

Philippines-China Relations

Philippines-China Relations:

*Geopolitics, Multilateralism and
the South China Sea Disputes*

By

Rommel C. Banlaoi

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Lovingly dedicated to the following:

my wife, Grace

my children:

Rome Melchizedek, Ronaiah Gail and Rommel Gian
and my parents: Lolita and Rizalino (deceased)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	xii
Acknowledgments.....	xv
Part I. Bilateral Relations	
Philippines-China Relations at 50: Revisiting a Shared Past for a Shared Future.....	2
Philippines-China Relations: Shifting to a Higher Gear Under Marcos Jr. Administration?.....	7
The Imperative of Strategic Partnership in Philippines-China Relations	13
Duterte Presidency: A Game Changer in Philippine-China Relations?....	19
Philippines-China Relations after the Arbitration.....	24
Arbitration and Philippines-China Relations under the Duterte Administration.....	27
International Arbitration Award Five Years After: China and the Philippines Should Move on to Pursue Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation.....	29
The South China Sea Arbitration Award 9 Years after under Marcos Jr. Administration: Philippine Government Interests and Geopolitical Consequences.....	34
RCEP and Promotion of Practical Cooperation between China and the Philippines.....	36
EDCA Expansion Damages Philippines-China Relations.....	40
Philippines-China Cooperation in the South China Sea during the Covid-19 Pandemic.....	44

Part II. Geopolitical and Multilateral Issues

Flexible Foreign Policy: Balancing Philippine Relations with the US and China under Marcos Jr. Presidency.....	50
The Philippines under Marcos Jr.: Playing the US Card to Deal with China	57
Current State of China-US Relations and Philippine Security	61
Security Risks of EDCA under Marcos Jr. Administration.....	65
Roles of Small States in International Security: Philippine Experiences amidst US-China Big Power Rivalry under Duterte Administration.....	73
The VFA and Philippine-American Alliance amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic	77
The Philippines under Duterte: The Vacillating VFA, an Ambiguous US Ally.....	82
Duterte’s Policy of Deliberate Ambiguity towards China and the US	87
Duterte Faces a Hard Choice Mending Ties with China and Keeping Alliance with the US	91
US-China Relations and COVID-19: Pursuing Chinese Studies during the Pandemic and its Aftermath	94
China-Southeast Asia Relations and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.....	97
Securing the Developing World amid Climate and Environmental Threats: An ASEAN Response	99
RCEP and Regional Economic Integration: Supply Chain Stability and Regional Security.....	102
RCEP in the New Trade Environment: Benefits and Implications for the Philippines with Trump’s Tariff Offensives	108

Vital Roles of Think Tanks in Implementing China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.....	112
Peace and Development: Southeast Asian Studies and the Study of Philippines-China Friendly Relations	115
China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), and the Direction of Philippines-China Security Relations.....	119
Challenges Facing ASEAN Centrality in Regional Security Cooperation Architecture.....	123
Regionalism of the New Era: A Community of Shared Future between China and Southeast Asia.....	126
Trump Presidency 2.0: Ending Colonial Mentality in Philippine Defense and Foreign Policy under Marcos Jr. Administration.....	130
The <i>Pax Aseana-Sinica</i> , the ASEAN Way with Chinese Characteristics: China-ASEAN Defense Cooperation towards a Security Community of Shared Future.....	142
Part III. West Philippine Sea and the South China Sea Disputes	
Understanding the South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea	148
Amidst the Russia-Ukraine War: Current Security Situation and Future Direction of South China Sea Disputes	155
Challenging Western Narrative of New War in the South China Sea	158
Pursuing Cooperation for Common Development between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea	163
Pursuing Philippines-China Cooperation on Oil and Gas Development in the West Philippine Sea.....	165
Oil and Gas Development in West Philippine Sea and South China Sea Conflict.....	169

