

Philippine Frontrunner Marcos Favors China Over US

Presidential hopeful would pursue a bilateral deal with China on sea disputes, a stance that will likely open him to Manchurian candidate accusations

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The race for the Philippine presidency will be contested on various emotive issues but the frontrunner so far is setting himself apart from rivals on perhaps the most sensitive of them all: China.

Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, the son of a former dictator and ally of outgoing **President Rodrigo Duterte**, is the only presidential candidate to have openly vowed to continue Duterte’s pro-Beijing foreign policy while downplaying the nation’s alliance with the United States.

In a series of press interviews, Marcos has laid out clearly his position on China, saying in one he would set aside the landmark 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruling on the South China Sea in favor of the Philippines over China, which effectively ruled Beijing’s nine-dash line claim to the sea had no legal basis under the UNCLOS.

In a recent DZRH radio interview, Marcos said the Philippines’ arbitral win against China was “not effective” and that the “only practical option” for resolving the sea disputes was a bilateral agreement with China. He [said](#), “I think we can come to an agreement. As a matter of fact, people from the Chinese embassy are my friends, we have been talking about that.”

“Let’s not talk about war, because that’s not really an option. We must continue to engage the Chinese,” he said, echoing a frequent line from Duterte’s pronouncements on the South China Sea disputes.

In another ABS-CBN network interview, Marcos went further in saying he would dismiss any potential offer of assistance from the United States in negotiating with China, saying,

“The problem is between China and us. If Americans come in, it is bound to fail.”

With the campaign season ready to start in earnest, Marcos' rivals are expected to step up their portrayal of the frontrunner as a pro-China Manchurian candidate who, like Duterte, will supposedly sell out the country to Beijing in exchange for economic deals and other financial inducements.

All of the other major candidates, including **Vice-President Leni Robredo**, **Senators Manny Pacquiao and Panfilo Lacson**, and **Manila Mayor Isko Moreno**, have all [taken overtly hawkish and nationalistic positions](#) on China's pressure on Philippine-claimed features and territory in the South China Sea.

When it comes to China relations, history is on Marcos' side. Of all the major Philippine political dynasties, the Marcoses have the longest ties with China's communist leadership.

At the height of the Cold War, then-dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Bongbong's father, was among the [first Asian leaders](#) to ditch the US-aligned government in Taipei in favor of establishing formal bilateral relations with Communist China.

During the dictator's official visit to Beijing in 1974, which reinforced the Sino-American détente and Beijing's charm offensive across Southeast Asia, Marcos was [accompanied by his entire family](#), including then heir-apparent Bongbong, who met and greeted Chinese paramount leader Mao Zedong.

Over the years, the Marcoses' relations with the US, a treaty ally, turned increasingly contentious amid disagreements over human rights issues and strategic rents for America's large-scale bases in the Philippines.

The Marcoses are known to hold a grudge against the Americans for abandoning them during the 1986 People Power revolt, which forced them into temporary exile in Hawaii.

Since their return in 1991, the Marcoses have gradually worked their way back to the center of Philippine politics by exploiting weaknesses in the country's elite-driven democracy and building powerful cartels with other political dynasties, including the Dutertes.

The Marcoses, who have had almost uninterrupted control over the northern province of Ilocos Norte, also maintain warm relations with the Chinese-Filipino business community and have courted investment ties with China in their bailiwicks.

Marcos Jr is now running in tandem with presidential daughter Sara Duterte, who decided to withdraw her presidential bid to head off a direct clash with the son of the former dictator.

Marcos Jr has presented himself as a candidate of continuity, vowing to protect the current president from any future prosecution over human rights-related issues, including over his lethal war on drugs campaign, as well as building on Duterte's policies, including his China embrace.

At the same time, Marcos has barely mentioned the Philippines' alliance with the US and its historically warm relations with Western countries, perhaps reflecting the family's lingering resentment toward the US.

Some suggest the urbane and softly-spoken Marcos Jr could prove more successful in appeasing Beijing's ambitions in the South China Sea without the Duterte administration's frequent resort to pugnaous language and threats.



Frontrunner Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr with his sister Maria Josefa Imelda 'Imee' Marcos. Photo: WikiCommons

Last year, during a public event only weeks ahead of his official registration for the presidential race, Marcos Jr indicated his preference for staying the course of maintaining friendly ties with Beijing regardless of intensifying disputes in the South China Sea.

“The policy of engagement, which the Duterte government is implementing, although it is criticized, it is the right way to go. Because whatever we do, we can’t go to war,” [said Marcos Jr](#), regurgitating the incumbent president’s insistence on strategic subservience towards the Asian superpower.

“We don’t want to do that, I don’t think the Chinese want to go to war with us. Certainly, we don’t want to go to war with China,” he added, insisting that adopting a friendly posture was the only viable option for the Philippines.

Marcos Jr’s stance has clearly already pleased Beijing. During [a meeting](#) with the presidential candidate last year, China’s ambassador to Manila **Huang Xilian** was full of praises for the Marcoses.

“Hanging on the wall are photographs recording historic moments of China-Philippines relations, one of which on the top has depicted the historic scene of then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and then Philippine President Ferdinand E Marcos signing the Joint Communique on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between our two counties on June 9, 1975,” Huang said, referring to the background picture during his high-profile meeting with Marcos Jr.

The Chinese envoy emphasized the need for maintaining friendly relations “so as to bring more benefits to our two peoples and pass on our traditional friendship from generation to generation.”

Beijing will likely take less kindly to Vice-President Robredo's candidacy. She recently said if elected she would "leverage" the 2016 arbitral win "to form a coalition of nations" supportive of the ruling to form a coalition against "ongoing militarization of the West Philippine Sea."

The language of coalition-building to counter China's regional ambitions, including in the South China Sea, obviously echoes that of the Biden administration.



President Rodrigo Duterte and Xi Jinping in 2019. Photo: WikiCommons / Robinson Ninal Jr

That would appear to put Marcos and Robredo on opposite sides of US-China rivalry for influence in the Philippines, presenting voters with a stark choice on foreign policy matters.

"We must understand that we are a tiny tiny nation caught in between two superpowers," Marcos said in a mixture of Filipino and Tagalog in a recent press interview where he ruled out tighter security cooperation with Washington to check China's ambitions

During the lengthy interview, observers noticed he barely mentioned the [Philippine-US Mutual Defense Treaty](#), which obliges Washington to come to the Philippines' assistance in the event of any armed conflict in the South China Sea.

In the DZRH radio interview, Marcos echoed the same position, arguing that leveraging defense ties with the US is a "recipe for disaster, which would ensure that China will not listen to us anymore."

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Featured image: Philippine presidential hopeful Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos is reaching out to China

on the campaign trail. Image: Twitter / Rappler

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