



## PHILIPPINE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION ON DUTERTE'S CHINA POLICY

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In anticipation of his visit to China later this month, President Rodrigo Duterte will be leaving behind a growing number of Filipinos who are weary of his refusal to hold China accountable for its misdeeds in the West Philippine Sea. While Duterte has managed to cultivate positive relations with the Chinese government since the start of his administration, this has not translated into a more constructive perception of the country among a majority of Filipinos. Just the opposite, public opinion in the Philippines has become increasingly negative toward China even as Duterte continues to enjoy broad support for his domestic policies.

A lack of concern and low awareness among the general public regarding international affairs is not unusual and the Philippines is no exception. Domestic issues that have an immediate and visible impact garner more attention than somewhat vague grand politics associated with external relations. However, Filipino public opinion is becoming more vocal regarding maritime claims in the West Philippine Sea. According to a [Pulse Asia survey](#) conducted in June 2019, 74% of Filipinos polled believe that the Philippines should not trust China. This negative perception is also apparent regarding Duterte's policy on territorial sovereignty. According to the [Social Weather Stations survey](#) released on July 11, 93% of Filipino adults surveyed say that "it is important that the Philippines regain control of the islands occupied by China in the West Philippine Sea."

Public dissatisfaction with Duterte's China policy worsened after he downplayed the Chinese ramming of the Philippine fishing boat Gem-Ver 1 in the Recto (Reed) Bank and the abandonment of its 22 fishermen at sea. Ironically, the incident happened on June 9, the date both countries mark as "Philippine-Chinese friendship day." Photographic evidence of the destroyed fishing vessel, the plainspoken testimony of the fishermen, and the inspiring stories from the Vietnamese rescuers (who saved the Filipinos) fueled [national outrage](#). This 'hit and run' incident puts a human face on the longstanding territorial dispute.

For many, this episode marked a turning point for Duterte's "pro-China policy." In his first public statement, he downplayed the collision as just a "little maritime incident" that should not be blown out of proportion. The typically loud and confrontational president uncharacteristically urged the nation to calm down, revealing just how far Duterte would go to avoid upsetting China, even at the expense of national interests and Filipino dignity.

The recent incident puts a spotlight on the Philippines' struggle to stand up against Chinese incursions on its maritime territories. Yet this time it intensified the nation's fury. In the administration of President Benigno Aquino III, the general perception was that the government was doing everything it could to advance the nation's maritime interests and address issues with China. It was during the Aquino administration that the Philippines faced off against China near Scarborough Shoal, lobbied ASEAN to take a strong stance against Chinese incursions in disputed waters, and filed an unprecedented arbitration case against China, which it eventually won.

With the Duterte administration, Filipinos are increasingly agitated and becoming outspoken against his perceived subservience to China. The nation is left wondering why he would not stand up to the Chinese, considering that Duterte had earlier projected himself as the defender of Philippine sovereignty. He even pledged to ride a jet ski to the Spratly Islands or Scarborough Shoal and plant the country's flag there. However, a spokesman later said it was merely a joke, which eventually turned out to be a [publicity stunt](#).

Certainly Duterte is aware of anti-China sentiments among the Filipino public. Under growing pressure, he gave a tough response last April when more than 200 Chinese vessels “swarmed” the Philippine-held Pag-asa (Thitu) Island. Referring to China, he even [stated](#), “I will not plead or beg, but I am just telling you that lay off the Pag-asa because I have soldiers there. If you touch it, that’s another story. Then I will tell my soldiers ‘prepare for suicide missions.’” However, his aggressive speech is largely perceived as a tactical statement to gain votes for his political allies during the country’s midterm elections last May. After winning the majority in Congress, Duterte continued with his soft approach towards China.

Following the Recto Bank incident, Duterte announced that he will raise the Philippines’ arbitral victory over the West Philippine Sea in his forthcoming meeting with Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping at the end of August. Is this being done to appease the Filipino public? In fact, his visit to China may generate even more suspicions. Based on his [spokesperson’s statement](#), Duterte plans to raise the arbitral ruling for the purpose of discussing the 60-40 sharing scheme in the proposed joint oil and gas exploration in the West Philippine Sea. This raises another alarm bell as it may put the Philippines’ maritime claims in further jeopardy.

It seems likely that Duterte will continue with his controversial China policy despite growing public wariness since he continues to enjoy nationwide popularity. In June, after the Recto Bank incident, [Pulse Asia](#) reported that Duterte still had the trust of 85% of Filipinos, suggesting that although people do not necessarily agree with his policy toward China, they still adore him as president. This may only embolden Duterte to continue accommodating China, confident that his perceived failure in promoting the country’s maritime interests will not be challenged.

The Filipinos’ disappointment with Duterte’s China policy and their continued trust in him as a leader is quite perplexing and disturbing. Yet, it seems likely that this paradox in Philippine public opinion will continue for three more years until the end of Duterte’s administration even though it may have long-term negative costs to the Philippine interests that will be difficult to overturn. Unless public opinion

dramatically changes to make Duterte accountable for his actions, Filipinos will have to wait for the next administration to have a China policy that truly reflects and protects the nation’s interests.

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