Promoting Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in South China Sea through Bilateral Consultative Mechanism	173
Philippines-China Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM): Consultation and Not Militarization Can Unlock Peace in the South China Sea.....	176
The Philippines and China: Deepening Mutual Trusts in the South China Sea through Compliance and Accountability.....	179
RCEP, Maritime Cooperation and Achieving Peace in the South China Sea.....	185
Tract II Diplomacy and Roles of Think Tanks in Building China-ASEAN Blue Economic Partnership in the South China Sea.....	191
Building Partnership for Blue Economy: Achievements and Limitations on the 20 th Anniversary of the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea	197
On the Recent Second Thomas Shoal Incident: The Philippines and China Need to Overcome Misunderstanding	202
The Philippines and Vietnam: Strategic Partners of Rivals in the West Philippine Sea?	205
China-ASEAN Relations at 30: Pursuing Maritime Cooperation in the South China Sea.....	211
The Time is Ripe for China and the Philippines to Pursue Cooperation on Joint Search and Rescue Operations in the South China Sea.....	214
AUKUS: Security Implications for China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation and Good Ocean Governance in the South China Sea.....	217
AUKUS and Duty to Cooperate: Current State and Future Direction of South China Sea Disputes	220

Philippines-China Relations: Geopolitics, Multilateralism and the South China Sea Disputes	xi
Deescalating China-US Tensions in the South China Sea.....	223
Strategy of a Small State with Great Powers: The Philippines amidst US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea	226
Situating the Philippines between the US and China in the South China Sea.....	230
China’s Vision of Global Ocean Governance through Maritime Cooperation	233
Can the Philippines Settle Territorial Disputes with China in the West Philippine Sea?.....	236
De-Escalation of Philippines-China Tensions in the South China Sea: A Building Block for China-ASEAN Blue Economy Cooperation.....	241
Current Security Architecture in the Asia Pacific: Reaffirming the ASEAN Way of Peaceful Settlement of Disputes in the South China Sea	243
Ensuring Peace and Stability in the South China Sea.....	246
Meeting Half Way Through Peaceful Co-Existence is Imperative to Promote Cooperation for a Shared Future in the South China Sea.....	249
Sinology in the Philippines in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: A Peaceful Settlement of Philippines-China Disputes in the South China Sea.....	253
Appendices	
Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines 5 January 2023.....	266
Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines 21 October 2016	274
Joint Communiqué of the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines 9 June 1975	283
About the Author from DeepSeek	285

PREFACE

This volume is a collection of my analyses, commentaries, short essays, op. eds, and speeches covering some aspects of Philippines-China relations during the mid-term of President Ferdinand “Bong Bong” R. Marcos Jr and full-term of former President Rodrigo “Digong” R. Duterte.

I collected these think-pieces in one reader to mark the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the formal establishment of Philippines-China diplomatic relations inked on June 9, 1975. This volume focuses on bilateral relations between China and the Philippines in the context of prevailing geopolitical and multilateral issues as well as persistent territorial disputes and maritime jurisdictional conflicts in the South China Sea, in general, and the West Philippine Sea, in particular.

Since this volume is a collection of separate pieces published by known print media and social media platforms in the Philippines and abroad, they can be read separately from each other as each item is already a complete masterpiece of its own. But all these pieces are interrelated threads weaved and woven on a larger canvass of diplomacy, foreign affairs, defense, security, and international politics.

Readers may find redundancies in some issues repetitively covered, particularly on Philippine relations with China and the US as well on the various aspects of the South China Sea disputes. They are meant to highlight the recurrence of vital and perennial issues confronting Philippines-China relations. Though this volume lacks the coherence of a “scientific book” with clear methodology, framework of analysis and literature survey, it, however, serves as a useful scholarly reader as it is consistent in diligently following, through the rigor of scholarly research, some current concerns and various cyclical issues in Philippines-China relations.

Most pieces in this volume underwent stylistic editing and some substantive amendments to make the discussion timely and contemporary. But all pieces must be read in the context of the date of its original publication, or time of actual delivery in the case of some speeches. Though some issues in this volume may have been overtaken by current

events, they, however, document the recent history of Philippines-China relations, especially during the Duterte and Marcos Jr administrations. Each piece, therefore, must be read in its proper historical milieu.

