimidation from the China Coast Guard. This ranges from the use of water cannons against Filipino fishing boats, dangerous blocking maneuvers that threaten lives, and even the destruction of Filipino fishermen's fishing equipment. This indicates that the diplomatic concessions made to China have been perceived as a sign of weakness and have encouraged more aggressive behavior (Buszynski, 2025). This situation is one of the factors influencing the foreign policy under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who will lead the Philippines in the next period.

Based on the above background, the researcher aims to investigate how the Philippines' foreign policy under Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration has addressed the South China Sea dispute.

This study aims to examine the Philippines' foreign policy under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in relation to the South China Sea

dispute. The researcher hopes that this study will be useful for other studies in the field of international relations, particularly those regarding foreign policy, and can provide input for decision-makers in understanding the foreign policy of the Philippines, especially during the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., in dealing with the South China Sea dispute.

Framework for Analysis

Several previous studies on Philippines foreign policy have discussed various aspects of relations with major powers, particularly the United States and China. Anh et al. (2024) and Bao & Thao (2023) analyze the Philippines diplomatic strategy in the context of the changing world order and the transition from theory to practical implementation. In his various works (De Castro, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, 2024), he explores the evolution of the Philippines' grand strategy from the Aquino to Marcos Jr. administrations, with an emphasis on the dilemma between appeasement and limited hard balancing, as well as the Ukraine-Russia war's impact on Philippines foreign policy. Fan (2024) analyzes the logic behind the Marcos Jr. administration's South China Sea policy, Quilop (2024) examines the consistency of Philippines foreign policy amid apparent shifts, and Rodier (2022) discusses the behavior of Philippine alliances in the Duterte era. What distinguishes this article from these studies is its specific focus on Philippines foreign policy toward the United States during the Marcos Jr. era, examined through the lens of Lovel's Rational Model.

The author uses the Rational Model in analyzing the Philippines' foreign policy toward the United States during the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Lovel (1970) defines the Rational Model as an analytical framework that emphasizes that the foreign policy decision-making process is carried out through a series of systematic and logical calculations, in which policymakers consciously evaluate national objectives, identify various available policy alternatives, and select the option that provides optimal results based on a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis.

Lovel (1970) argues that there are a number of key factors that influence the formation of a nation-state's foreign policy strategy, namely the structure of the international system, the views of the elite, the strategies of other countries, and the capacity of the country itself. These four factors determine the characteristics of inter-state relations from a strategic perspective, which include leadership strategy, confrontation strategy, accommodative strategy, and concordance strategy.

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing data from secondary sources, including written and visual materials, such as books, scientific journals, archival records, the internet, and official documents, as well as news from electronic media. The collected data was then analyzed, enabling data triangulation to improve the validity and reliability of the findings. Data triangulation was used to validate data from various sources. Triangulation was employed by combining policy documents, cooperation reports, and academic literature related to observations of the context of Philippines foreign policy towards the United States during the leadership of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. This technique was used to enhance the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

DISCUSSION

Foreign Policy in the Rodrigo Duterte Era

From 2016 to 2022, the Philippines underwent a significant transition in its relationship with the United States under the leadership of Rodrigo Duterte. In contrast to the historically stable bilateral relationship, the Duterte era has been characterized by efforts to rebalance the Philippines' foreign policy, reducing its dependence on the United States while fostering closer ties with China (Bao & Thao, 2023). This change in orientation cannot be understood solely as an ideological shift, but rather as a response to the perception that the concordance strategy does not provide optimal benefits for the Philippines' national interests, particularly in the context of economic development and resolving maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

The behavior of the Philippine alliance under the Duterte era exhibits a distinct pattern from previous administrations, marked by systematic efforts to reduce the visibility and intensity of military cooperation with the United States. Duterte has openly criticized certain aspects of the bilateral relationship, including excessive dependence on US security assistance and what is perceived as interference in Philippine domestic affairs, particularly with regard to controversial anti-drug policies (Rodier, 2022). Duterte also canceled a bilateral meeting with President Barack Obama, halted joint patrols with the US Navy in Philippine waters, and ordered US special forces to leave Mindanao (Candice & Perwita, 2021).

In the field of defense, the Duterte administration has shown ambivalence toward military cooperation with the United States. Duterte has threatened to terminate agreements such as the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and has even questioned the relevance of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) (Wu, 2024). However, the implementation of these threats has been consistently postponed or modified, indicating that despite the desire to reduce dependence, the Philippines under Duterte's leadership has not immediately ceased cooperation with the United States. This indicates that, despite a political desire to reduce dependence on the United States, the reality of security and limited domestic capabilities means that the Philippines still requires cooperation with the United States on various practical issues.

Duterte's statement publicly expressed his desire to build closer relations with Beijing, including his willingness to delay or suspend the implementation of the 2016 PCA ruling that rejected China's claims over the South China Sea (Fan, 2024). This indicates that the Philippines believes economic cooperation with China can yield greater development benefits than continued confrontation over maritime issues.

