

Explaining the Dynamic Hedging Policy of the Duterte Administration Amid the Sino-US Rivalry

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Abstract

This article explains the dynamics of Duterte's foreign policy in responding to geopolitical uncertainty in Southeast Asia. The Philippines' geopolitical alignment toward China shifted during his administration, marking a significant break in its foreign policy history. The Duterte administration has also been distancing the Philippines from the United States. As a result, the Philippines' foreign policy orientation began to view its relations with the two powers more pragmatically. Using hedging as an analytical framework and a qualitative-deductive method of analysis, this article argues that the Duterte administration adopted a hedging-oriented foreign policy shaped by both the structural climate and domestic socio-bureaucratic considerations. Furthermore, his approach reflected strong policy dynamism, marked by flexible and anticipatory shifts in alignment during the latter half of his administration in response to perceived risks and opportunities.

Keywords:

Philippines; hedging; Duterte; alignment; great power

Introduction

Overview of the Philippines' Foreign Policy

The discussion of the foreign policies of Southeast Asian countries cannot be separated from the great power dynamics that have influenced the region. Amid the US-China rivalry, the Philippines' foreign policy reflects its historic ties with both powers—viewing the US as its security guarantor and China as its primary threat. For much of its history, the country's asymmetric alliances with Washington have been the primary characteristic of its defence policy. The persistence of this arrangement reflects mutual interests, with the Philippines leveraging its strategic geography for protection and the US maintaining its regional influence (McCoy, 2016, p. 1050). On the other hand, Beijing has been consistently perceived by the Philippines as the primary adversary due to the unresolved territorial dispute. However, Duterte's rise marked a significant departure from the country's traditional foreign policy.

The Duterte administration has radically revised the Philippines' geopolitical alignment. Through his interpretation of 'The Independent Foreign Policy'¹, Duterte sought to adopt a foreign policy that significantly departs from the Philippines' traditional alignment pattern. This new approach entails downgrading Manila's security-based relations with the US to better accommodate China as its new economic partner (De Castro, 2016, p. 140; Heydarian, 2017, p. 222). However, his foreign policy reflected a distinctive shift as it sought rapprochement with the US while gradually distancing from China in the latter part of his administration, returning to the conventional

¹ The term originated from the Republic of the Philippines Constitution, which mandated that the implementation of foreign policy must be based on the principles of independence, freedom, and autonomy. However, interpretations vary across administrations with different considerations, resulting in different foreign policy patterns and decisions (DFA, personal communication, June 9, 2025; CIRSS, personal communication, July 1, 2025).

pattern (Nguyen & Tok, 2025, p. 29). The shift reflects his dynamic approach, characterised by a fluid and adaptive alignment strategy to address structural and domestic socio-bureaucratic considerations. This development underscores two key tensions: while a formal US treaty ally, the Philippines continues to harbour animosity toward China over the unresolved South China Sea dispute.

The Duterte administration's foreign policy has drawn wide academic debate, marked by an initial pivot to China followed by renewed ties with the US—signalling both a break from the Philippines' pro-Washington tradition and a caution against overreliance on Beijing. Scholars have noted how domestic interests are often regarded as the primary driver that shaped Duterte's foreign policy choices. Some underscore the various stakeholders within his administration who persistently influenced his decisions (Takagi, 2022; Wu & Velasco, 2022; Camba, 2023). Meanwhile, others argued that public sentiments played a pivotal role in influencing and constraining Duterte's foreign policy trajectory (Fang & Li, 2022; Lee, 2020; Yeo & Gloria, 2023). Some also point to Duterte's nationalist-populist views and idiosyncratic factors as central in shaping the Philippines' alignment towards the two great powers (Magcamit, 2021; Tenorio et al., 2022; Magcamit & Arugay, 2024; Song & Velasco, 2024). Meanwhile, others explore the dynamics of the US-Philippine alliance and the implications of China's rise towards the arrangement (Winger, 2021; Ma & Kang, 2022; Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023; Kih, 2023; Ross, 2025). Notably, the works of De Castro (2016, 2018, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023) stand out in this literature, as they highlight key developments and complexities of Duterte's foreign policy, providing crucial insights and serving as starting references to this article.

However, existing literatures fail to capture the complexity of Duterte's foreign policy. These studies only provide partial

explanations, often oversimplifying Duterte's approach by isolating specific themes—such as domestic politics, structural dynamics, or idiosyncratic factors—as the primary determinants. Furthermore, these studies overlooked the shifting alignment that occurred during the latter part of his administration. Therefore, this article offers a different view by positing that Duterte's stance cannot be reduced to a single defining concept. Instead, the administration pursued a range of policies that fit within the conceptual umbrella of hedging. By treating hedging as a spectrum, this article shows how Duterte's approach shifted from benefit-oriented to security-oriented hedging, a recalibration aimed at boosting and sustaining domestic legitimacy. As such, this article aims to explain the Philippines' dynamic hedging policy in response to the US-China rivalry during the Duterte administration.

