



## DUTERTE'S UNDERAPPRECIATED FOREIGN POLICY GAINS

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Criticism of President Rodrigo Duterte's foreign policy largely focuses on his rhetoric. Some have described his policies as defeatist and an attempt to appease China, especially in relation to the West Philippine Sea (WPS). At the same time, he is seen as confrontational toward the US and Europe for what Duterte considers unwanted interference in Philippine domestic affairs. As chief architect of the country's foreign policy and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the president's word is taken seriously and is taken by some as an expression of state policy. However, Duterte's unstatesmanlike persona and audacious – often vulgar – language makes it difficult to use his rhetoric as the primary basis for ascertaining his independent foreign policy. Beyond the rhetoric, however, the administration has undertaken significant steps – symbolic, actual, and enduring – to demonstrate its resolve in the WPS.

First, Duterte's administration sent the highest-level official delegation to the Kalayaan (Spratlys) Islands in recent memory, a publicized visit that other claimants, including Vietnam and China, have yet to attempt. In April 2017, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana led a high-level defense and civilian government delegation to visit the country's largest occupied feature in WPS, Pag-asa (Thitu). The delegation included the chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and chiefs of the Army and the Air Force. It also included civilian officials led by the governor of Palawan province, in which Kalayaan is

a designated municipality. During the visit, Lorenzana led a simple flag-raising ceremony, inspected the island's facilities, and announced government plans to upgrade and rehabilitate them. A proposal to convert the island into a tourist destination was also floated. The visit took place despite Chinese representations to discourage it and despite normal radio challenges from Chinese forces in the vicinity. That the visit took place amidst improving Philippine-China relations suggests a clear principled stand – friendship and harmonious ties with neighbors would not come at the expense of national interests.

Second, Duterte's administration has undertaken major improvements in facilities and structures in the Kalayaans, which previous administrations wanted to do but hesitated out of concern about how other claimants would react. In May 2018, construction commenced on lighthouses in Pag-asa (Thitu) Patag (Flat), Likas (West York) and Kota (Loatia) Islands to improve safety of navigation, and seven new buildings in Pag-asa to improve the living conditions on the island. The airstrip and port on Pag-asa are also undergoing much-needed repairs. Better relations with China, Vietnam, and other claimants along with strong domestic political will are making this construction activity possible. Thus far, these actions have not elicited a noticeable adverse reaction from other disputants. Meanwhile, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Allan Peter Cayetano has provided regular reassurances that the construction activity is intended for peaceful purposes. Lorenzana recently stated that except for an isolated episode on May 11 near Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Reef), the construction efforts are proceeding without incident.

Third, the "Second Horizon Modernization Program" (2018-2022) of the AFP continues under the Duterte administration. While the president has emphasized dispute management, it is erroneous to say that he is not investing in the country's external defense. The administration approved a defense budget of \$5.6 billion, more than the previous administration's \$1.7 billion from 2010-16. Duterte also moved the purchase of some items originally earmarked for the "Third Horizon" (2023-2028) to the "Second Horizon" (e.g. submarines), which would increase the chance that they will be procured before he steps down. The

president approved the acquisition of two squadrons of multi-role fighter aircraft and a frigate. Long-range patrol aircraft, drones, and offshore patrol vessels are also in the list of priority defense articles to be purchased. He emphasized the purchase of new units instead of second-hand or decommissioned ones as had been the case with previous acquisitions. The government is also diversifying arms suppliers and has been getting arms donations (e.g., China, Russia, US, and South Korea) and better terms. Goodwill visits by US, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Indian naval and coast guard ships were also welcomed. This gives substance to the policy of being friends to all and enemies to none. Military exercises with the US continue despite Duterte's anti-US tirades. The AFP's modernization is geared toward making it more responsive to evolving threats confronting the country, including terrorism and external security challenges.

These actions show that assessing Duterte's foreign policy by focusing on his rhetoric alone can lead to erroneous conclusions. The controversy generated by his remarks often distracts attention from meaningful and concrete measures being taken to reinforce the country's position in WPS. Whether it is a deliberate strategy of gradually accomplishing things on the ground while media and the public are consumed by his expletives is arguable. Despite being a lawyer and veteran prosecutor, the president downplayed suggestions that legal cases against China should be filed for every incident, given mechanisms for redress (e.g., Bilateral Consultation Mechanism at the ministry-level, hotline communications at the operational-level). That said, the government has been making non-publicized protests and actively raising issues with Beijing using established mechanisms. Enforcement challenges and preference for dispute management and expanding economic ties with China are critical factors behind this decision. Duterte has focused on actions that can make more difference in the here and now. The demand for immediate results given the short presidential term (six years) and doubts about US alliance commitments (ambiguity in the coverage and activation of the Mutual Defense Treaty, failure to halt China's massive island-building project, President Trump's transactional leadership) influence this predisposition.

Fixation on Duterte's language will hinder efforts to objectively assess his foreign policy or appreciate the gains he is making. One can argue that shrewd employment of rhetorical devices is cover for some of his administration's actions. He turned a challenging situation of the post-2016 arbitration decision into an opportunity and used the award, in subtle fashion, as leverage in dealing with an increasingly powerful northern neighbor. The president has scored symbolic, actual, and enduring gains in his two years in office that surpass those of his predecessors. Under his watch, the first high-level official visit to Philippine-held features and long-delayed construction projects on the same took place and a record-high military budget was approved.

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