

Filipino President-elect Bongbong Marcos Unlikely to Ignore Territorial Dispute with China

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Ferdinand Marcos Jr., or commonly referred to as Bongbong Marcos, will take office as president of the Philippines on June 30. His accession to the presidency comes amid simmering debate over which way he will take his country’s relations with China. Many in the Philippines expect Marcos Jr. to pursue the same policy of relations with China as his predecessor **Rodrigo Duterte**, but it is likely that he will actually be much tougher against Beijing.

Outgoing Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte improved relations with Beijing, projecting his country to enter a “Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation” with China. Despite the Chinese-Filipino territorial dispute, Duterte did not rely on the ruling of the International Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which even ruled that Beijing’s sovereign ambitions over the Spratly Islands were illegal. Duterte behaved as if there had never been any ruling from the International Court of Arbitration and took bilateral steps to improve relations with Beijing instead.

It is recalled that in 2017, the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea was agreed upon. Then, in 2018 during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Manila, the two sides signed “The Philippines-China MoU on Cooperation in Oil and Gas Development.”

Now in the final months of Duterte’s presidency, the Filipino Foreign Ministry sent a protest note to Beijing against their ban on fishing in the South China Sea and against the Chinese coast guard violating the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone. Most recently, there have been three new Filipino coast guard outposts on these islands.

Despite this, these issues are miniscule in the context of the friendly relations that the leaders of the Philippines and China currently have. The majority of Filipinos are not enthusiastic about such friendly expressions as there is a distrust for the Chinese, as well as

strong patriotic sentiment. In this way, Marcos Jr. will have to take a tougher stance than Duterte against Beijing's expansionist policy in the South China Sea.

However, some observers say that under Marcos Jr., the Philippines will become even closer to China as his family has a special relationship with the Asian Giant. Marcos Jr.'s father was the one to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1976, and his parents even met with **Chairman Mao Zedong**.

Chinese leader **Xi Jinping** congratulated Marcos Jr. on his victory shortly after the election. In his congratulations, Xi honored the new president-elect as "a figure in the creation, support and promotion of the China-Philippines friendship" and expressed his wish that the two sides would continue to develop close ties.

However, it does appear that his parents' special relationship with Beijing will not interfere in his policy of maximizing Filipino demands in the South China Sea. On May 26, speaking to television reporters, Marcos Jr. vowed to rely on the 2016 International Court of Arbitration ruling to assert "our territorial sovereignty against Beijing's ambitious claims in the South China Sea."

At the time, he stressed: "Our sovereignty is sacred, and we will not give in in any way. We will not allow anyone to trample on even a square millimeter of our maritime sovereignty." The president-elect added that he would resolve the issue through diplomacy, "consistently and firmly."

Manila has always been a military ally of the United States, despite all of Duterte's sometimes harsh statements against Washington. In this way, the Philippines enjoys a unique position where it can once again simply pivot back toward the United States in some global and/or regional issues. It is no coincidence that there are now hints from Beijing to Manila reminding of their previous methods of discussing territorial disputes whilst boosting economic cooperation.

As Beijing would rather minimize the importance of the territorial dispute in its bilateral relations with the Philippines, it could allow the US to re-establish its influence in the country as Manila finds far more importance in the issue. Whereas China can offer economic opportunity and benefit at the price of sidelining differences in maritime territory, the US could offer strong diplomatic support on the territorial dispute, something that would surely spark Manila's interest.

It is clear that economic cooperation and joint exploitation of resources in the South China Sea is a good way to develop relations between countries. Although China could blame nationalist ambitions in the Philippines as hindering a long-term sustainable peace, stability and economic development in the region, Manila does have a right to make use of what it is entitled to. By ignoring such a major issue for the Philippines, Beijing is allowing a space for the US to exploit and therefore have a greater say in South China Sea matters.

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