As the title suggests, this book describes bilateral concerns, geopolitical issues, and multilateral challenges in Philippines-China relations in the context of various topics, particularly the South China Sea disputes. Though this collection covers a kaleidoscope of topics like national security, regionalism, world peace, major power rivalry, blue economy, economic integration, conflict management, dispute resolution ocean governance, maritime domain awareness, and military competition, these issues are analyzed on how they affect the current state and future direction of Philippines-China relations.

Most issues covered in this volume are current events in Philippines-China relations. But this book also discusses historical factors having a strong bearing on present security dynamics of the Philippines' bilateral ties with China. This book traces Philippines-China relations to the Nanhai Trade of the 9th to 16th centuries, where pre-colonial Philippine kingdoms (e.g., Butuan, Ma-I, Sulu) engaged in peaceful and mutually-beneficial trade with China to achieve common prosperity among their people. Their many centuries of commercial activities developed deep socio-cultural ties among the Chinese and Filipinos who regarded China as a "trader, not an invader" compared with Western colonial masters.

The advent of Western colonialism disrupted peaceful commerce among the Chinese and Filipinos. Colonialism even distorted China's image in the Philippines resulting in a racial hatred now called Sinophobia. This book argues that the strong anti-China attitude now prevailing in the Philippines is a colonial legacy from Spanish, American, and Japanese rule—not an organic, natural sentiments of Filipinos. This colonial historical distortion presently affects Filipino perceptions of China despite geographical proximity, cultural familiarity, economic connection, and social affinity.

Despite the development of anti-China feelings in the Philippines during the colonial eras, attempts to promote friendly ties with China persisted. In 1975, the Philippines and China formally established their diplomatic relations by signing a Joint Communiqué upholding common principles to cement bilateral ties like mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, economic cooperation and peaceful settlement of disputes. These principles remain essential in sustaining friendship, avoiding violent conflict, and improving comprehensive cooperation in Philippines-China

relations.

All essays in this volume champion the common theme that promoting friendly Philippines-China relations require a deep historical understanding of their ties. The book stresses the urgent need at present for bilateral dialogues and direct consultations over militarization to peacefully and eventually settle disputes in the South China Sea. More importantly, this book advocates for a mutually beneficial pragmatic cooperation in Philippines-China relations by integrating their commercial and trade activities with Southeast Asian neighbors and the rest of the world. This book emphasizes the need for peace and common prosperity with China, not war in the South China Sea.

Like my other books on Philippines-China relations, this volume is a written record of my intellectual journey as a serious scholar and an ardent observer of Philippines-China relations. It is my sincere desire to see this publication adding value to the existing scholarly literature on the topic.

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I also appreciate the support of my dearest friend, Tony Lopez, publisher and owner of BizNews Asia, for giving me a space, as a writer and a contributing editor in the Philippines' largest and most influential weekly business and news magazine. Many thanks also to Marites Vitug and Maria Ressa for using some of my works in Rappler, an online news website based in the Philippines with a bureau in Indonesia. I also appreciate the editors of Manila Standard, Manila Times, the Philippine Star, China-US Focus, Institute for China American Studies, Beijing Review, ISEAS Perspectives, East Asia Forum, and the South China Morning Post, among others for publishing some of opinion pieces and analyses on geopolitical and international security issues, especially on Philippines-China relations.

I am very grateful to my sincere friends in China for continuously engaging me in their various international conferences, workshops, and forums to share my humble thoughts and perspectives on security and geopolitical issues facing the Philippines in the context of its relations with China, United States and Asian nations. I am very much indebted to Dr. Wu Shicun, Chairman of the Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance as well as the founding Chairman of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies (NISCSS) where he now sits as Chairman of the Academic Committee. Dr Wu is a great friend, an effective mentor and a thoughtful colleague for two decades and I have

incurred intellectual debts to him after many years of academic interactions and collaborations on maritime security and South China Sea issues. I cannot really thank him enough, along with his equally supportive co-workers, Dr. Yan Yan and Dr. Hu Bo.