Synthesising definitions from previous studies (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, 2024; Tessman, 2012; Jackson, 2014; Koga, 2018; Ciorciari, 2019), hedging can be understood as an attempt to mitigate risks and maximize profits amidst an urgent or uncertain situation. For small states, hedging involves balancing risks and opportunities by pragmatically engaging with more powerful states (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 160). This argument also enunciates that hedging acts as a 'middle-ground' that emphasizes the insistence on not taking sides or being bound by a definitive alignment. The role of great powers is crucial in explaining why small states decide to adopt hedging. In an uncertain situation, a small state's hedging policy tends to be dynamic in accordance with the threats or prospects displayed by the region's great powers. When the line between threat and profit blurs, small states instinctively pursue counteracting behaviours to maximize benefits and cultivate a fallback position (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 161). The priority of these actions depends on the state's assessment of risk and profit, which would incur either a

Table 1.
Degrees of the small states' hedging strategy

HEDGING						
<i>Pure Balancing</i>	Risk-Contingency Options		Profit-Maximizing Options			<i>Pure Bandwagoning</i>
	<i>Indirect Balancing</i>	<i>Dominance Denial</i>	<i>Economic Pragmatism</i>	<i>Binding- Engagement</i>	<i>Limited Bandwagoning</i>	
Degree of Power Rejection (Security-Oriented Approach)			Degree of Power Acceptance (Benefit-Oriented Approach)			

Source: Based on Cheng-Chwee (2008, p. 166)

benefit- or security-oriented approach. Thus, this article agrees with Cheng-Chwee (2008, p. 166) that hedging can be portrayed as a multi-component strategy with a spectrum-based parameter (see Table 1).

In profit-maximising options, **economic pragmatism** refers to a behaviour that seeks to maximize economic relations with great powers, such as by increasing trade and investment or acceptance of economic aid/loans, despite ongoing political tensions or disputes. It is considered the most neutral approach that neither rejects nor accepts the influence of both powers. **Binding-engagement** refers to small countries' efforts to formalize and solidify relationships with emerging powers by signing binding agreements, establishing regular dialogues, or downplaying political disputes, to maximize diplomacy efforts and reduce their revisionist tendencies (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 167). Lastly, **limited bandwagoning** refers to soft alignment with emerging powers by adopting favourable foreign policy stances to maximise political benefit, emphasising voluntary deference and accommodation of interest for the sake of profit without fully committing to their cause (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 168).

Meanwhile, in the risk-contingency options, **dominance denial** refers to denying the emerging power from exerting unwanted influence by enlisting the support of other

powers, strengthening diplomatic leverage, or publicly voicing concerns/discomfort over its action (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 170). **Indirect balancing** focused more on defence-oriented behaviours such as military modernisation and strengthening military alliances or collective defence agreements, especially with the status quo, discreetly fortifying its capabilities without clear state-targeting. This behaviour aims for soft-balancing by curbing uncertainties rather than responding to perceived threat (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 171).

The Duterte administration's foreign policy shifted across different points of the hedging spectrum. The sudden changes during the latter part of his administration highlight an important question as to why such an alteration occurred. According to Cheng-Chwee (2024, p. 49), domestic legitimacy concerns help explain why small states hedge as they do. Elite trade-offs and priorities shape how external developments are interpreted, producing distinct patterns of hedging behaviour (Cheng-Chwee, 2024, pp. 50-51). When the elite primary pathway to justification centres around delivering performance and results, states will then adopt a benefit-oriented hedging policy characterized by prioritizing immediate economic profit, while deliberately downplaying security risk. On the other hand, when the elite primary pathway involves responding to public concerns and national

sovereignty issues due to existing external threats, states will adopt a security-oriented hedging policy that emphasizes preservation, independence, and defence preparedness over material gains (Cheng-Chwee, 2024, p. 51). This premise could help understand not only Duterte's decisions to align the Philippines towards China, but also his attempts to realign towards the US in the later stages of his presidency.

This article argues that Cheng-Chwee's (2008, 2024) theory provides a more robust understanding of Duterte's foreign policy. His conceptualisation of hedging as a spectrum rather than a singular strategy emphasizes contradictory multi-alignments logic involving profit-seeking and risk-mitigating actions. This narrowed focus is useful for explaining the behaviour of Southeast Asian states in managing the US-China competition on their doorstep. His sudden alteration of hedging behaviour illustrates a degree of flexibility that could be explained by the interplay of structural developments and domestic demands/pressures that compelled his administration to revise its alignment choices. Thus, this dynamic approach shows the framework's usefulness in explaining states with high policy dynamism, such as Duterte's Philippines. It illustrates that behaviours can vary not only across states or administrations but also within the same administration over time, as domestic elites adjust their primary pathways in line with their legitimacy concerns.

