



INDIA-PHILIPPINES STRATEGIC TIES UNDER MARCOS: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

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In one of the most significant political events in recent history, the Philippines held a general election on May 9, bringing to an end Rodrigo Duterte's six-year presidential term and instituting Ferdinand Marcos Jr – son of the country's ousted former dictator – into leadership. Popularly known as 'Bongbong', his landslide victory is bound to have a critical impact on the regional strategic environment, particularly considering that the Philippines stands at the forefront of US-China great power tensions.

The fact that Xi acknowledged Marcos' late father's role in opening Philippines - China diplomatic relations and pledged his support for his "independent foreign policy" only demonstrates that Beijing is well-aware of his pro-China leanings and set to court Manila.

In this context, what does Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos' leadership mean for the region, and for India in particular? Will India-Philippines' strategic ties be characterised by a continuity of their budding synergy under President Duterte, or will we witness a change in their trajectory?

Marcos's Foreign Policy Platform: Towards a China-friendly Strategy?

Despite a long and intense election campaign, very little is actually known about Bongbong Marcos's policy agenda. His primary election platform was comprised of vague messages of unity as the "first step towards getting out of this crisis."¹ His administration's priorities are stated to be economy, rising prices, jobs, education, and infrastructure, a continuation of the pro-growth policies followed under the Duterte administration. While there are few hints as to what Marcos's overall foreign policy platform looks like, he stated during the campaign that he would pursue closer ties with Beijing. Marcos called Duterte's earlier strategy of maintaining diplomatic engagement with China,

despite their territorial dispute, the Philippines' only viable option, emphasising the need for unprecedented unity to overcome all obstacles and allow the country to prosper.² Considering that the Marcos administration will look to focus on post-pandemic economic recovery and, by extension, infrastructure projects, the Philippines' economic relations with China are likely to be a high priority.

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Within days of being elected, the President-elect has already explicitly stated that under his leadership, the Philippines' relations with China will "expand and shift to a higher gear".³ The fact that Xi acknowledged Marcos' late father's role in opening Philippines-China diplomatic relations and pledged his support for his "independent foreign policy" only demonstrates that Beijing is well-aware of his pro-China leanings and set to court Manila.⁴

After a substantial conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Marcos elaborated that he would look to not only expand trade ties with China but also their diplomatic, cultural, educational, and health linkages so as to address any "minor disagreements" between them.⁵ In other words, he is set to trivialise the China-Philippines maritime dispute and move past their rocky history to ensure growing trade and infrastructure and connectivity aid. This clearly indicates that Marcos is ready to renegotiate the Philippines' stance on the country's territorial dispute with China in the West Philippine Sea, which no doubt comes as a massive concern for the US and other claimant powers.

At the same time, however, Marcos' foreign policy is not likely to be outrightly anti-Washington like his predecessor, who was momentarily prepared to entirely disavow Manila's long-standing security partnership with Washington. Marcos is rather more likely to play the strategic game and adopt a delicate balancing act wherein the US continues to stand as a valuable security treaty ally. Highlighting that "military deals are advantageous to both countries," Marcos has appreciated Manila's "special relationship" with Washington.⁶ The Philippines' strategic positioning within China's neighbourhood and its security pact⁷ with the US military that allows US forces and naval vessels to operate in the country and conduct large, joint combat exercises makes it a critical actor in Washington's web of security arrangements in the region.

However, any balancing act will necessarily complicate American efforts, as well as the Quad's efforts, to blunt China's growing influence and ambitions. Politically, Marcos' foremost aim will be to consolidate power for his family. China, with its numerous lucrative commercial opportunities that can be used to attract local elites and reward Marcos' loyalists, is perfectly placed to help him in this endeavour.⁸ In 2007, Beijing established a consulate in Laoag (Marcos' home province). This enabled officials to

build deeper relations with elites in the region. With Bongbong in power, the consulate will be incredibly beneficial politically, as the Marcos family will look to have greater sway over Chinese investments, financing, and trade networks.⁹ His aim will be to redirect existing opportunities and create new ones that help strengthen the family's political power. Therefore, with Marcos, Beijing has an opportunity to significantly enhance its soft power in the Philippines.

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India's Options under the Marcos Regime

Marcos' pro-China shift is a worrying development for not only the US but also the Quad countries and other like-minded regional powers. For India in particular, which has long been building in-roads in the Philippines and propping up their strategic partnership as a key pillar of its Act East Policy (AEP) and Indo-Pacific strategy, the regime change and shift towards China might be a concerning turn of events.