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Of course, this book would not have been written without the valuable inputs, advices, and insights from the two countries’ important diplomats who have become part of my scholarly adventures on Philippines-China relations: Philippine Ambassador to China, His Excellency Jaime Flor Cruz; and, China Ambassador to the Philippines, His Excellency Huang Xilian. I also thank all counsellors and staff members of the Chinese Embassy in Manila as they have been helping me clear my paths as I trek the oftentimes rough roads of Philippines-China relations.

Saving the best for last, I truly thank my loving and caring wife, Grace, for enabling and inspiring me to pursue my academic works amidst the pressure of parenting. Hugs and kisses to my children (Rome Melchizedek, Ronaiah Gail, and Rommel Gian) for motivating me to work harder as a scholar. Above all, to God be the Glory!

Selected books of Rommel Banlaoi on Philippines-China Relations

Philippines-China Relations at 45 During the Covid-19 Pandemic: New Discoveries, Recent Developments and Continuing Concerns, ed. (Quezon City: Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, 2021).

Philippines-China Relations: Geopolitics, Economics and Counterterrorism, ed. (Quezon City: Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, 2019).

Philippines-China Security Relations: Current Issues and Emerging Concerns (Manila: Yuchengco Centre, 2012).

Security Aspects of Philippines-China Relations: Bilateral Issues and Concerns in the Age of Global Terrorism (Quezon City: Rex Bookstore International, 2007).

Defense and Military Cooperation Between the Philippines and China: Broadening Bilateral Ties in the Post-9/11 Era (Taipei: Center for the Advancement of Policy Studies, June 2007).

PART I.

BILATERAL RELATIONS

PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS AT 50: REVISITING A SHARED PAST FOR A SHARED FUTURE

Despite their persistent territorial conflicts and maritime jurisdictional disputes in the West Philippine Sea (WPS),¹ the Philippines and China commemorated on June 9, 2025 the 50th anniversary of the formal establishment of their diplomatic relations. The celebration of this important occasion was supposed to be a very special event under President Ferdinand “Bong Bong” Marcos Jr considering that the establishment of the said ties was formalized by no less than his own father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr.

But Marcos Jr’s “firm” approach towards China made the commemoration of this occasion awkward as the Philippine government paid more attention on WPS disputes.

Establishment of formal diplomatic ties

There is a need to remember that on June 9, 1975, then Philippine President Marcos Sr and then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai signed in Beijing the historic Joint Communiqué on the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Philippines. This Joint Communiqué contains many important provisions that should inform the current state of Philippines-China relations under Marcos Jr administration. These provisions include the following key principles:

- That both Governments desire to promote the traditional friendship between the Chinese and the Filipino peoples;
- That the economic, political and social system of a country should be chosen only by the people of that country, without outside interference. They maintain that the difference between the economic, political and

¹ The West Philippine Sea is a term used by the Philippine government to describe a body of waters in the South China Sea falling under the maritime jurisdiction of the Philippines. It is composed of waters around the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG), the Scarborough Shoal and the Luzon Straits.

social systems of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines should not constitute an obstacle to peaceful co-existence and the establishment and development of peaceful and friendly relations between the two countries and peoples in accordance with the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit;

- That the two Governments agree to settle all disputes by peaceful means on the basis of the above-mentioned principles without resorting to the use or threat of force;
- That both Governments agree that all foreign aggression and subversion and all attempts by any country to control any other country or to interfere in its internal affairs are to be condemned. They are opposed to any attempt by any country or group of countries to establish hegemony or create spheres of influence in any part of the world; and,
- That the two Governments agree to cooperate with each other to achieve the foregoing objectives.²

The Joint Communiqué could have become more and more relevant in the context of the ongoing disputes between the Philippines and China. The document asserts that “The two Governments recognize and agree to respect each other's territorial integrity.”³

In the Joint Communiqué, the Philippine Government upholds the One-China Policy when it “recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, fully understands and respects the position of the Chinese Government that there is but one China and that Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory, and decides to remove all its official representations from Taiwan within one month from the date of signature of this communique.”⁴ On the hand, the Chinese government “agrees to respect the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of the Philippines.”⁵

Thus, the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Philippines-China diplomatic relations must serve as a sterling reminder for both countries on the main purpose of their relations: to remain friends despite their on-going differences on some current issues.

