Philippine Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: the Influence of Double-Asymmetric Structure

Jeremy Chiang*

As China’s rise in the 21st century reconstructs regional order in East Asia, regional states such as the Philippines find themselves struggling to navigate through this new international disorder, which showcases a global competition between an emerging China and a relatively declining U.S. Confronting the United States’ and China’s geopolitical struggle in the western periphery of the Pacific, the Philippines has fallen into a “Double-Asymmetric Structure”, one that curses the archipelago to constantly alter its foreign policy due to asymmetric relations with China and the U.S. This paper will present an initial analytical framework of “Double-Asymmetric Structure” which builds on Brantly Womack’s “Asymmetric Relations” theory, and concentrate on the structural limitations and challenges it presents towards Philippine foreign policy, and the novelty situations that prompt policy change, while reexamining foreign policy under four consecutive Philippine presidents through case studies: Joseph Estrada (1998.6-2001.1), Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001.1-2010.6), Benigno Aquino III (2010.6-2016.6) and Rodrigo Duterte (2016.6-present).

Keywords: United States of America (USA), China, Southeast Asia, Philippines, Foreign Policy

* Senior Student, Department of Diplomacy, National Chengchi University.
The rise of China in recent decades has immense effects on U.S. friends and foes in Southeast Asia, especially after the dawn of the 21st century. While the two powers’ military and economic might’s gap continue to narrow, the asymmetry between them and other states persist, and the anxiety of a great power competition continues to grow in the mindsets of surrounding parties, with regional states such as the Philippines finding themselves struggling to navigate through this new international disorder.

The Philippines is one of the states most affected by this ongoing regional order reconstruction. Once a state that voted to close American military bases in its territory in 1991, China’s military activities in the South China Sea have forced the Philippines to reinvigorate their traditional ties with the U.S. However, while China’s aggressive moves have provoked backlashes from the Philippine government and domestic opinion, there is still an undercurrent in Filipino society that perceives the Americans as an imperialist power, and vows to restore an independent foreign policy of its own, which is best depicted by President Duterte’s staunch nationalist rhetoric. This relates to the trend of Philippine over-attentiveness towards the two powers actions, which normally do not bear the presumed weight, however tend to be exemplified cognitively by the asymmetric relations Philippines has with the U.S and China.

Strategies do not come out of thin air, but have always been triggered within a larger setting. Previous works have mostly placed Philippines’ foreign policy in the hedging category, performing low-intensity balancing1, indirect-balancing2 or soft balancing3 with the United States against China. While being discussed alongside other Southeast Asian states, concentration has been put on categorizing the Philippines’ response towards a rising China into this camp or another, and with lesser attention towards the reasons that cause states to alter strategies. Building on their results, this paper aims not to trace the specific strategies that the Philippines employ, but the reasons underlying these Philippine foreign policy shifts between China and the United States. Understanding the intrinsic asymmetry of these two bilateral relations and the essential role it plays on shaping Philippines’ foreign policy and worldview, I argue that the Philippines has fallen into a “Double-Asymmetric Structure”, one that curses the archipelago to constantly alter its foreign policy due to asymmetric relations with China and the U.S.

---

This research will first visit Brantly Womack’s “Asymmetric Relations” theory, then present an initial analysis framework of “Double-Asymmetric Structure”, followed up by unfolding how “novelty” acts as a catalyst of bilateral or trilateral relationship shifts, during when four forms of novelty will be named and explained. Then three case studies will be carefully displayed, to demonstrate how novelty events interplay with “Double-Asymmetric Structure”: from Arroyo’s retreat from Iraq, to Arroyo’s corruption and Aquino’s South China Sea push, then Duterte’s reapproachment with China, these cases will depict how domestic and international events have shaped the direction of Philippines external engagement, and how “Double-Asymmetric Structure” has triggered these turning points into possibility through the amplification effects of asymmetry. Finally, I will end with a brief conclusion discussing the intrinsic limits towards Philippines-China-United States trilateral relations.

**Brantly Womack’s “Asymmetric Relations” Theory**

Brantly Womack’s “Asymmetric Relations” theory is a useful analytical framework for understanding China’s relations with Southeast Asian states such as the Philippines. The “Asymmetric Relations” theory argues that power and influence asymmetry between states is a permanent situation, not merely a temporal stage. Though this structure contains intrinsic hostilities which have huge conflict potentials, it is basically “normal” and sustainable. With acknowledgment of this reality, it would be easier for us to understand the possibility of two states not beholding similar perceptions towards a bilateral interaction due to their disparities in capabilities, which contributes in providing different worldviews and priorities in terms of foreign policy.

In Womack’s articulation, this difference of perception comes from the politics of “Over-attention” and “Inattention”. For example, Philippine-U.S. relations is the most crucial bilateral relationship the Philippines has with another state, whereas it would only account for a small segment in U.S.’s Asia strategy. This asymmetry in “attention” structures an environment which exacerbates the possibility of intention misperception, and distorts policy messages sent through channels of communication.