Methods

This article analyses the dynamics of the Philippines' dynamic hedging policy amid the US-China rivalry during the Duterte administration. This article uses a qualitative research method with a deductive approach. According to Bryman (2012, p. 36), qualitative methods can be understood as a research design that emphasises linguistics rather than quantification. In this context, a qualitative

design would explain the course and considerations that shape Duterte's hedging policy toward the US and China. Meanwhile, the deductive approach implies that this article utilises an existing framework and the indicators attached to it, namely, (1) Limited Bandwagoning, (2) Binding-Engagement, (3) Economic Pragmatism, (4) Dominance Denial, and (5) Indirect Balancing, and also elite domestic considerations in influencing its dynamic approach.

The data collection technique is based on desk/library-based research divided into primary and secondary forms (Lamont, 2015, p. 62). The primary data collected is in the form of official documents from the Philippines' governmental institutions, statements, speeches, and press releases that discussed the Philippines' foreign policy during the Duterte administration, supported by interviews with representatives from the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs and Centre for International Relations and Strategic Studies. Meanwhile, secondary data consist of past scientific articles, reports, and news relevant to Duterte's foreign policy and broader political developments in Southeast Asia. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, this article also employs a triangulation process (Lamont, 2015, p. 62). The collected data is cross-referenced to identify the convergences, ensuring that the findings are not limited to unilateral interpretation. The results are then evaluated to confirm their consistency with the theoretical framework. The temporal scope of the data spans from the start of Duterte's tenure in 2016 through to the conclusion of his administration in early 2022.

Results

Deciphering Duterte's Dynamic Hedging Policy Amid the US-China Rivalry

The Duterte administration's Independent Foreign Policy signifies a departure from his predecessor's balancing agenda. By

adjusting its alignment with the US and China, Duterte employed contradictory strategies associated with hedging. Moreover, his approach was dynamic, with anticipatory shifts shaped by structural pressures and elite legitimacy concerns. His earlier pivot toward China, evident in the adoption of economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning, was driven by his attempt to secure Beijing's concession to advance his domestic economic agenda, viewing China's rise as a strategic opportunity to accelerate national development. While his later realignment toward the US, evident in the adoption of dominance denial and indirect balancing besides maintaining economic pragmatism, was driven by public and bureaucratic pressures arising from China's persistent aggressiveness in the South China Sea, which pushed Duterte to uphold national sovereignty to defend his administration's approval and unity. Thus, Duterte's hedging is heavily influenced by the assessment between risk and profit, and how it could impact his legitimacy.

During the early years of his tenure, Duterte enacted a benefit-oriented hedging

policy (see Table II). He sought to pursue a closer trade and investment relationship with China to take advantage of Beijing's rise as an economic powerhouse, despite the ongoing South China Sea issue, which has led to the constant deterioration of their relations. However, trade and investment ties with the US persist despite the separation agenda, reflecting Duterte's recognition of Washington as a key economic partner and his pragmatism in avoiding over-reliance, which reinforced his hedging policy. This behaviour can be characterised as **economic pragmatism** to maximise economic gains despite ongoing foreign policy disputes or initiatives with the two powers.

Duterte reinforced his outreach to China by joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signalling an effort to engage Beijing positively and open space for dialogue on other contentious issues. He then purposely ignored the Philippines' victory in the 2016 UNCLOS ruling, downplaying the significance of the maritime disputes to ease diplomatic tensions. Additionally, Duterte sought to conclude the Code of Conduct (CoC) drafting and negotiation, showcasing his support for

Table 2.
Deconstructing the Duterte Administration's Dynamic Hedging Policy

Period	Visible Strategy				
	Risk-Contingency		Profit-Maximizing		
	<i>Indirect Balancing</i>	<i>Dominance Denial</i>	<i>Economic Pragmatism</i>	<i>Binding Engagement</i>	<i>Limited Bandwagoning</i>
First Part (<i>Benefit-oriented</i>) 2016-2020			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing economic ties with China. Persistent economic ties with US. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joining China's BRI Scheme. Ignoring the 2016 UNCLOS ruling. Attempting to finish the CoC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threatening the US-Philippine alliance.
Second Part (<i>Security-oriented</i>) 2021-2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refurbishing key military bases and modernizing its military. Reaffirming the US-Philippine alliance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upholding the 2016 UNCLOS ruling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent economic ties with China. Persistent economic ties with US. 		

Source: Adapted from (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, p. 166)

China's inclusion in the regional rule-making process and his willingness to settle the issue in a manner acceptable to Beijing. These actions can be described as forms of **binding engagement**, demonstrating Duterte's attempt to cordially bind and engage China to nullify their revisionist tendencies.

Meanwhile, Duterte threatened to undo the US-Philippine alliance, adopting confrontational tactics and signalling a shift toward loosening Manila's security ties with Washington—an implicit attempt to align more closely with China. This manoeuvre fits the framework of **limited bandwagoning**, characterised by Duterte's ambition to pursue greater flexibility, even as far as softly deferring and aligning the Philippines' policy stance with China to further demonstrate his commitment. Nevertheless, this sequence does not amount to full bandwagoning, as the US-Philippine alliance persisted, though marked by fluctuations.