At present, India and the Philippines share a multifaceted relationship, which includes broad-based cooperation encompassing areas from agriculture, science and technology, and infrastructure to defence and maritime security. In February 2022, a meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Filipino counterpart, Teodoro L. Locsin Jr., reviewed developments in bilateral cooperation and pledged to further expand economic cooperation.¹⁰ Such cooperation will involve capitalising on the complementarities of the two national economies and a shared interest in building diversified and resilient supply chains. India can therefore provide Manila with profitable opportunities for growth.

Given the intense focus on the security dimension, both sides also agreed to enhance defence collaborations in military training, capacity building, counter-terrorism, and maritime security, as well as emerging sectors such as blue economy, renewable energy, cybersecurity, and space security.¹¹ In January 2022, both states signed a US \$375 million military trade deal under which India supplied the BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Manila, making the Philippines the first Southeast Asian state to conclude such a contract with India.¹² In July 2022, Filipino marine corp personnel are set to visit India for training on the BrahMos systems, giving further boost to bilateral cooperation. Most importantly, the deal will provide a legal framework for future defence trade between the two nations, thus bolstering their strategic connections.¹³

Such a growing defence focus is rooted in the India-Philippines 2006 Defence Cooperation Agreement. Both states have developed robust maritime cooperation through regular naval exercises, such as the August 2021 drills in the West Philippine Sea, which focused on enhancing interoperability.¹⁴ These exercises come in addition to regular

intelligence-sharing and service-to-service military exchanges. Ultimately, India's hope is to build the India-Philippines partnership into a comprehensive strategic one, much like the one New Delhi shares with close partners like Vietnam (2016) and Indonesia (2018).¹⁵ Manila's acquisition of BrahMos can be viewed in this vein. It is meant to support the Philippines' quest to exert credible sea denial over the disputed waters in the region, and hence bolster its defence capabilities. With a stronger strategic partnership with the Philippines, India has sought to amplify its presence in Southeast Asia and prevent the dominant presence of any single autocratic power.

As Marcos prioritises post-pandemic development, India will need to adjust its Philippine economic approach to bring more emphasis on avenues for increased prosperity and look towards forging a developmental partnership.

Now that the Philippines is looking to redraw its China policy, what are the implications for India's strategic outreach to the country? Although Marcos has certainly opened the doors for a greater connection with Beijing, India has several options. It must employ strategic and artful diplomacy to pursue avenues for deeper economic engagement, especially in fields like health and pharmaceuticals, where India has much to offer and the potential to become a preferred partner. Indian companies are already engaged in sectors like manufacturing, information technology, agriculture, and renewable energy. However, significant room exists for more robust relations. Under Duterte, Manila pushed for a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with India in November 2021. Now, the challenge for India will be to ensure that the plans put in place are sustained under the Marcos administration.

Therefore, as Marcos prioritises post-pandemic development, India will need to adjust its Philippine economic approach to bring more emphasis on avenues for increased prosperity and look towards forging a developmental partnership. India's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' can offer a roadmap for Manila in its effort to put in place a post-pandemic recovery plan. On supply chains, India can open doorways to regional mechanisms like the India-Japan-Australia-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), and help Manila build resilient value chains. Furthermore, Philippines can benefit from India's focus on infrastructure and connectivity development in the region through bilateral collaborations in third countries with Japan as well as multilateral platforms like the Build Back Better World (led by G7), Blue Dot Network (led by US, Australia and Japan), and most prominently, the India-led Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

Importantly, even as Marcos seeks to move closer to China for economic development benefits, he will seek a balancing act in foreign policy between China and the US. Here, a strategic partnership with India, which is in a similarly precarious situation, could be exceedingly valuable. Marcos' vision of an 'independent foreign policy' is synergetic

with India's commitment to strategic autonomy, which entails its ability to pursue its national interests without being constrained by any foreign actors.¹⁶ Building on such convergence, both countries can look to enhance high-level exchanges and push for greater cooperation to tackle shared security challenges.