The larger state (hereafter A) will attract the smaller state’s (hereafter B) attention due to its large existence in B’s external environment, providing the basis for B’s anxiety and alertness in this bilateral relationship, and a higher possibility of politicization during

---

6 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.10
domestic discussion regarding B’s policy towards A. On the other end, A’s attention towards B is relatively limited, due to their interest being occupied by other affairs of greater importance. However, when B’s action prompts issues of fundamental interest or can be related to other broader threats, the larger A still might pay over-attention towards B, though such exaggerated attention on limited aspects of the bilateral relationship might create another sequence of distorted perception.

With one side more attentive and the other side not, B will have relatively more coordinated policies towards A. Precisely because A’s policies towards B might be a contradictory mix of different messages and policies due to diverse interests/policies between different domestic interest groups/government agencies, it will be unlikely for A to have a consistent posture towards B. A will be reluctant to rethink the relationship and coordinate policies into consistence, but persist to view B through lens of stereotyped hostility or friendship. In contrast with B’s patience, A tends to wish issue closure appear within a shorter time frame.


8 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.50-51
9 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.48
10 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.49
11 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.49
12 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.50
On the other hand, a seemingly hierarchical structure between states does not imply what Thucydides stated in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

“Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.

In reality, A will find it hard to conquer a smaller B, as the incentives for B to stand against A’s assertiveness are strong, whereas A lacks a resolve for unlimited sacrifice. A and B also have fundamental differences in their perceptions of interests: for A, the ultimate goal is acquiring B’s deference, while B aims for A’s respect of its autonomy. When a normalcy of bilateral relations is present, A acknowledges B’s autonomy, while B refrains from posing questions against their asymmetric relations. However, when bilateral relations deteriorate, this fragile consensus collapses and hostilities reemerge onto the main stage. In this phase, B might seek support and reinforcements from third parties, though third parties would normally abstain from explicitly siding with B, as they perceive their relations with A’s more vital. This best illustrates the difficulties of B’s aspirations for external balancing.

“Double Asymmetry Structure” and the Philippines

Providing a structural view through the lens of asymmetry, Womack’s “Asymmetric Relations” theory has no doubt contributed to the study of China-Southeast Asia relations. However, while Womack's 2015 new book *Asymmetry and International Relationships* has expanded its analytical boundaries to encompass regional and global systems, and also developed a framework on understanding asymmetric triangular relations, in order to extract a specific theoretical framework that concentrates not on asymmetric triangles itself, but rather on specific Southeast Asian small states’ foreign policy and the external structure it confronts (which I argue is most affected by its two most important bilateral relationships, one with the United States, the other with China), there is still need for an new analytical framework that builds on Womack’s groundbreaking arguments, revising and reorienting it to fit our needs. In the following paragraphs, this paper will look into the case of the Philippines, and illustrate a framework for understanding asymmetry and its direct effects towards Philippine foreign policy, especially the role it plays in triggering policy changes.

Though the United States still remains a sole dominant global power, a rising regional power China has been able to gain immense influence towards its peripheral neighbors, and now even beyond the regional theatre. Despite unable to surpass U.S. in per capita GNI, the

---

15 Brantly Womack, China Among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), pp.430
Chinese economy has grown in a formidable pace, and is poised to surpass the U.S economy before 2030. Adding its growing military might and geographical proximity to the table, I argue that Southeast Asian states such as the Philippines have fallen into a “Double-Asymmetric Structure”, which illustrates an external environment not pressured by “one” bilateral relationship, but “two” equally important asymmetries with China and U.S, which intertwines with China and U.S.’s regional geopolitical competition. In this triangular relationship, there is a centrality of U.S.-China relations, which presents an intrinsic challenge for the smallest actor in this three-party interaction.

![Graph Source: Self-illustrated](image)

As depicted in this “Double-Asymmetric Structure” graphic illustration above, the dotted line and solid line each stands for China and U.S’s inattention towards Philippines, and Philippines’ contrasting over-attention. Though there are times when Philippine-U.S, Philippine-China relations rarely interfere with each other, the overlapping segments of Philippine-U.S, Philippine-China interactions in this graph illustrates when the “Double-Asymmetric Structure” demonstrates its Double-Asymmetric-ness best: a valid scenario might be the Philippines paying immense attention on China and U.S’s intentions and actions, while China and U.S take little notice of Philippines’ anxiousness and interests on the same issue, and continue to proceed on their actions. The mechanisms of Womack’s asymmetry theory still prevail in the two bilateral relations, while the existence of two equally important powers and the centrality of the two larger powers’ relations intensifies the Philippines’ sense of anxiety. This sense of anxiety by the small is central to the Double-Asymmetric Structure.

---

It is an obvious reality that the Philippines plays merely a minor role in China and U.S.’s global rivalry: the Philippines catches the eyes of the Chinese mostly as a claimant country in the South China Sea and a member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while Americans perceive the Philippines as a second tier strategic outpost in East Asia, with lesser significance than Japan and South Korea. Understanding the perils of the weak, when seeking economic benefits and security guarantees from China and the U.S, the Philippines also strives with affliction to maintain its autonomy; this attention paid towards preserving autonomy not only originates from the anticipated fruits of sovereignty rights, but also centuries of abhorrent colonial experience.