However, the Philippines finds itself in a difficult position between appeasement and limited hard balancing, where efforts to accommodate China

on maritime issues have not resulted in the expected concessions from China. China continues to maintain a hardline stance in the South China Sea dispute and has even increased its unilateral activities in areas claimed by the Philippines, including the construction of military facilities on various disputed maritime features (De Castro, 2022a).

Foreign Policy in the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Era

The relationship between the Philippines and the United States underwent a significant transformation during the era of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who has been in power since June 2022. During this era, the Philippines' foreign policy toward the United States can be categorized as a concordance strategy. Based on Lovel's (1970), the Rational Model concordance strategy refers to a strategy built on the basis of mutually beneficial interests, whereby countries with relatively lower capabilities seek to establish harmonious relations with superior countries by avoiding policies that could lead to conflict and aligning with the initiatives of dominant countries. Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy represents a calculated response to the dynamic security environment, especially China's increasingly assertive policy in the South China Sea (Wu, 2024).

The transition from the Duterte administration to Marcos Jr. reflects a fundamental shift in the Philippines' perception of threats and strategic priorities. Fan (2024) argues that the logic behind the South China Sea policy of the Marcos Jr. administration is based on empirical lessons learned from the failure of Duterte's accommodative approach, which did not succeed in securing the Philippines' vital interests. Duterte's pro-China policy, which was expected to provide economic benefits while reducing dependence on the United States, has instead produced counterproductive results. China did not provide substantial concessions regarding Filipino fishermen's access to Scarborough Shoal, promised infrastructure investments did not materialize as expected, and most crucially, the Chinese Coast Guard became increasingly aggressive in intimidating Filipino activities in the disputed area (Fan, 2024). This failure has

created a policy lesson that has prompted Marcos Jr. to turn to the United States for a concordance strategy as a more reliable option.

Marcos Jr.'s leadership style, which differs from that of his predecessor, also influences Philippines foreign policy. Unlike Duterte, who had a dominant leadership style and tended to make unilateral decisions in foreign policy, Marcos Jr. exhibits a more institutional and consultative leadership style (Rodier, 2022). This creates more space for the institutional preferences of the defense and foreign affairs bureaucracy, which has traditionally been pro-United States, to influence policy formulation.

The Philippines' foreign policy toward the United States during the Marcos Jr. era can be identified through several mutually reinforcing policy dimensions. In the bilateral defense dimension, Marcos Jr. took strategic steps to expand the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) which was originally signed in 2014. This expansion was not only quantitative, increasing the number of bases from five to nine locations, but also qualitative, providing more comprehensive access to the U.S. military forces (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). The additional bases approved include strategic facilities in Cagayan, Isabela, and Palawan, which are located in close proximity to the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, reflecting an explicit alignment with the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy in addressing potential Taiwan contingencies and China's maritime expansion (Wu, 2024).

The intensification of joint military exercises and training programs demonstrates the deepening military integration between the two countries. The Balikatan exercise, which is the main annual joint military exercise, has undergone significant expansion in scope, scale, and complexity during the Marcos Jr. era (Anh et al., 2024). These exercises involve not only conventional military training but also scenario-based simulations relevant to potential conflicts in the South China Sea, including amphibious operations, maritime domain awareness, and cyber warfare capabilities. After Marcos Jr. took office

as the President of the Philippines in 2023, the largest Balikatan exercise in the history of bilateral military cooperation between the two countries was held. The exercise involved more than 17,600 personnel, comprising 5,400 members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and 12,200 U.S. military personnel, which was approximately 8,000 more than the previous year (U.S. Embassy Manila, 2023). In 2025, the exercise will further involve third-party participants from regional allies such as Australia and Japan, reflecting the Philippines' integration into a broader multilateral security architecture led by the United States (Wu, 2024).

The modernization of the Philippine military's capabilities demonstrates a clear alignment with the US defense industry and technology standards. In 2023, the Philippines received \$40 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), as well as additional assistance through the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative from the US Department of Defense. Under the Trump administration, which in February 2025 excluded USD 336 million in aid for Philippine military modernization from the foreign aid freeze policy (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This program includes the acquisition of maritime patrol aircraft, coastal radar systems, and naval vessels that are compatible with U.S. systems and can operate in an integrated manner with U.S. forces. This technological alignment not only enhances interoperability but also creates long-term dependencies that strengthen the strategic partnership (Wu, 2024).

The intelligence-sharing mechanism has undergone more comprehensive institutionalization. The Marcos Jr. administration has developed a formal framework for sharing information on Chinese activities in the South China Sea, including the establishment of a joint intelligence center and regular consultation mechanisms (Fan, 2024). This information sharing is not only tactical in nature for direct threat assessment but also strategic for long-term planning and coordination in dealing with China's gray zone operations and potential escalation.