² Joint Communiqué of the Government of the Peoples' Republic of China and the Government of Republic of the Philippines. June 9, 1975.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Friendship dates back many centuries ago

In fact, the long-standing friendship between the Chinese and Filipinos dates back many centuries ago built through extensive commercial, social and cultural interactions. Ancient inhabitants of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao actively participated in the *Nanhai Trade* that was fully recorded and documented during the 9th and 16th centuries.⁶ The *Nanhai Trade*, known to be the ancient maritime silk road, was the ancient commercial network between Chinese and Southeast Asian traders including ancient people we now call Filipinos.⁷

Before the Spanish colonial rule of the archipelago now called the Philippines, the Chinese and inhabitants of the various kingdoms of pre-Hispanic Philippines enjoyed generally peaceful and friendly relations with each other for more than a millennium. The Chinese and pre-colonial Filipinos liked each other so much that they had close, mutually beneficial and reciprocal ties. During these periods of peaceful coexistence, China never thought of invading the various ancient kingdoms of the archipelago. The Chinese just wanted to trade, promote commerce, and exchange cultures.

Thus, China was a trader and was never an invader of the pre-colonial Philippines. Prior to Western colonialism, the Philippines enjoyed great civilizational exchanges with China.

The Tang Dynasty that lasted from 7th to 9th centuries left behind valuable ancient records of Chinese trading activities with the pre-colonial people of Butuan, Manila, Laguna, Mindoro, and Pangasinan among others.⁸ The ancient Kingdom of Butuan was known to be the archipelago's main trading post with fully documented records of intense commercial and civilizational activities in the 9th century. *Ma-i* ("Mindoro" or "Bai Laguna") also served as a trading center with recorded activities in the 10th century. Eventually, the Sultanate of Sulu, the Kingdom of Manila and a Kingdom in Pangasinan became active in trade activities in Fujian and Guangdong provinces of China recorded during the 11th and 15th centuries.

⁶ Gungwu Wang, *The Nanhai Trade: The Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003).

⁷ Rita C. Tan, "Participation of the Philippines in the Nanhai Trade: 9th to 16th Centuries", *International Seminar for UNESCO Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue*, Manila, The Philippines, February 5-6, 1991.

⁸ Onofre D. Corpuz, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation, Volume I* (Quezon City: Aklahi Foundation, Inc., 1989), 12-13.

Historical factors through trade and commerce deeply connected the Chinese and Filipinos. They shared a very long documented common peaceful history of more than a millennium. This historic shared ancient past established a very strong social bond, cultural connection, and personal camaraderie between the Chinese and Filipinos resulting in the formation of very intricate social relations and cultural familiarities between the two peoples that can facilitate the development of shared future between the Philippines and China.

Colonial pasts developed Sinophobia

But the Philippines' unfortunate colonial pasts developed the current Sinophobia or anti-China sentiments and negative attitude towards China. Filipinos inherited the pejorative and negative view of its erstwhile colonial masters against the Chinese.

Spain colonized the Philippines in the 16th century, the United States in the early 20th century and Japan during the mid-20th century. These three colonial powers had strong anti-China sentiments. Thus, the current anti-China attitude in the Philippines is not natural but an artificial product of bitter colonial experiences under Spain, US and Japan.

The anti-communist campaign at the height of the Cold War exacerbated China's negative image in the Philippines during the last quarter of the 20th century. Anti-communist hysteria endorsed anti-China propaganda in the Philippines. Rising territorial disputes in the South China Sea in the post-Cold War during the current century have reinforced the anti-China feelings of some Filipinos.

This pejorative view against China compelled some Filipinos to be ironically distant with the Chinese government despite their geographical proximity, shared ancient history, and cultural familiarity. At the same time, however, there are Filipinos who still feel close with the Chinese because of their awareness of historical ties and cultural connections.

Paradox of bilateral relations

Thus, the history of Philippines-China relations has become an epic story of connecting and distancing, of love and hate, of acceptance and rejection, of resistance and accommodation, of cooperation and competition and even trust and betrayal.