However, such yearnings for autonomy have been largely ignored by the two giants alike: the Chinese perceive the Philippines as an U.S proxy aiming to contain its peaceful development\(^\text{17}\), while the Americans see the Philippines as a South China Sea strategic axis up for grabs. Both powers fail to stand in the Philippines’ shoes and lack concern for the Philippines’ national agenda, for the attention of China and U.S’s domestic audience has been largely captured by Sino-American geopolitical competition, and only when the Philippines finds a fitting role inside such worldview can it leap onto the forefront of their agendas. However, such a way of attaining attention might enhance the Chinese and Americans’ already distorted understandings of Philippine policy intentions.

Filipino leaders have always tried to shell the archipelagic state way from the asymmetric advantages of China and U.S, especially by executing strategies of forging stronger relations with the other party\(^\text{18}\). Fearing such policies might affect its ties with B, the Philippines might wish to limit the growing intimacy of its relations with A; however, its ties with A cannot be left unsuspected due to B’s cautious perception of the Philippines’ move towards A. For the Philippines, a strengthening of ties with A provides a vital sense of security, which relieves some of the pressure imposed by B. When B employs counterstrategies against the Philippines, the Filipinos will see it as an aggression and enhance their already growing cooperation with A, which then will be further understood by B as a provocative act: this implicates that when original intentions are lost in “translation” due to the distortion of asymmetric relations, their corresponding policies end up to be misled acts, which then again amplifies the vicious cycle of negative responses\(^\text{19}\). This demonstrated logic shows how smaller states’ formulation and execution of foreign policy gets unintentionally drawn into the larger context of U.S. and China’s global competition, due to the effects of Double-Asymmetric Structure.

\(^\text{17}\) Robert D. Kaplan, Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific (New York: Random House, 2014), pp.131
\(^\text{18}\) In this paragraph, A and B stand as interchangeable code names for the two larger powers: China and the United States.
\(^\text{19}\) Brantly Womack, “Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: China, Vietnam and Cambodia” The Journal of Strategic Studies, 26:2 (June, 2003), pp.103
Though not an inevitable cycle, Womack illustrated a bilateral pattern of interaction in five stages: novelty, misperception, hostility, stalemate and normalization\textsuperscript{20}, which provides us a basis on understanding Philippine-U.S-China relations’ cyclical patterns. As contended by Womack, "novelty is the most fertile ground for problems in an asymmetric relation"\textsuperscript{21}, while uncertainty is enhanced by the structural asymmetries already existent. Novelty and its initial reactions are mostly forged by the Philippines, for it has greater exposure in this structure, which provides the sensitivities and anxieties that might induce action.

In Philippine’s Double-Asymmetric Structure towards U.S and China, novelty has four forms: (1) Territorial Disputes, (2) Nationalism and Identity, (3) Domestic Imperatives, and (4) International Context. Encompassing political and cultural reasons, and observing domestic and international influences simultaneously, these four forms of novelty depict different causes that might potentially lead to relational upheavals. On the other hand, these four forms might not be entirely mutually exclusive, while a novelty situation might compose of more than one single form.

(1) **Territorial Disputes**: Contentions on sovereignty of land have always been hard to solve and even mitigate, causing normalization efforts challenging to sustain and tensions easily re-stirred by mismanagement. Philippine-China relations constrained by the South China Sea best depicts this dilemma. Though both countries understand the necessity to explore beyond this maritime dispute, arising tensions have always played a major role in deteriorating bilateral cooperation, sometimes even dramatically. With the United States cautiously observing China’s crouching interest in its surrounding regions, and neighboring small states eager to induce its attention, it would be hard for territorial disputes between China and the Philippines to be simply bilateral without the U.S. more or less playing a role.

(2) **Nationalism and Identity**: While historical memories can be a tool to mend, it also leaves scars and sensitivities that are often misunderstood or neglected by other parties. When

\textsuperscript{20} Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.94

\textsuperscript{21} The five stages above are carefully explained In Womack's "Asymmetry and International Relationships". Novelty is the opposite of a habitual relationship, where a relationship is new or for whatever reason must be recast, which may or may not be managed smoothly to avoid descending into crises. Womack provided four forms of novelty: the formation of new communities, change in capabilities, change in leadership, and difference in political systems. Misperception, on the other hand, is not due to individual psychology, but because of the politics of attention and inattention, which may be structurally amplified because of the occurred negative complementary. Hostility is when relational interactions are recast as a zero-sum game, and will reach the bottom only when achieving stalemate or the destruction/domination of one side. A stalemate is reached when the smaller state is incapable of destroying the larger states abilities, while the larger state cannot force then sustain the submission of the smaller state. A stalemate may be either calm or of military confrontation. Normalcy is reached when the smaller state is expected not to disrupt or challenge the power and prestige of the larger state, while the larger state acknowledges the smaller states autonomy. Deference and autonomy are the two main characteristics of this stage.
a larger state treads over a smaller states’ nationalistic sentiment, the smaller state is bound to have strong reactions, for identities are non-negotiable and can prompt staunch acts of defense or aggression, even towards a party with superior capabilities. Despite constantly inducing diplomatic rows with other countries when related legal issues occur, the protection of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), which correlates heavily with Filipinos’ compatriotism towards fellow Filipinos scattered worldwide due to domestic political and economic upheaval, has been a fundamental aspect of Philippine diplomacy for decades. The Philippines historical scars of American colonization is also a past memory that inflicts explosive impacts on Philippine-U.S. bilateral relations, best illustrated by the 1991 rejection of renewing U.S military bases by the Philippine Senate. The nationalistic rhetoric of Philippine politicians was mostly directed towards wishing to cease being an American appendage and restore true sovereignty to the Philippines.