Unlike Duterte, who tended to be skeptical of multilateral approaches and preferred bilateral negotiations, Marcos Jr. actively supported US-led initiatives in various regional forums (Bao & Thao, 2023). In ASEAN, while respecting the principle of consensus building, the Philippines under Marcos Jr. has become more vocal in promoting positions aligned with US interests, including stronger language in joint statements on the South China Sea and support for the principle of freedom of navigation (Nugraha, 2021). In the broader Indo-Pacific context, the Philippines has shown openness to closer cooperation with the Quad mechanism and other multilateral arrangements promoted by the United States (Jannuzi, 2025).

In the economic sphere, the Philippines has undertaken calculated diversification with the aim of reducing economic vulnerability to China without severing its beneficial economic ties completely. The Marcos Jr. administration is actively pursuing alternatives to US-backed infrastructure initiatives, such as participation in the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) (Anh et al., 2024). The Luzon Economic Corridor becomes one of the outcomes of the PGI economic corridor, which is the first in the Indo-Pacific region. This corridor is a trilateral initiative between the United States, Japan, and the Philippines that aims to improve infrastructure connectivity, strengthen the semiconductor industry, increase food security, and promote sustainable economic growth in the Philippines, while strengthening economic partnerships among these three countries in the Indo-Pacific region (Miller, 2024). Through this corridor, the United States can counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Public diplomacy and strategic communication represent another crucial dimension of implementing the concordance strategy. Unlike Duterte, who often appeared antagonistic toward the United States and accommodating toward China, Marcos Jr. has adopted a clear messaging strategy that articulates alignment with democratic values and the rules-based international order (Fan, 2024). Marcos Jr.'s public statements consistently emphasize the shared history of the United States and the Philippines, democratic values, and common

interests in maintaining regional stability. At the same time, relations with China have become more assertive, as demonstrated by a clear rejection of historical claims and a firm stance in defending the Philippines' sovereignty claims (Wu, 2024).

The dynamics of structural forces that support the United States' continued presence in the Philippines, as well as the institutional attachment to cooperation mechanisms, create stability in the relationship between the two countries (Wu, 2024). In addition, success in achieving tangible benefits from the US partnership, including enhanced security capabilities and economic opportunities, can foster domestic support for the continuation of the strategy (Fan, 2024).

An analysis of internal factors influencing strategy implementation reveals that Philippine security institutions, including the AFP and the Department of National Defense, have played a crucial role in maintaining continuity in relations with the United States, even during periods of political tension (Rodier, 2022). This institutional inertia creates stability in policy implementation that transcends the individual preferences of political leaders. Congressional support for the US alliance and pressure from civil society also serve as stabilizing factors that ensure the continuity of the strategy (De Castro, 2024).

With rising tensions between the United States and China, middle powers such as the Philippines face pressure to choose sides in the competition between major powers (Son, 2025). The Philippines' decision to adopt a foreign policy aligned with the concordance strategy with the United States reflects the calculation that the benefits of aligning with the status quo power outweigh the risks of confrontation with the rising power.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the Philippines' foreign policy in dealing with the South China Sea dispute, particularly during the Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration, using the Rational Model approach. The analysis shows a

significant transformation in the orientation of the Philippines' foreign policy from the Rodrigo Duterte era to the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. era.

The Duterte era implemented a strategy of reducing dependence on the United States while building closer ties with China through diplomatic concessions on maritime issues for economic gain. However, this strategy has had counterproductive effects, with China failing to make the expected concessions, Filipino fishermen still can't access Scarborough Shoal, and the Chinese Coast Guard becoming increasingly aggressive in intimidating Philippine maritime activities. This failure proves that an accommodative approach is ineffective in securing the Philippines' national interests.

The transition of leadership to Marcos Jr. marks a significant shift towards a concordance strategy with the United States as a rational response to the failure of previous policies and the increasing threat from China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. This policy is implemented through several mutually reinforcing strategic dimensions, including the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement from five to nine strategic bases, the intensification of joint military exercises such as Balikatan involving more than 17,600 personnel, the modernization of military capabilities through Foreign Military Financing worth hundreds of millions of USD, the institutionalization of intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and active participation in multilateral forums led by the United States.

The concordance strategy implemented by Marcos Jr. has proven to be more effective in securing the national interests of the Philippines than Duterte's accommodative approach, as reflected in the improvement of defense capabilities, the strengthening of diplomatic positions on the South China Sea issue, and economic diversification through alternative infrastructure such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, which reduces vulnerability to China. The stability of this strategy's implementation is supported by the institutional inertia of the Philippine security agencies, which

have historically been pro-United States, congressional support, and pressure from civil society, which wants a firm stance against China's aggressiveness.

This study confirms that in the context of competition between the United States and China, middle powers such as the Philippines face complex strategic choices. The Philippines' choice to implement a concordance strategy with the United States reflects a rational calculation that the benefits of aligning with the status quo power outweigh the risks of confrontation with a revisionist power, particularly in the context of protecting maritime sovereignty and national interests in the South China Sea.

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