Fast-forward into the latter part of his administration, Duterte started to shift his policy and enact a more security-oriented hedging. While maintaining **economic pragmatism** towards the US and China, evident by the consistent increase in trade and investment between them, Duterte started to adopt risk-management behaviours that contradict his earlier foreign policy implementation. Firstly, he chose to publicly and repeatedly uphold the UNCLOS 2016 ruling. The objective was to expose China as a threatening power and voice his discomfort to garner support from the international community. This action could be classified as **dominance denial** as Duterte attempted to challenge Beijing's unwanted behaviour/influence through diplomatic means.

Next, he reaffirmed and reinvigorated the US-Philippine alliance, acknowledging the US role as the primary counterbalance to China and placing them back as Manila's security guarantor. Duterte also attempted to enhance

the Philippines' internal deterrence measures by upgrading key military infrastructure and procuring additional equipment to modernise its armed forces. The aim is to reduce defence disparities and show the administration's resolve regarding sovereignty without directly identifying China as a threat, all of which is an instance of **indirect balancing**. Again, this sequence does not fully constitute balancing, as the Philippines' growing reliance on Chinese loans and funding propelled Duterte to perceive China as an uncertain partner rather than an imminent adversary.

The shifting pattern from a benefit-oriented hedging toward a security-oriented hedging represents the dynamic approach of his hedging policy, which was prompted by Duterte's consideration regarding structural conditions and his domestic legitimacy. In this case, Duterte's pivot towards China policy was prompted by his performative effort to fulfil his domestic economic agenda, thereby demonstrating his administration's capability to deliver prosperity that would, in turn, boost internal legitimacy. The need for funds and loans critical to the success of this program compelled Duterte to defer and accommodate China's interest as a strategic necessity. Legitimacy also drove Duterte to alter his hedging policy during the latter part of his administration. China's persistent encroachment into Philippine-claimed waters despite Duterte's appeasement effort highlights the dominance of Beijing's maritime policy, which forces Duterte to adopt a more decisive stance. This shift also aimed to bolster public approval and bureaucratic unity, as domestic stakeholders consistently remained alarmed by China's aggressive behaviour in the disputed area and concerned about Duterte's muted policy against Beijing.

Discussion

To further illustrate Duterte's dynamic hedging policy, this article analyses three

key issues that influenced his foreign policy: 1) Deepening economic ties with China, 2) International court rulings on the South China Sea dispute, and 3) The fluctuating dynamics of the US-Philippine alliance. Empirically, these issues collectively showcased Duterte's efforts to navigate the pressures and opportunities presented by the two powers, in line with his pursuit of domestic legitimation. Theoretically, the selection of these cases reflected the framework's notion of threats and profits, reflecting his shifting attempts to balance risk and benefit amidst the uncertainty of great power politics.

Strengthening the Sino-Philippine Economic Partnership

One issue that stands out during the Duterte administration is the deepening economic ties between the Philippines and China. During his election campaign, Duterte stressed the need to expand and modernise the Philippines' outdated infrastructure. His flagship program, dubbed the Build, Build, Build! (BBB), was designed explicitly to improve the poor infrastructure conditions, which would streamline the Philippines' economic growth. However, initial estimates projected that the program would require approximately US\$160-180 billion, sharply increasing infrastructure spending by up to 7.3 percent of its GDP (Department of Budget and Management, n.d.). The BBB was also expected to widen the budget deficit to around 3% of GDP annually, potentially worsening macroeconomic stability and significantly inflating the national debt (Padilla, 2017). In order to mitigate this problem, Duterte turned his attention toward Beijing as an alternative source of funding.

The need for funding and loans drove Duterte closer to China. After his inauguration, he immediately conducted a state visit to Beijing, bringing home an investment pledge amounting to US\$24 billion in foreign

direct investment (FDI) and aid. Chinese officials and business tycoons frequently visit underdeveloped regions such as Davao and Cebu, signifying their willingness to strengthen and support economic linkages between the two countries (Chao, 2021, pp. 50–51). In a year, the Duterte administration signed more than 20 bilateral economic and infrastructure agreements with China, totalling a whopping USD\$1.4 billion. This amount surpasses the combined Chinese investments received during both Arroyo and Aquino administrations before (Rabena, 2018, p. 684).

Formalising his economic pivot, Duterte attended the BRI summit in 2017, indicating a clear convergence of national interest between Manila and Beijing (Ranada, 2017). A year later, Malacañang Palace announced the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding, establishing the Philippines as a formal member of the BRI. The Philippines' entry into China's economic diplomacy scheme further solidified its economic ties, ensuring a steady influx of funds and loans essential for the success of the BBB program. In 2018 alone, Chinese soft loans and aid surged by 5.862 percent, with Beijing committing at least US\$7.34 billion of investment and development assistance (Rabena, 2018, p. 690). By 2019, several large-scale infrastructure projects such as Chico River Pump Irrigation, Centennial-Kaliwa Dam, PNR South-Long Haul Railway, Southeast Manila Expressway, and Clark Airport Expansion, had received or were slated to receive fundings and assistance from China (Rabena, 2018, p. 691; Baviera & Arugay, 2021, p. 290; Chao, 2021, p. 49; Tabbada & Pacho, 2021, p. 142).