(3) Domestic Imperatives: As an archipelagic state struggling financially to fund its infrastructure plans, improve its economic competitiveness, disaster preparedness, and also combat Muslim and Communist militant factions in Mindanao and beyond, the Philippines has constantly employed different diplomatic tools and postures to attract foreign assistance. "Development Diplomacy” itself has been an indispensable pillar in Philippines’ foreign policy since the Marcos years. Seeking to attract aid and FDI from developed countries, the Filipino state’s diplomatic maneuver has strong economic characteristics, willing to approach states that can provide such resources, even potential geopolitical adversaries. After Aquino’s confrontational stance towards China that withheld economic opportunities, this has been the undercurrent of Duterte’s dance with a mixture of ideologically diverse states since inauguration, namely China, Russia and Japan. Besides admitting the Philippines’ dim winning prospects of a South China Sea military showdown, the President has constantly expressed the necessity to extract economic benefits from China, and also broaden economic relationships with regional powers Japan and Russia.

(4) International Context: Twist and turns in international environment often affect diplomatic decisions of small states such as the Philippines. Initially a staunch U.S. ally troubled by Chinese-supported Communist militant factions in the 1960s, Philippines and China established diplomatic relations with the signing of the Joint Communiqué on 9 June 1975. Speared by food and oil trade agreements in the 1960s and early 1970s, the overall international environment shaped by U.S.-China rapprochement provided the context for Ferdinand Marcos to forego official ties with Taiwan and accommodate the reality of Communist China’s regional presence.

---

Due to historical and ideological links, the Philippines seems unlikely to balance against the United States\(^\text{23}\), therefore the parameter of its foreign policy fluctuation operates between a pivot enjoying friendly ties with both powers and an anxious small state seeking to balance against China. Hedging would be the most commonly employed strategy, since the economic benefits of approaching China would be irresistible to a developing Philippines, whereas the military arsenal of the United States will still be core to Philippines national security, shielding it from domestic and international threats. Bilateral or trilateral novelty situations categorized in the four forms listed above, are the catalyst of Philippine’s strategic posture fluctuation between China and the United States, which may then flow into Womack’s bilateral cycle of novelty, misperception, hostility, stalemate and normalization. Though the two sets of bilateral relations and their cyclical patterns do not directly interfere with each other, varying degrees of correspondence do exist according to different issues.

**Case Study: Philippine Foreign Policy in the 21st century**

Bilateral normalcy is not immune from deteriorating into hostility again, for novelty situations enhanced by asymmetry produce cognitive misperceptions that if mismanaged might induce bilateral hostility. Philippine foreign policy and its asymmetric interactions with U.S. and China since the 21st century is best seen as a relational pattern, marked by novelty situations and corresponding fluctuation of Philippines’ current strategic posture. Catalytic novelty and the role of Double Asymmetric Structure further will be further examined in this chapter. I will present three novelty situations which have influenced Philippine relations with U.S. and China since the 21st century, how the Double Asymmetric Structure interplays in these situations, and the effect of novelty situations towards trilateral interactions and Philippines’ foreign strategy.

The first novelty situation will be “Arroyo’s Retreat from Iraq”, illustrating the role of nationalism and identity during the Angelo De La Cruz case, which resulted in the Philippines pulling out of Iraq, even when a U.S. backlash was predictable. On the contrary, the Philippines and China enjoyed warming bilateral relations during Arroyo’s second term, especially since the temporary deterioration of Philippine-U.S ties after the Angelo De La Cruz case. The second novelty situation will be “Arroyo’s Corruption and Aquino’s South China Sea Push”, which depicts how territorial disputes enhanced by nationalism and identity impede a geopolitically fragile Philippines from achieving normalcy with China, while providing fertile grounds for Philippine-U.S. relations to grow. A weak leadership damaged by domestic events, Arroyo resorted to the classic tools of nationalism towards the end of her tenure, then continued by Aquino’s six years of confrontation with China due to tensions in

the South China Sea. The final novelty situation showed below will be the more recent “Duterte’s Reapproachment with China”. With domestic imperatives interplaying with nationalism and identity, Duterte adopted a different way of resolving the South China Sea conflict. He has pushed for comprehensive engagement with China, and at the same time downplayed maritime disputes, which were behind his belief that a direct military conflict with China would not only be unwinnable but also harmful to the country. He has constantly expressed the economic necessities of the Philippines, and how he believes China can contribute to help, while at the same time pressing anti-imperialist rhetoric criticism towards the United States, especially during Obama’s final months.

**Arroyo’s Retreat from Iraq**

The Visiting Forces Agreement ratified in 1999 is believed to be a major factor on softening China’s confrontational stance temporarily in the South China Sea. Though not licensing the United States to reestablish military bases in the Philippines, it clarified and provided legal framework for U.S military personnel to have temporary presence in the Philippines. Thus, to avoid the South China Sea dispute from permanently harming Philippine-China relations, further reinvigorating Philippine-U.S. military cooperation and damaging its image in ASEAN states, China lent out a warm hand.