Nonetheless, the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Philippines-China diplomatic relations should provide the momentous opportunity for both countries to take stock of their shared past as a result of many centuries of friendship.

Their shared past can provide the strong foundation for them to build their shared future where their people can live in peace, harmony, prosperity and amity.

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PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS: SHIFTING TO A HIGHER GEAR UNDER MARCOS JR. ADMINISTRATION?

On January 3-5, 2023, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr visited China with the aim to shift China-Philippines relations to a higher gear. But the aftermath of the visit unexpectedly yielded an opposite outcome as Marcos Jr opted to pursue an excessive pro-Americanism in Philippine foreign and security policy.

The historic visit originally resulted in the signing of 14 agreements by two governments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) spanning various areas in order to elevate the status of their comprehensive strategic cooperation to the next level of partnership. In one of his statements delivered during the visit, Marcos stressed, “It is very important that these partnerships continue to be strong, continue to be encouraged. And I think that will be the way forward to the mutual benefit of our countries.” This statement, however, turned out to be an empty rhetoric.

While meeting with Marcos in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that China regarded the Philippines as a priority in its neighborhood diplomacy and viewed its relations with the Philippines from a strategic and overall perspective. He added that he was ready “to stay in regular strategic communication with President Marcos and make comprehensive plans for the growth of bilateral ties so that the two countries will stay good neighbors helping each other, good relatives sharing affinity, and good partners pursuing win-win cooperation, delivering more benefits to the two peoples and contributing more positive energy to peace and stability in the region.”

Marcos Jr, on one hand, expressed his readiness “for close communication with President Xi and closer cooperation on all fronts to open a new chapter in the Philippines-China relationship of comprehensive strategic cooperation, better resolve common challenges and issues facing the two countries, deliver more benefits to the two peoples, and make new contributions to reestablishing the region as a major engine of the world economy.”

But Marcos Jr broke his own words. This strongly disappointed President Xi who felt really betrayed.

The visit could have been beneficial for both countries as the two leaders agreed to work closely together in the fields of agriculture, infrastructure, energy, and people-to-people exchanges as their four priority areas of cooperation. These four areas could have been “the main pillars for the China-Philippines relationship of comprehensive strategic cooperation.”

A new chapter?

There was a huge expectation that the visit of President Marcos Jr to China could have opened a new chapter in China-Philippines relations. To broaden their bilateral ties in new fields, the Philippines even planned to pursue digital cooperation with China, particularly in the area of the digital economy. There was also a huge expectation of an increased opportunities for the two countries to promote cooperation in this domain by encouraging Chinese Internet companies to invest in the Philippines. But all these expectations failed because of excessive pro-Americanism of Marcos’ Jr administration.

In order to bring their people closer together in a rapidly changing world, the Philippines under Marcos Jr planned to enhance tourism cooperation with China. “As our doors open up in the new normal, I will invite our Chinese neighbors to once again return to the Philippines as tourists, as students, investors. Aside from sharing the wonders of our archipelago with our Chinese friends, strengthened people-to-people exchanges will allow us to bridge gaps in understanding between our two countries at every level,” Marcos Jr said before his departure for China. But Marcos Jr actually departed from his words and abandoned all his plans to pursue comprehensive cooperation with China.

As part of sustaining their infrastructure development cooperation, the Philippines originally committed to a framework agreement with China for the ongoing construction of three bridges as part of the Twelve Priority Bridges Under the Pasig-Marikina River and Manggahan Floodway Bridges Construction Project in Metro Manila. Infrastructure development was one of the core competencies that China and the Philippines expected to benefit from.

Most importantly, the Philippines under Marcos renewed its commitment to China’s BRI. To this end, the Philippines proposed grants from China

amounting to 1.5 billion yuan (\$218 million).

But Marcos Jr regrettably cancelled the implementation of these BRI projects because of his excessive pro-Americanism.

Longstanding friendship

During his visit, Marcos Jr attempted to provide all the building blocks to elevate the status of bilateral ties to a higher plane, especially in the context of its participation in China's BRI cooperation.

