

# South China Sea: How China's military play in disputed waters could torpedo Rodrigo Duterte's foreign policy shift

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**Richard Heydarian writes that the fate of the Philippine president's post-America foreign policy likely is to be decided by what happens in the contested South China Sea.**

For almost two years, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has painstakingly moved to normalise bilateral relations with China. A consummate pragmatist, the mayor-turned-president views the Asian powerhouse as an emerging superpower to be reckoned with.

For him, American hegemony in Asia is a geopolitical anomaly, the accidental upshot of two global wars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and headed towards an inexorable decline.

By contrast, China, according to Duterte, is an age-old geographical reality that simply can't be ignored. If anything, it needs to be viewed as an indispensable partner for national development in the Philippines and across Southeast Asia.

Yet, the blossoming bilateral relationship is far from impregnable. China's assertiveness within the Philippines' claimed waters could torpedo the president's hopes of reorienting his country's foreign policy calculus.

In recent days, China's reported deployment of surface-to-air-missile and anti-cruise ballistic missile systems in territory claimed by the Philippines has rekindled a ferocious policy debate in Manila.

Weeks earlier, US officials said China had installed equipment across several artificially created islands in the South China Sea capable of jamming communications and radar systems. For rivals and critics of China, the move was seen as the prelude to the establishment of a Chinese exclusion zone in a major global maritime artery.

In the Philippines, hawks have been eager to portray China's latest moves as a sign of its supposed shiftiness, a direct threat to freedom of regional navigation and overflight and an example of Beijing's untrammelled appetite for Philippine resources.

To them, the Philippines' conciliatory policy towards China has only emboldened the latter to push its luck in adjacent waters. They propose revitalising defence ties with America and ending Duterte's strategic flirtation with China.

Earlier this year, the Philippine defence chief implied that any unilateral deployment of advanced military assets on Philippine-claimed land would constitute a direct betrayal of China's promise not to militarise the disputed area.

While Philippine defence officials have consistently called on the country's foreign ministry to take a tougher stance against China's purported threat to Philippine interests in the South China Sea, the Americans, a century-old ally of the Southeast Asian country, have wasted no opportunity to chip in.

Sung Kim, the US ambassador to the Philippines, accused China at a high-profile press conference of engaging in "aggressive unilateral action" and "moving towards militarisation" of the disputed area. That statement came just days before the Philippines and the US conducted annual joint exercises involving as many as 8,000 soldiers, 60 per cent more than a year ago.

Among the Philippine public, the US continues to remain the country's most favoured foreign partner, while China's approval ratings have seen only a modest uptick in recent years.

By highlighting China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, the US and its regional allies hope to pull the Philippines back into their strategic embrace. To that end, at least two American aircraft carriers have visited Philippine shores in recent months, highlighting Washington's hopes for continued and expanded access to strategically located bases.

Despite a massive public backlash amid China's latest activities in the contested waters, Duterte remains adamant about the utility and soundness of his foreign policy. In his view, Donald Trump's administration is the swan song of Western global primacy; China's President Xi Jinping is the incoming leader of a new global order.

In a speech in his home city of Davao, Duterte portrayed China as the Philippines' primary security partner.

"China said, 'We will protect you. We will not allow the Philippines to be destroyed. We are just here and you can call for our help anytime'," the president said, in an attempted push back against criticism of his cosy relations with Beijing.

Duterte may be a popularly elected commander-in-chief, but he is not a king. In matters of foreign policy, he has to contend with various veto players, including the defence establishment and the broader media-intelligentsia complex, that remain embedded in the American sphere of influence.

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This is precisely why tensions in the South China Sea continually threaten the tenuous Philippine-China rapprochement. The fate of Duterte's post-American foreign policy is likely to be decided by what happens in the contested waters. And that ultimately will lead to a test of will and nerves among competing factions in the Philippine political leadership.

**Richard Heydarian**

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