After EDSA II in 2001, President Joseph Estrada’s successor Gloria Macapagal Arroyo proceeded with a strategy of “Equi-Balancing”, seeking to balance ties with the United States, China, Japan and other regional powers. When the War on Terror embarked after 911, the Philippines did not hesitate to give a positive response. This was marked with a need to fund its military efforts against militant groups in Southern Philippines, and also a strategy to extract economic aid. After Arroyo’s state visit to the United States in November 2001, President Bush also reciprocated with a state visit to the Philippines in October 2003, during when he became the first U.S president to address the Philippine Congress since Dwight D. Eisenhower. Total U.S military assistance to the Philippines soared from US$38 million in 2001 to US$114 million in 2003, and in that same year the United States designated the Philippines as a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally alongside Thailand. In 2002, Washington and Manila signed the Military Logistics and Support Agreement, which allowed the United States to use the Philippines as a supply base in the region, aiming to support counterterrorism efforts in the region.

---

However, the abduction of truck driver Angelo De La Cruz in the Iraqi City of Fallujah in July 2004 marked a turning point in warming Philippine-U.S relations, and then further influenced Philippine-China ties. During the incident, Iraq insurgents threatened to kill the hostage unless the Philippine government agreed to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Giving up to the demands of insurgents, the Philippine government confirmed that it would withdraw its troops “as soon as possible”\(^{26}\). On July 21, 2004, Angelo De La Cruz was released. Though earning the displeasure of the United States, Arroyo publically said that she “made a decision to bring our troops home a few days early in order to save the life of De La Cruz” and “I do not regret my decision.”\(^{27}\) She was not alone with this positiveness: The fate of de la Cruz, a father of eight, became a national drama, and there were celebrations in his home town when news of his release came in. Filipinos touched by his plight not only cheered for him, but also offered de la Cruz a job, scholarships for his children and a new house for his family. Truly a symbol of the millions of OFWs abroad, embedding their sorrowful encounters and hardships, Angelo de la Cruz’s case manifests how the effects of nationalism and identity affected the seemingly unshakeable Philippine-U.S. relations. As Arroyo contended, this “was a time of trial and a time of triumph”\(^{28}\) for the Philippines. On the other hand, the Philippines also acknowledged the potential costs of this retreat, which is best depicted in The Philippine Star’s comments: “We must be prepared to fight our own battles, because like it or not, after abandoning allies in the middle of a fight, when we send out an SOS, help can only come with great reluctance...We turned tail in the face of terror, no ifs or buts about it, and that will haunt the nation for a long time.”\(^{29}\)

On the American side, the souring effects of such drama were quick to unfold. During a news conference, General John P. Abizaid, the commander of American troops in the Middle East said “it is regrettable we lose a member of the coalition and regrettable countries are making decisions that would appear to be appeasing terrorists as opposed to standing up to them”\(^{30}\), while US Ambassador to the Philippines Francis Ricciardoni returned to Washington for urgent consultations, saying “people in Washington...[who] will be the ones making


White House officials were surprised by this sudden withdrawal, for it was believed by many that Arroyo was preparing to extend troop commitments in Iraq prior to the incident, not to mention the warm relations both sides enjoyed since the start of the War on Terror. As Washington reviewed its financial and military assistance to the Philippines, conservative think tanks such as Heritage Foundation chastised Arroyo as being weak.

In contrast with the tensions of Philippine-U.S. relations, Philippine and China welcomed what was dubbed the “golden age” of bilateral relations in Arroyo’s second term. During Arroyo’s term (2001-2010) as President of the Philippines, her administration signed a total of 83 bilateral agreements with China, while Aquino had 9 in his six years and Estrada 15 agreements during his 1998-2001 tenure; the number of bilateral agreements signed peaked in Arroyo’s second term, especially in 2005 and 2007, all after the hostage incident in 2004. One of the most important agreements during this period, was when the Philippines proposed a joint maritime seismic undertaking (JMSU) in the South China Sea during September 2004 to China, later joined by Vietnam in 2005. This best marked efforts to contain maritime tension under Arroyo’s presidency.

Number of Bilateral Agreements per Year (1975-2015)


33 Ben Reid, Bush and the Philippines after September 11, Mark Beeson edited, Bush and Asia: America’s evolving relations with East Asia, 2006, pp.157
With the gradual increase of bilateral trade volumes, China did wish to utilize extended economic and political ties to affect Manila’s responsiveness to U.S. demands. On the other hand, Philippines’ realization of its “Equi-balancing” only sped up after the hostage incident in 2004. The enhancement of Philippine-China relations illustrated that when the United States counteracts against Philippine actions, the Philippines will perceive a negative signal amplified by the existent asymmetric relational structure, which pushes the Philippines into embracing ties with the Chinese. This then goes on being acknowledged by the United States as a challenge to its ongoing political goals and geopolitical ambitions, which further initiates a negative cycle of complementary reactions.

