The South China Sea issue and Philippine President-elect Rodrigo Duterte

Lowell Bautista

University of Wollongong, lowell@uow.edu.au

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The victory of President-elect Rodrigo Duterte in the recently concluded Philippine election is nothing short of astonishing. The election itself, a far cry from others in recent memory, is worth celebrating.

It had the highest voter turnout recorded, and has been widely acclaimed as the most credible and peaceful presidential election in the country's history. After an incendiary campaign laced with profanity and foul-mouthed, controversial rants, the freewheeling figure who captured the votes of the masses with his anti-establishment battle cry to eradicate crime, drugs and corruption, will soon be sworn in as the 16th President of the Republic of the Philippines.

The Duterte phenomenon

The rise of the brusque Duterte, the 71-year-old lawyer who was for more than two decades mayor of Davao in southern Mindanao, was not anticipated, almost unbelievable, in a country where the political system is dominated by rich, powerful dynastic families.

The Philippine electorate, afflicted with grievance politics and thirsty for change, overwhelmingly supported Duterte whose appeal crossed age groups, social class and demographics. On election day, he enjoyed a massive lead of over five million votes compared to the administration-supported candidate Manuel Roxas. Duterte won despite having no coherent or practical national economic plan. His campaign platform offered no solid, long-term foreign policy plans. In contrast, he boasted he had two wifes and several girlfriends, made a necrophiliac joke about a murdered Australian missionary, and vowed to extra-judicially kill criminals. Not surprisingly, the prospect of a Duterte presidency elicited anxiety in the business community and sent shock waves overseas.

The Duterte presidency

The election fever in Manila now seems to be dying down and life will soon go back to normal across the archipelago. Even Duterte’s electoral victory has been magnanimously received and largely uncontested by his rivals, a rare occurrence in Philippine electoral contests.

But we are yet to see if the President-elect has what it takes to run the country. What is Duterte’s position on the various challenging diplomatic and foreign policy issues that confront the Philippines? Where does he stand on the issue of the South China Sea?

The plethora of issues that await the President-elect as chief architect of Philippine foreign policy could be daunting. The series of diplomatic faux pas that peppered the Duterte campaign trail made it obvious that he is not a foreign policy maestro. His innocuous blustering statements provoked gasps — if not outrage — in various capitals across the globe.

Duterte's position on the South China Sea

The issue of the South China Sea is definitely among the most intricate foreign policy challenges facing the incoming President. Of course, his position on this issue will be procrastinated on his views about China. Restoring the Philippines’ precariously precarious bilateral relationship with China while maintaining robust security and defense relations with the US will require a delicate balancing act.

The outgoing Aquino Administration has consistently maintained a hard-line policy towards Beijing over the South China Sea dispute, and warm relations and deepening security ties with Washington and Tokyo. In the Southeast Asia, if not the whole of Asia, Manila has emerged as the most outspoken opponent of China’s provocative actions, including a tense standoff over Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and the more recent occupation and development of features in the South China Sea. The former incident brought the bilateral relations between the two countries to its lowest level since the 1995 Mischief Reef incident, prompting Manila to file an international legal case in 2013 against Beijing over its controversial nine-dash line. The highly anticipated ruling of the tribunal is expected very soon, and most analysts expect it will be unfavourable to China.

While Duterte has indulged the public with spur of the moment histriornics, including a pledge to plant a Philippine flag via jet ski on Chinese-occupied artificial islands, his position on China otherwise appears to have been conciliatory and amicable. Election pronouncements of Duterte on China and his views on the South China Sea disputes appear to be diametrically at odds with the current design and trajectory of Philippine foreign policy on these important issues.

Duterte favours direct negotiations with China and is willing to shelve the contentious issue of sovereignty in exchange for Chinese economic concessions. He is opposed to the idea of going to war with China and does not advocate the use of legal avenues to enforce the Philippine claim. Rather, he prefers a multilateral approach that will bring rival claimants and even extra-regional powers to the negotiating table. These views, although not necessarily novel, do seem to signal a radical shift in Philippine-China relations.

A pivot in Philippine-China relations

The paucity of any solid, long-term and categorical statement from the president-elect on the South China Sea — or on foreign policy in general — under his administration makes gauging at the crystal ball particularly difficult.

At best, Duterte’s rhetoric suggests a more amicable and conciliatory diplomatic stance between Manila and Beijing. This could be a good thing. The two countries could focus their energy and resources on infrastructure and economic activities that are mutually beneficial. On the other hand, the softening of Manila’s stance against an increasingly aggressive and expansionist China could expose cracks in the unstable regional security architecture, and further weaken concerted efforts of extra-regional powers such as the US and Japan to counterbalance China’s provocative military posturing. Manila’s actions could also subvert ASEAN’s initiatives to rally behind a unified position. A rapid shift, in regional defense postures could also increase the risk of miscalculations and provocations on the ground, and undermine longstanding efforts to reinforce a rules-based approach to resolving South China Sea disputes.

It is always difficult to predict how incoming leaders will act. The unpredictable and volatile nature of this President-elect makes it even harder to calculate such positions.

The tribunal is expected to make a ruling before Duterte is inaugurated on June 30. This is likely to provide the first litmus test of where the populist strongman stands on this matter. The Chinese Government has repeatedly confirmed that it will disregard the tribunal ruling.

Next year the Philippines assumes chairmanship of ASEAN, providing another occasion on the not too distant horizon to test Duterte’s position on the South China Sea.

The competing claims on the South China Sea have made its waters rather turbulent in recent times. But hope always remains buoyant. And the man of the hour is incoming Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.

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Whatever Mr. Duterte is planning about negotiating with China is bound to fail. China will not budge unless the U.N. will issue a verdict making China the culprit, intruder and region grabber.

Multilateral approach involving all claimants and the major regional powers with a stake in the dispute would serve very well the interests of all parties—except perhaps Communist China. This multilateral approach is a very good idea because it at least indicates a change in approach, which, combined with a more amicable and conciliatory tone, might bode well for the outcome of an adequate compromise.

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