Leading up to the end of his presidency, economic cooperation with both powers continued without a sign of decline. Gradually, China solidified itself as the Philippines' primary economic partner. In 2021, China became the Philippines' largest import partner while remaining its second-largest export partner. The same year, the Philippines'

exports to China were estimated at around US\$18 billion, accounting for 29 percent of the country's total exports (Baviera & Arugay, 2021, p. 289). During Duterte's administration, there was a consistent 15 percent annual increase in trade between the two countries. Chinese FDI has also increased by 36 percent since 2016 (Malindog-Uy, 2021; Rivas & Tomacruz, 2021). Nevertheless, the deepening economic interaction with China did not affect the Philippines' long-standing trade and investment ties with the US. Despite Duterte's pivot to China, the Philippines' trade with the US demonstrates a consistent increase by about 6% annually (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). The same could be said of the US investment, which shows fluctuating increase despite having a smaller quantity than China (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). Therefore, the Duterte administration's pragmatic point of view regarding trade and investment highlights a crucial feature in his hedging policy, which saw economics as a neutral platform of engagement with both powers.

However, despite several key BBB projects such as Estrela-Pantaleon and Binondo-Intramuros Bridge, Clark Airport Expansion, and Southeast Manila Expressway, having been completed or making significant progress, other projects such as Subic-Clark Railway, PNR South-Long Haul Railway, and Panay-Guimaras-Negros Bridge faced setbacks, including China's failure to deliver its funding promises (Burgos Jr, 2022; Manabat, 2022). A 2021 Public Works Department report reveals that only 12 out of 119 BBB projects slated for Chinese funding have been completed (Camba & Rongchen, 2022). This reality contributes to the growing public scepticism, with a 2021 ISEAS poll showing that 77.5 percent of respondents were wary of the Philippines' increasing dependence on China without tangible and sustained benefits (Seah et al., 2021, p. 21). Nevertheless, the underwhelming

progress of the BBB did not deter Duterte from strengthening economic ties with China, as he sought performative gains to sustain his legitimacy. The discussions above also illustrate how his pursuit of economic engagement remained the only issue that demonstrated an unchanging pattern and an important neutral point.

Changing Perspective on the 2016 UNCLOS Ruling

The South China Sea maritime dispute remains a persistent challenge to Southeast Asian stability. At the heart of this dispute is China's expansionist 'nine-dash line' claim, which overlaps with the claims of several Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines. During Arroyo's tenure, the repeated incursion of Chinese vessels forced the administration to take a tougher stance while still maintaining engagement with Beijing. Subsequently, Aquino opted to adopt a pure balancing strategy by revitalising its security pact with the US and shifting the armed forces doctrine to territorial defence (De Castro, 2016, p. 146). Following China's unilateral occupation of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012, Aquino also filed a statement of claim against China in 2013, attempting to assert the Philippines' rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled in favour of the Philippines, affirming its legal claim to stretches of islands in the South China Sea, much to China's (De Castro, 2016, pp. 147–148).

Faced with this predicament, Duterte refused to accept the 2016 UNCLOS ruling, choosing to set it aside and reacting with a silent response. Duterte upheld his stance during the 30th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference in 2017, refraining from including or mentioning the Philippines' legal victory (De Castro, 2018, p. 6). Foreign Secretary Yasay echoed similar tones

by urging the concerned parties to respect the ruling while exercising restraint and sobriety (Inquirer, 2016). The administration's decision to ignore the Philippines' legal victory could be seen as an attempt to placate China, showing its willingness to close past hostilities and accommodate Beijing's claim to de-escalate tensions.

Rather than affirming the ruling and further antagonising China, Duterte instead referenced the unfinished Code of Conduct (CoC) as a means to resolve the issue, which aligns with Beijing's preferred resolution method of excluding external powers, especially the US (Kipgen, 2018, p. 443). Taking over the responsibility of concluding it in 2017 through his chairmanship of the ASEAN-China Dialogue, the process quickly encountered problems. First were the infrequent talks between the concerned parties, which only occurred twice a year (DFA, personal communication, June 9, 2025). Additionally, ASEAN's emphasis on a consensus-based decision-making mechanism inadvertently prolonged the negotiations (Batongbacal, 2021, p. 213). Lastly, several parties hold contentious views that directly contradict and openly challenge China's claim (Pedrozo, 2021, p. 944). By the end of Duterte's administration, progress eventually stagnated, especially following his sudden move to uphold the ruling.