However, despite being seen as playing the China card against United States, the historical and institutional relations between Philippines and the United States poses some intrinsic limits for the development of Philippine-China relations, not to mention the South China Sea dispute. Sensing U.S. doubts on increasing Philippines’ security cooperation with China, Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo presented a speech before the Heritage Foundation in May 2005, aiming to reassure the United States of recent defense and military cooperation developments with China\(^3\). The temporary hostility and diplomatic stalemate

\(^3\) Rommel C. Banlaoi, Philippine Security in the Age of Terror (Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), pp 190-1
between Philippine and U.S. did not persist long, with security assistances and financial aid eventually left intact. Besides geographical distance and similar ideologies, the historical memories and institutional restraints between the two countries contained the Philippines of its ability to confront the United States. These institutionalized and routinized interaction channels provided what was necessary to recover from asymmetric misperception, and also abundant precedents to provide relational resilience, which were enough to impede the permanent deterioration of bilateral ties. However, a revived relation does not equate an unscarred one. With the Philippines still wary of its relative exposure and fragility in this Double Asymmetric Structure, it will always be more cautious of bilateral developments, and despite the seemingly endless tension and quarrel in the South China Sea, the Philippines’ will always leave open a gap at the door for China, a manifestation of an ever influential Double Asymmetric Structure.

One the other hand, this also illustrates the curses of Philippine foreign policy under the Double Asymmetric Structure: while both sides are anxious to see the fungibility of their capabilities into actual policy changes in Philippines’ posture, both are unable to contribute a similar level of concentration to Philippines’ national agenda and its autonomy, thus incentivizing the Philippines to alter its relational trajectories between the United State and China, aiming to attain attention and guarantees. Though such a method of achieving attention may damage Philippines’ credibility in an alliance, and raises risks of becoming a discarded pawn during military confrontation, or being stereotyped in an issue area of greater American and Chinese interest, these are the perilous routes that a hedging Philippines under Double Asymmetric Structure must endure.

_Arroyo’s Corruption and Aquino’s South China Sea Push_

During the last years of Arroyo’s presidency, the infusion of Chinese ODA intertwined with the corruption and patron-clientelism of Philippine domestic politics. In April 2007, the Philippine government signed a MOU with Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment Co. Ltd (ZTE) form China, which dealt on the construction of a US $329 million national broadband network (NBN). Accused by the opposition of violating government Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) regulations, then followed by allegations of illegal kickbacks behind the project, this opened several other Chinese-related infrastructure projects to suspicion and investigation, such as the North Luzon Rail Project. During this period of

---

36 Brantly Womack, China Among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), pp.426
37 Brantly Womack, China Among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), pp.431
nationwide outrage, negative perceptions toward Chinese investments and ODA affected Filipino citizen’s perceptions towards Philippine-China relations, causing the Chinese embassy in Manila to announce Beijing’s concern over “the recently emerging tendencies in the Philippines which may impose negative influence on the two countries’ relations and mutual cooperation”\(^{40}\). Stereotypes of Philippines being an American proxy and Southeast Asian states being ungrateful to Chinese aid quickly deteriorated China’s intention to stay benevolent, which was further damaged by Benigno Aquino III’s successful campaign for presidency.

Arroyo finished her term in 2010, weakened by corruption and treason accusations of her dealings with the Chinese. In contrast with Arroyo’s engaging relations with China, her successor President Aquino was troubled almost from the start. During the campaign for presidency, Aquino fueled a good governance and anti-corruption platform, which was aimed at Arroyo’s administration shortcomings. Arroyo’s “Equi-Balancing” policy, the improved Philippine-China relations all become casualties of Aquino’s determination to wage a Anything-But-Arroyo campaign\(^{41}\). Despite Aquino’s newly appointed Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario being highly suspicious of China’s geopolitical intentions and sought to reinvigorate defense relations with the United States, Aquino did try to maintain peaceful relations with China during his first year in office, best depicted by bandwagoning China’s stance on not sending any representatives to the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in late 2010, which was to award the Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiabo, and also extraditing Taiwanese nationals accused of electronic fraud to China in February 2011\(^{42}\). However, bilateral asymmetry distorted such messages, while an inattentive China gradually returning to aggression in the South China Sea.

In March 2011, two Chinese patrol boats harassed a Philippine Department of Energy vessel conducting oil exploration at Reed Bank, 250 kilometers west of the Philippine island Palawan. China’s following negative response hastened the Aquino Administration’s intent to adopt a harder stance, such as developing the AFP’s territorial defense capacities to confront external threats, which was initially held back by wishes of reciprocal peace. The Philippines and China were heading towards direct collision in the South China Sea, with the Philippines increasing its military budget aiming to build a defense force capable of providing “minimal-credible defense” against superior Chinese military forces, and the filing of an arbitration case against China in 2013, under Annex VII to the United Nations Convention on


the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) concerning certain issues in the South China Sea including the legality of China's "9-dash line" claim.