This was very logical as the Philippines since the ancient times had always been an integral part of China's maritime trade activities in Southeast Asia as a permanent neighbor and an ancient friend. Before the Spanish colonial rule of the archipelago, the Chinese and inhabitants of the various kingdoms of pre-Hispanic Philippines enjoyed generally peaceful and friendly relations for more than a millennium. The Chinese and pre-colonial Filipinos liked each other and had close, mutually beneficial and reciprocal ties.

As mentioned during the previous chapter of this volume, documented bilateral relations date back many centuries and were built through extensive commercial, social and cultural interactions.

Historical factors and geographic proximity deeply connected the Chinese and Filipinos. This extensive shared ancient history has resulted in the formation of intricate social relations and cultural familiarities between the two peoples that can facilitate the development of shared future between the two countries despite their differences on the South China Sea issue.

These differences on the South China Sea are, in fact, are not irreconcilable and common ground on them can be found through friendly consultation and direct negotiation for purpose of cooperation.

South China Sea: Just one aspect of ties

During the visit of Marcos Jr to China, both countries recognized that the South China Sea was just one aspect of relations and should not set the tone of their overall bilateral ties. The Philippines and China acknowledged that they could promote cooperation in the South China Sea as mandated by the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea. In the DOC, areas of cooperation cover marine environmental

research and protection, safety of navigation and communication at sea, search and rescue operations, and combating transnational crimes including but not limited to trafficking in illicit drugs, piracy and armed robbery at sea, illegal traffic in arms, and international terrorism. The two countries could also pursue cooperation on joint development of natural gas and oil projects, as they agreed in 2018 during Xi's state visit to the Philippines.

However, Marcos Jr's hardline position on the South China Sea led to the deterioration of Philippines-China relations.

For the purposes of continuity and to sustain their countries' efforts to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea, President Marcos Jr and President Xi planned to reexamine the achievements and limitations of the Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM) pursued during the administration of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Through the BCM mechanism, the two parties were undoubtedly able to establish multiple channels of official communication to promote cooperation and avoid armed conflicts in the South China Sea.

As a confidence-building measure, the BCM allowed both countries to discuss with each other their existing differences as well as their common interests in the South China Sea. It also served as a tool kit for preventive diplomacy for providing platform to have greater clarity and transparency on some details of their respective national positions, now made known candidly to each other, unlike before where details of their national positions were deliberately kept secret away from each other. Through the BCM, therefore, the Philippines and China exerted efforts to be more transparent and candid to discuss not only their differences, but also their common interests. Fortunately, Marcos Jr resumed the holding of the BCM under his administration, but with less enthusiasm compared with the administration of President Duterte.

Complementing the BCM is the holding of Annual Defense and Security Talks (ADST). China and the Philippines under President Marcos Jr. administration needed to resume the ADST in order to improve military-to-military relations and to strengthen their defense cooperation for purposes of building confidence, promoting mutual trusts, preventing misunderstanding, and avoiding military conflicts in South China Sea. But Marcos Jr failed to resume the ADST with China because of sour bilateral relations. In fact, Marcos Jr even suspended military-to-military exchanges with China.

Towards a comprehensive strategic partnership?

There was expectation that the state visit of Marcos Jr to China would provide an opportune time for both countries to reach the next level of their bilateral ties: from comprehensive strategic cooperation to comprehensive strategic partnership. It was through the comprehensive strategic partnership that China-Philippines relations could have really shifted to a higher gear. It could have fostered closer China-Philippines friendly relations and could have committed both countries to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation where their respective national interests could have been inextricably linked and shared with each other.

After the visit, however, Marcos Jr made a drastic turn-around by embracing excessive pro-Americanism in Philippine foreign and security policy. Rather than pursuing friendly ties with China, Marcos Jr became hostile against China by even allowing the expansion of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the US.

Thus, Marcos Jr's visit to China in January 2023 was actually put to waste. Instead of elevating Philippines-China relations to the higher gear, the two countries' bilateral ties reached a rock bottom under Marcos Jr administration.

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Source: Presidential Communication Office, 2023.



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