The CoC's protracted negotiations and China's persistent aggressiveness in the disputed area forced Duterte to review his assessment (CIRSS, personal communication, July 1, 2025). Departing from his previous stance, the administration began to acknowledge the validity of the ruling. This shift was evident in the statement delivered by then Foreign Secretary Locsin Jr during the 4th anniversary of the ruling, emphasising it as an integral component of rule-based regional and international order (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Furthermore, Locsin Jr also bashed Chinese claims, stating that it "had no

basis in law (...) exceeded the geographical and substantive limits of maritime entitlements under UNCLOS." He then mentioned that "certain actions within the Philippines' EEZ violated the Philippines' sovereign rights and were thus unlawful," indirectly referring to incidents, skirmishes, and illegal activities conducted by Chinese vessels in Philippine-claimed waters (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Duterte then publicly expressed this stance during the 2020 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), asserting that the ruling is "part of international law, beyond compromise and beyond the reach of passing governments to dilute, diminish, or abandon" (Aljazeera, 2020). This marked a departure from Duterte's earlier posture, which seemingly disregarded the ruling in favour of Chinese concessions. Similarly, in 2021, he reiterated the significance of respecting the ruling, while also beginning to subtly voice his objections to China's repeated encroachment on the Philippines' waters, stating that "no amount of wilful disregard by any country, however big and powerful, can diminish the Arbitral Award's importance" (Fernandez, 2021).

Duterte's shifting view toward the international ruling marked a significant change from his previous policy. China's dual strategy of building trust with other claimants while projecting unwavering commitment to its maritime claims to bolster domestic political image, fuelled Duterte's administration discontent (Raymond & Welch, 2022, p. 222). By utilising the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN), China Coast Guard (CCG), and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), Beijing repeatedly employed grey-zone tactics² to maintain controlled aggression and a domineering attitude (see

² Gray-zone tactics are characterized by ambiguity and non-attribution to maintain controlled violence and prevent sparking open conflicts (Singh, 2018, p. 2).

Table 3.
Notable recorded Chinese aggression in the South China Sea during Duterte's administration, showing persistence despite his appeasement policy

Year	Form of aggression
2017	Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships intimidate the Philippines' Coast Guard by glaring sirene over Thitu Island (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017). CCG fast boat fire warning shots over the Philippines' civilian vessel on the Spratly Islands, causing damage to the ship's hull (Glaser & Funaiole, 2017).
2018	The emergence of a video showed CCG personnel coercively inspecting and taking the Philippines' fishing vessel haul in Scarborough Shoal (Viray, 2018). The CCG and PAFMM vessels blocked access to Thitu Island in what is known as the longest maritime blockade in the South China Sea dispute (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2019).
2019	The Filipino fishing vessel, F/B Gem-ver 1, was allegedly rammed and sunk by a PAFMM vessel over in the Reed Bank, Scarborough Shoal (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2019). Further intensification of the Thitu Island blockade by the CCG and maritime militia (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2020).
2020	PLAN warships fired laser rangefinder systems at the Philippine Navy warship, BRP Conrado Yap, near the Spratly Islands (Pareno, 2020).
2021	The Whitsun Reef Incident allegedly saw over 200 PAFMM ships anchoring and blockading the land features without formal explanations (IISS, 2021).

Source: Author's own compilation based on various sources of information

Table III) (Yamazaki & Osawa, 2021, p. 333). This behaviour demonstrated China's resolve to assert its claim, despite Duterte's best efforts to voluntarily defer and appease its interest.

The continued militarisation of the area contradicted Duterte's narrative that closer ties would reduce China's revisionist tendencies. This development not only erodes China's credibility but also casts a negative light on Duterte's foreign policy. In 2019, the Social Weather Station survey shows that only 21 percent of Filipino respondents felt that Duterte's China policy was "effective". Instead, almost 80 percent criticised the administration's perceived ignorance and lack of action in dealing with China's continued assertiveness in the South China Sea (Aurelio, 2019). In 2020, Social Weather Station also noted that Duterte's image among the Filipino public plummeted from "poor" to "very poor", demonstrating public disapproval of his administration's appeasement policy (Social Weather Station, 2020).

The 2021 ISEAS poll indicates that 86 percent of respondents have "little" or "no" confidence in China's ability to contribute to regional prosperity, citing Beijing's maritime

encroachment and disregard of international law as the primary reasons (Seah et al., 2021, p. 42). 61 percent of respondents also expressed concerns that China's power could be used to "threaten Philippine interest and sovereignty" (Seah et al., 2021, p. 43). Conversely, 75 percent of respondents support the US increasing participation as a counterbalance to China, indicating the public's preference for close ties with Washington (Seah et al., 2021, p. 23). Moreover, repeated demonstrations expressing support for the 2016 UNCLOS ruling from civil organisations, oppositions, and the general public, signifying growing discontent with Duterte's Independent Foreign Policy (Esmaguell II, 2019; Philstar, 2021). Therefore, upholding the ruling became a means to regain public support and legitimacy.