Building on the basis of anti-terrorism cooperation since 2001, and also the United States’ “Rebalancing” strategy, Philippine-U.S. relations was improved to an unprecedented level in recent Philippine history during Aquino’s presidency. Despite the United States not formally obliged to commit to defend Philippine territory under the Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1951, the Philippines vigorously pursued all means necessary to improve the competitiveness of its armed forces, while carving new military agreements with the U.S., such as the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2014. The Obama Administration committed to fund and assist the AFP’s Capability Upgrade Program, which consisted of equipment refurbishment, maintenance and acquisition, and also provided funds for the Coast Watch South to enhance Philippines’ surveillance, communication and interdiction capacities in the western part of the archipelago. However, the Obama Administration maintained a vague attitude on whether the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty would prompt an U.S. military response if conflict breaks out in the South China Sea. It was clear that the value of U.S.-China economic relations was something higher at stake to the Americans.

When observing Chinese media and the comments of Chinese netizens, the perception of the Philippines as an American proxy is prevalent, while analysts and scholars seemingly cannot help but portray the South China Sea dispute as a geopolitical chessboard between China and the United States. This stereotype or fault of thinking is what blinds the Chinese from engaging the Philippines positively when opportunities are ripe, but induces China to plan for potential conflict against an imagined adversary looming behind the Philippines: the United States.

Anxious to achieve issue closure quickly and also frustrated by the existing stalemate, China adopts a seemingly contradicting strategy, that of inducing bilateral negotiation while militarily harassing other parties in the South China Sea at the same time. Though reluctant to bandwagon the United States’ ambitions, Philippines alongside other Southeast Asian states still prefer an U.S-led regional order, while wishing to integrate China into it. Such an effort seen from the Chinese side is not reciprocated with gratitude, but rather infuriating the Chinese: observing an extra-regional power meddling with its neighboring states and being imposed as an insurance against itself, China is unlikely to satisfy with such geopolitical blueprint from Southeast Asian states. As a former U.S. Colony, the Philippines best

---

represents the adversarial undercurrent in Southeast Asia, therefore it attracts the most negative attitudes from Chinese domestic audience, while absent from Chinese ears are the reluctance and criticism of the Philippine left and nationalists towards the United States, and the struggles of an small state caught between two powers anxious to preserve autonomy. The existence of asymmetry inhibits true or even relatively comprehensive understandings of interacting parties’ core intents.

During the final years of Arroyo’s term and Aquino’s succession, territorial disputes enhanced by nationalism and identity impeded a geopolitically fragile Philippines from achieving normalcy with China, while providing fertile grounds for Philippine-U.S. relations to grow. This overturn of trilateral relational trends depicts the activeness of the Philippines under Double Asymmetric Structure: though unable to determine regional outcomes, it serves as a provider of novelty situations which restrains relationships from reaching stability. Seen by the two larger powers as just one pawn on their chessboard, it is hard for the United States and China to stand in the Philippines’ shoes and understand the uncertainty and anxiety it experiences. Therefore, the action of the Philippines that derives from such background is always perceived by them through the lens of great power politics, thus complicating opportunities for asymmetric bilateral normalcy or at least cessation of hostilities. It is more difficult to manage relations in Double Asymmetric Structure than in a bilateral setting, due to the reality of triparty interaction which includes capability asymmetry, not to mention the centrality of U.S.-China relations. With the Philippines and China both concerned of preserving relations with the United States, normalcy is intrinsically difficult to achieve, for a United States cautious of losing hegemony and a Philippines wary of potentially adversarial neighbors will always produce chemical effects that would trigger Chinese frustration. Due to existing anxieties, the Philippines is most likely to employ strategies of aligning with the larger U.S., and fomenting hostility between China and the United States to improve its strategic relevance.46

**Duterte’s Reapproachment with China**

Since inaugurating to the presidency last June, Rodrigo Duterte has posed an unprecedented challenge to Philippine-U.S. relations. Constantly drawing up the colonial past to express his disdain of American power, the strongman president called U.S. president Barack Obama to “go to hell” and threatened to dismantle the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty when Obama criticized Duterte’s violent drug war.47 His colorful cursing language does come with swift actions: He has scaled back joint military exercises with the United States, barred

46 Brantly Womack, Asymmetry and International Relationships (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.110
47 “Philippine leader tells Obama ‘go to hell’, says can buy arms from Russia, China”, Reuters (5 October 2016), available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-duterte-arms-idUSKCN12414A
U.S. warships from using Filipino bases to conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea,48 and effectively softened the Philippines’ tone over the South China Sea arbitration victory, downplaying the territorial dispute in the Philippine-chaired 30th ASEAN Summit Chairman’s Statement during May 2017.49

In contrast with his distaste for Americans, Duterte has worked to normalize relations with China, which were heavily damaged during his predecessor’s term, while reaching out for defense cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. During Duterte’s state visit to Beijing last October, Duterte announced his “separation from the United States” while declaring his intention to forge an alliance with China and Russia “against the world” in front of Chinese and Filipino business people, which immediately captured headlines around the globe.50

Though a president alone cannot break through the institutional and historical constraints that have bound U.S.-Philippines for decades, Duterte’s diplomatic maneuver seems to have drawn on its two counterpart’s attention under the Double Asymmetric Structure. After declining President Trump’s invitation to the White House euphemistically in April, Duterte had a telephone discussion with Chinese President Xi Jinping on regional issues.51 Both sides have seemingly pursued efforts to woo Philippines in their camp, due to their intensive attention of events on the geopolitical fault line bordering the Pacific’s western periphery, especially the South China Sea.