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Marcos is no doubt aware that while China brings considerable economic benefits, the Philippine public is highly sceptical of Beijing.¹⁷ Duterte, too, eventually recognised China as not being a friend of the Philippines,¹⁸ and the importance of building strategic partnerships that help protect the country's interests (particularly in the South China Sea). In this context, New Delhi can expect continuity in its defence ties with Manila. The change in leadership may thus, in fact, be an opportunity for exploring greater strategic convergence between the two states. For instance, in order to practice its balancing diplomatic act, Manila will strive for a stable and peaceful regional order that is conducive to growth; India has great room for cooperation with the Philippines in this regards. Both countries can work together to ensure regional maritime security, thus safeguarding critical sea lines of communication and the freedom of navigation and commerce, against both traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

The BrahMos deal was a crucial way for India to show the Philippines how it can support its coastal defence goals. Now, New Delhi must consider how it can take its defence partnership forward through added practical initiatives for cooperation. Concluding a military logistics agreement that enables greater naval and air exchanges and joint exercises is one avenue India could explore to bolster defence ties. Ultimately, India can be an example of how to manage a boundary dispute with China while also engaging with it on multiple levels. New Delhi can show a Marcos-led Manila that entering into a full conflict or entirely decoupling from Beijing are not the only options for its China policy; rather, the Philippines can draw lessons on how to stand firmly for its territorial integrity and strategic interests, while cooperating with China on the economy and the US on security matters.

Notes:

¹ “Ferdinand Marcos Jr wins landslide election victory in the Philippines,” *France 24*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220509-ferdinand-marcos-jr-wins-landslide-election-victory-in-the-philippines>. Accessed on May 19, 2022.

² “Biden, Xi congratulate Marcos Jr on Philippine presidential win,” *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/12/us-china-congratulate-marcos-jr-on-philippine-presidential-win>. Accessed on May 19, 2022.

³ “Philippines’ Marcos Jr wants China ties to ‘shift to higher gear’ under his presidency,” *CNA*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-marcos-jr-wants-china-ties-shift-higher-gear-under-his-presidency-2690686>. Accessed on May 20, 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Chloe Mayer, “Who Is Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Where Does He Stand on US Relations?,” *Newsweek*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/ferdinand-marcos-bongbong-philippines-1704691>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

⁷ The Philippines-US Visiting Forces Agreement was signed in 1998, and stands in support of their Mutual Defense Treaty. See Office of Treaty Affairs, “Philippines (12931) – Agreement Regarding the Treatment of US Armed Forces Visiting the Philippines; Agreement Regarding the Treatment of Philippines Personnel Visiting the US,” US Department of State, June 1, 1999, <https://www.state.gov/12931>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

⁸ Alvin Camba, “Bongbong Marcos will move the Philippines closer to China,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 5, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Bongbong-Marcos-will-move-the-Philippines-closer-to-China>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Visit of External Affairs Minister to the Philippines (February 13-15, 2022),” Press Release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, February 15, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34865/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_to_the_Philippines__February_1315_2022. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

¹¹ ANI, “India, Philippines agree to expand economic cooperation, trade and investment,” *The Print*, February 15, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/india-philippines-agree-to-expand-economic-cooperation-trade-and-investment/832763/>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

¹² “India, Philippines ink \$ 375 million deal for BrahMos missiles,” *Economic Times*, January 29, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-philippines-ink-375-million-deal-for-brahmos-missiles/articleshow/89188501.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

¹³ Rezaul H. Laskar, “India signs pact with Philippines for supply of BrahMos missile,” *Hindustan Times*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-signs-pact-with-philippines-for-supply-of-brahmos-missile-101614795752832.html>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence, “Maritime Partnership Exercise between Indian Navy and the Philippine Navy – 23 August 2021,” Release ID: 1748328, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, August 23, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1748328>. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

¹⁵ Akash Sahu, "India and the Philippines: Towards a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, April 1, 2022, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/india-and-the-philippines-asahu-010422#footnoteref1_fd27x40. Accessed on May 21, 2022.

¹⁶ Esha Banerji, "In US-China Great Power Contest, Regime Change in Philippines is Good News for India," *News18*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/in-us-china-great-power-contest-regime-change-in-philippines-is-good-news-for-india-5213683.html>. Accessed on May 22, 2022.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *The Philippines' Dilemma: How to Manage Tensions in the South China Sea*, Asia Report No 316 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/316-philippines-dilemma-how-manage-tensions-south-china-sea>. Accessed on May 22, 2022.

¹⁸ Derek Grossman, "China Has Lost the Philippines Despite Duterte's Best Efforts," RAND, May 6, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/05/china-has-lost-the-philippines-despite-dutertes-best.html>. Accessed on May 22, 2022.



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