Fluctuating Views on the US-Philippine Alliance

Duterte's dynamic hedging behaviour could also be seen in his view regarding the US-Philippine alliance. In the early years of his presidency, he distanced the Philippines from the US in favour of alignment with China. This was evident during his state visits to Beijing

in 2016, in which he declared, "I announce my separation from the United States, both in military and economics, also," and "I am ready to not really break ties (with the US), but we will open an alliance with China and Medvedev" (Reuters, 2016). These statements mark the start of Duterte's hedging, which pragmatically balances the Philippines' alignment with China and the US.

The US-Philippines alliance is fundamentally based on the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), a collective defence mechanism from the Cold War designed to expand the US influence in the region while simultaneously safeguarding the Philippines' sovereignty. Over time, two additional agreements were introduced to enhance its effectiveness: the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The VFA provided a legal framework that allowed the US to retain jurisdiction over its military personnel stationed in the Philippines. While the EDCA granted the US permission to rotate its troops and operate non-permanent military facilities on Filipino soil. These supplementary agreements serve as the basis for various defence-related activities such as personnel training, joint patrols, and other forms of military and non-military assistance (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2025).

In the ensuing years, Duterte made several attempts to downgrade the alliance. For example, in late 2016, Duterte attempted to expel the US special forces stationed in Mindanao under the EDCA, because their presence could complicate the conflicts with the Islamic militants (Winger, 2021, p. 12). Afterward, Duterte again caused friction by threatening to suspend the annual Philippine-US Bilateral Exercises (PHIBLEX) and '*Balikatan*' exercise scheduled for 2017, stating that the previous exercises in 2016 would be the last (Simon & Carl, 2017, p. 39). In March 2017, Duterte announced that US warships would no longer

be permitted to use the Philippines' ports as a staging point for Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP). He argued that FONOP could instigate an unwanted conflict with China, and the Philippines could be dragged into it due to its alliance with the US (De Castro, 2022a, p. 488).

In contrast, Duterte sought to reframe China as a reliable and responsible power. In late 2017, Duterte revived the China-Philippines Military Dialogue after it was suspended due to increasing tensions during Aquino's administration (Parameswaran, 2017). Moreover, in 2018, Duterte signed the Philippines' first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS), asserting that the country currently faced no serious external threats and recommended the army to focus its orientation towards internal defence, which contradicts reality on the ground (Office of the President of the Philippines, 2018, p. 9). The administration also refuses the offer to purchase US equipment for its modernisation program, opting to import guns and equipment from Russia and/or China instead (Mellejor, 2018).

However, the greatest challenge to the alliance emerged in 2020 when Duterte decided to officially order the termination of the VFA. This decision came after the US immigration cancelled the visa for a Filipino Senator and former Police Chief, Ronald Dela Rosa, due to his involvement in extrajudicial killings during Duterte's drug war. As a response, Duterte formally instructed Foreign Secretary Locsin Jr. to send a discontinuance notice of the VFA to the US embassy, thereby initiating a six-month waiting period before the eventual termination (Reuters, 2020). This move could be considered the lowest point in the history of the alliance, as the termination would render the EDCA and MDT ineffective, practically ceasing the alliance (De Castro, 2022a, p. 494). Nevertheless, the complete termination never happened as Duterte's perception of the alliance took a different turn.

As explained before, the persistence of China's hostility (see Table III) and its implications on Duterte's legitimacy, inevitably pushed him to revise his foreign policy. This also affects how the administration saw the US-Philippine alliance. After a series of repeated extensions to the cancellation waiting period, the Duterte administration decided to withdraw the VFA termination notice in 2021, citing "complex geopolitical developments" as the main reason (Robles, 2021). He then re-established previously suspended defence-related activities with Washington. One example is the attempt to resume the suspended refurbishment and modernisation of several bases overlooking the East and South China Sea under the EDCA (Hammond, 2021). The PHIBLEX and *Balikatan* also increased in intensity and scope, involving other powers such as Japan and Australia, and began incorporating more complex training such as amphibious operation and island-retake simulation (Parameswaran, 2019).

Subsequently, Duterte refocused the Philippines' armed forces doctrine to territorial defence and procured new military equipment. In 2021, the Philippines purchased several T-129 ATAK helicopters from Turkey and two anti-submarine frigates from South Korea. His administration also proposed a plan to acquire 12 US-made F-16 'Fighting Falcon' fighter jets worth US\$2.43 billion, alongside various tactical munitions such as Sidewinder anti-air and Harpoon anti-ship missiles worth US\$42 million (Agence France-Presse, 2021; Aljazeera, 2021; Aspinwall, 2021). This plan significantly departs from his prior preference for non-US equipment during the administration's early years. Diplomatically, he endorsed the trilateral partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS), making the Philippines the first Southeast Asian nation to do so (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023, p. 445). This apparent shift highlights how Duterte started to view China as an uncertain partner, propelling him to adopt a security-oriented policy.