Still, tensions in the South China Sea are unlikely to diminish anytime soon, a major example being Chinese ships spotted surveying the waters of Benham Rise earlier this year, which had been recognized by the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2012 as part of the Philippines’ extended continental shelf. Triggered by uncertainty, Duterte was pressured by domestic attitude to adopt a nationalistic posture, saying he wanted to change the name of Benham Rise to “Philippine Ridge”, asserting the country’s claim in the 13-million hectare underwater plateau, and also instructed the military to...
to assert control in the region, while saying he would personally raise the Philippine flag on one of the Spratly Islands on June 12, the country’s Independence Day. As Duterte stated, “We tried to be friends with everybody, but we have to maintain our jurisdiction now, at least the areas under our control”; the Philippine-China rapprochement is not without challenges and limits.

Domestic imperatives interplaying with nationalism and identity were the background of Duterte’s swift change of Philippine foreign policy to a hedging position, which was in stark contrast to Aquino’s balancing stance. Though social and historical ties with U.S. were hard to forego, Aquino over-alignment with the United States made Duterte’s campaign message easy to resonate among Filipino voters. After all, the fundamentals of Filipino identity did not compose of bandwagoning American interests at all costs, especially at the expense of economic opportunities with the Chinese. Expressing economic and developmental needs of the Philippine public, and the unaffordable outcome of military confrontation, Duterte’s popularity in his domestic policies did soothe some potential backlashes against his bold diplomatic maneuver. However, asymmetric attention can still quickly produce a new novelty situation for the Philippines anytime in the near future. During the Benham Rise incident, local Philippine media groups covered related news with extensive coverage, while American news outlets and Mandarin news outlets in the Sinosphere published only a few articles, and without the anxious tones Filipino articles embedded. If China were to pursue or increase similar actions in the future, Duterte’s nationalistic punch might reverse directions to aim the Chinese, for the amplification effects of Double Asymmetric Structure will not take Chinese and American acts lightly.

**Conclusion**

Strategies do not come out of thin air, but have always been triggered within a larger setting; in the case of the Philippines, this is what I dub “Double Asymmetric Structure”. Despite the intrinsic asymmetry between their power and resources, a smaller Philippines strives to engage with China and United States, constantly struggling in an environment influenced by attention and inattention. With the Philippines more anxious and concentrated with its relations towards the two larger powers, it will often be the provider of novelty situations, which amplifies the difficulties of retaining relational normalcy, posing potential risks for the smaller Philippines and frustrating the larger United States and China. On the other hand, the immense but distorted attention that arises when United States and China foresee a Philippine act as part of its geopolitical rival’s ambition, or affects its own

---

fundamental interest, is also an important factor in shaping these novelty situations and their following developments.

The Philippines has been one of the countries most affected by post-Cold War strategic environment. With China emerging politically, economically, militarily, the Philippine leadership has tried to fend off Chinese aggression toward the South China Sea by redefining and renegotiating ties with the U.S. Though both sides have contributed considerable effort to improve bilateral ties, as China’s near neighbor, Manila still is far from trusting Beijing. Reciprocally, whenever the Philippines seeks stronger cooperation with the U.S, Philippine-China relations again sink into a vicious cycle of negative responses and punishing acts from China. However, when U.S influence and military deployments enter Philippine territory, it still triggers anger from the Philippine people, who perceive the endurance of Fernando Marcos’ authoritarian dictatorship an U.S contribution and disdain excessive U.S roles in Philippine affairs. Philippines’ assistance demands towards U.S is not one of gladness and enjoyment, but a depiction of smaller states’ reluctant pursuit under Double-Asymmetric Structure’s limitations after painful, stressful contemplations.

Observing recent developments in the Philippines, the transition between Aquino and Duterte’s administration has showcased the effects of Double-Asymmetric Structure: with Duterte’s staunch nationalist rhetoric targeting the U.S, the dependent asymmetry between U.S and the Philippines under Aquino years has come to a halt, shifting bilateral ties into a new period of shuffling readjustment. In terms of Philippine-China relations, Estrada’s ice-breaking state visit, Arroyo’s warm start and cold end, Aquino’s legal confrontation and Duterte’s reapproachment altogether form an interesting pattern, with a novelty situation marking every reverse; this cycle plus the temporary decline of Philippine-U.S ties best manifests the characteristics of small state diplomacy under Double-Asymmetric Structure: though the Philippines is positioned at the weaker tip of asymmetric relations, both China and U.S. can’t fully control the Philippines’ diplomatic maneuver, for an anxious Philippines is bound to act unilaterally when perceived sensitivities arise, with (1) Territorial Disputes, (2) Nationalism and Identity, (3) Domestic Imperatives, and (4) International Context being the four forms of such novelty situations. These novelty situations induce or embed foreign policy changes from the Philippines.

While the Philippines’s policy towards great powers fluctuates over time, it never fully anchors itself under one single power. However, the Filipinos’ ambition of dislodging U.S and Chinese influence is ultimately zero; this still is the dreadful intrinsic burden for small states facing Double-Asymmetric Structure.