While the domestic public mainly focused on pressuring the administration's stance regarding the UNCLOS ruling, defence establishments such as the Department of National Defense (DND) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) were instrumental in revitalising Manila's security ties with Washington. Both institutions persistently resist Duterte's agenda, resulting in his reluctance to fully dissolve the alliance during his pivot toward China period (Yusuke, 2022, p. 11). For example, when Duterte decided to suspend PHIBLEX and *Balikatan* in 2016, Defence Secretary Lorenzana and the AFP actively lobbied against such decisions, giving a list of values of these exercises for the army's combat readiness (DFA, personal communication, June 9, 2025). During the 2017 Marawi Crisis, despite Duterte's refusal to accept US assistance, the DND defied it and authorised Washington to provide non-combat support, such as the supply of munitions, actionable intelligence, and specialised urban warfare training to the AFP (Winger, 2021, p. 12).

When Duterte threatened to suspend joint US-Philippine maritime patrol, the head of AFP's public relations, Colonel Arevalo, firmly stated that "Our maritime and aerial patrols continue. Let me assure our people that your AFP continues and will continue to perform its mandate", affirming the military's commitment to uphold its responsibility as the guardian of national sovereignty, regardless of the circumstances (Cordero, 2018). These facts show that rather than bandwagoning toward China by severing its ties with the US, Duterte chooses to maintain the alliance and its activities not only as a 'just-in-case' instrument, but also to preserve military support.

The DND and AFP also emerged as vital actors in influencing Duterte's subsequent realignment toward the US. The pursuit of their own institutional agendas was prompted by the heightened anxiety over China's constant aggressiveness in the South China Sea (see

Table III) and Duterte's perceived indifference. Without official directions or orders, the DND took the initiative to seek clarification from the US regarding long-standing concerns over their collective defence arrangement, demonstrating a clear crack within Duterte's internal administration (De Castro, 2022b, p. 707). Seeing the opportunity to reapproach the Philippines, Washington reaffirmed their commitment by adding an addendum to the MDT that reads "an armed attack on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea would invoke US mutual defence commitments under Article IV of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty" (Lema & Morales, 2019). The addendum not only addressed Manila's concerns over US commitment in the contested region, but also solidified the strategic value of the alliance, thereby pushing Duterte to revise his foreign policy or risk alienating the DND.

The AFP also demonstrates similar attempts. Through constant reporting of China's harassment and incidents in the South China Sea area, the AFP consistently portrayed Beijing as a clear threat to the Philippines' sovereignty, countering Duterte's effort to reframe them as a benign power. Not only that, the AFP published its own defence doctrine in 2019 titled the National Defense Strategy (NDS), which explicitly mentions China's island-militarisation campaign and deliberate territorial violation as "a grave threat to the national security", countering Duterte's NSS report (Galang, 2019, pp. 2–3). AFP's consistent hard stance against China further delegitimises Duterte's credibility in the eyes of his defence establishments, to the point where rumours circulated of a military coup plot to overthrow him. (Esguerra, 2018). Although quickly denied, this episode highlights AFP's significant influence in Duterte's consideration, enabling the institution to shape and alter the course of the Philippines' foreign policy. Fearing disunity and potential rebellion from the AFP,

Duterte adaptively changed his foreign policy trajectory, starting to subtly challenge China's maritime aggressiveness through external and internal externally soft-balancing measures.

Conclusion

Duterte's rise to leadership has significant implications for the Philippines' foreign policy trajectory. Using his own interpretation of an 'Independent Foreign Policy', Duterte has strategically drawn the Philippines closer to China for the sake of economic concessions. Consequently, this shift also deteriorated the long-standing US-Philippine alliance, creating friction in their relations. This situation shows that the administration's Independent Foreign Policy could be categorised as a hedging-based foreign policy aimed at maximising potential gains and minimising risk under uncertainty caused by great power rivalry. Moreover, Duterte's administration demonstrated a dynamic approach, as evidenced by the sudden recalibration of alignment toward the US while simultaneously distancing Manila from Beijing during the later stage of his presidency. This unique behaviour highlights Duterte's ability to reshape his alignment dynamically in accordance with his domestic concerns, demonstrating his attempt to boost/maintain internal legitimacy while preserving strategic autonomy amid the US-China rivalry.

Cheng-Chwee's (2008, 2024) hedging conceptualisation allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dilemma faced by secondary countries that try to maximise profits and mitigate losses simultaneously. Although it lacks clear definitions regarding the action's indicators, the concept has succeeded in conceptualising state behaviour more realistically and guides in studying the pattern of strategic choices of secondary countries in responding to geopolitical uncertainty in the region. His explanation regarding the state's hedging pattern also demonstrates the importance of the interplay between structural

and domestic considerations in influencing the state's alignment and policy choices over time. Therefore, further research is expected to delve deeper by studying the strategies of secondary countries in other regions in dealing with uncertainty, or focusing on the variety of structural and domestic factors that influence their hedging strategy. The aim is to enrich this concept by explaining the strategy of limited alignment carried out by secondary countries in their efforts to navigate the uncertainty of regional politics.

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