

## **From Arbitration to Diplomacy: Duterte's Performative Populist Approach to the South China Sea Issue**

**Note d'introduction à la table ronde du 15 mars 2018**

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From the start of his administration, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared bold changes in the country's formerly conservative and predictable foreign policy. The contempt for the West, admiration toward unlikely allies such as Russia and China, and indifference toward international law and norms were all essential departures from the nation's previous positions. This paper uses the concept of performative populism to analyze Duterte's foreign policy, particularly toward the South China Sea dispute. It argues that as a specific political style of conducting foreign policy, populism can reorient established positions and biases but in turn generates uncertainty and erosion of credibility in the face of weak institutions and domestic distractions.

It also traces the changes that Duterte's government instituted on the issue by embarking on more diplomatic and multi-faceted approach that includes trade, defense cooperation, joint development, infrastructure, and others. In the end, the sustainability of populist performances on foreign policy depends on reconciling the tensions and overlaps between the populist's multiple audiences and constituencies. By way of conclusion, this paper examines the prospects of Duterte's foreign policy given existing strategic realities, bureaucratic politics, and domestic political stability.



## Introduction

One can include Rodrigo Duterte among a new cohort of populist leaders. But while most of his counterparts focused on domestic policy, the Philippine president surprisingly started his term by making bold changes in the country's formerly conservative and predictable foreign policy. Displaying a contempt for the West, an admiration toward Russia and China, and an indifference toward international law and norms were all seen as radical departures from the nation's previous positions and manifestations of populism as applied internationally. Campaigning on a platform of change, Duterte's new architecture of Philippine foreign policy aims to establish independence from any single major power as well as an openness to nurture deeper relations with new partner countries in its neighborhood. In his inaugural speech, the chief architect of foreign policy promised to reorient the country's foreign relations toward the national interest in order to benefit ordinary Filipinos.

While journalists and researchers have already spilled ink on the role of personality, charisma, political savvy, and skill of populists, academic and policy-based scholarship has so far paid less attention to the role of agency and individuality in explaining populism's allure to the electorate (Samet 2017; Mouffe 2016). This perspective requires seeing populism less as an ideology but more as a political style used by politicians to approach voters through a combination of fiery rhetoric, unorthodox manners, and controversial declarations (Moffitt 2016). This paper argues that the performative aspects of populism translate into electoral voter mobilization and sustained political support. When combined with some semblance of credible commitment through a substantive policy agenda that seeks to overturn the status quo, populists can affect different policy areas, even the most resistant to change such as foreign policy.

Duterte's populist pivots in foreign policy have far-reaching repercussions for the Philippines as well as the Asia-Pacific region. Questions arose from the ability of the state to credibly maintain its international commitments and its previous strong posturing against revisionist states and challenges to the rule-based order in the Asia-Pacific. It also added confusion when the firebrand president threatened to abrogate its defense agreements with longtime ally the United States and a subsequent friendlier approach toward China amidst the favorable ruling on the South China Sea rendered by the Permanent Court on Arbitration (PCA). Finally, the use of derogatory language to describe world leaders and international institutions was unprecedented and also in violation of diplomatic protocol. While this is uncharted terrain for Philippine diplomacy, Duterte is not the first populist leader in the world to implement a foreign policy embellished with populist performances.

How does performative populism affect the ability of leaders to conduct foreign policy? This paper argues

that the elements of performative populism as a political style – appeal to the people, bad manners, and the presence of crisis, breakdown, and threat – have substantive impact on foreign policy (Moffitt 2016). First, it can reorient foreign relations in ways that disrupt long-standing alliances with old partners but also explore new external relations. Second, it violates diplomatic norms of protocol and engagement but can popularize foreign policy issues to ordinary members of society. Finally, it can challenge extant institutional arrangements like international law, norms, and orders. This paper construes populism as a particular political style that combines rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions in performing policy which could be modified depending on whether such performances increase audience costs (Fearon 1994) and/or improve constituency support.

This paper discusses the performative aspects of Duterte's rise as a populist leader in the Philippines. It then discusses his populist foreign policy through the case of the South China Sea dispute. This paper offers tentative conclusions on the likely direction of Philippine foreign policy under Duterte. The realization of the goal of a more independent Philippine foreign policy needs to be reconciled with existing strategic realities, bureaucratic politics, and domestic political stability. Moreover, the sustainability of populist performances on foreign policy depends on reconciling the tensions and overlaps between the audiences and constituencies of the president's performances. Finally, any successful defense and promotion of the national interest will also be contingent on the ability of the foreign policy bureaucracy to implement the policy content of his performances.



## Populism as a Performative Political Style: Linkages with Foreign Policy<sup>1</sup>

Moffitt and Tormey (2014: 394) have put forward a conception of populism as a political style, that is, 'a repertoire of performative features which cuts across different political situations that are used to create political relations'. The underlying belief here is the centrality of performance in politics. For the proponents of performative populism, politics is performance, and performance is politics. This view is particularly relevant within an increasingly mediatized and stylized milieu of modern politics, where aesthetics and performative components of politics are being highlighted more. Moffitt and Tormey (2014: 290-4) identify three core elements of a populist performance, namely: (1) appeal to 'the people'; (2) perception of crisis, breakdown and threat; and (3) coarsening of political language or 'bad manners'. Instead of purely relying on the content provided by a populist ideology, or the organizational structures generated by a populist logic, special attention is placed on the role of performative repertoires vis-à-vis the interactions between populist leaders and their supporters (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016).

1 - This section heavily draws from Magcamit & Arugay (2017).

There are few debates on the impact of populism on foreign policy. International relations theory put a lot of stress on the ability of national interests and international systemic constraints to discipline foreign policy making with little regard for the role of individuals (Waltz 2001). However, the literature on foreign policy analysis takes exception and has recognized the vital role of domestic sources of foreign policy (Rosenau 1971). This is particularly relevant in the case of the Philippines where statecraft and foreign policy are largely determined in the personalized authority of the president as head of state. Its weak bureaucracy coupled with a dysfunctional and volatile party system makes foreign policies discontinuous and subject to the whims of a chief executive whose tenure is only for six years (Cibulka 1999).

Studies that link populism with foreign policy tend to be single case studies that examine its impact on foreign policy as a fringe aspect of a leader's populist stance on politics (Clem & Maingot 2011; Pavin 2010). Since most populists tend to concentrate on domestic policy, foreign relations is often not discussed as a channel through which populism is analytically deciphered. Compounding this is the tradition that disallows foreign policy to be subject to much public scrutiny, its difficult and multifaceted nature, and the level of technical expertise that is often required from its formulators and implementers. Unlike other kinds of policy, those that pertain to foreign relations and issues of war and peace, are often confined in a small policy circle of trusted advisers with its broad contours set by the chief executive and carried out by government officials charged with diplomatic functions (Carlsnaes 1992).

With the election of Donald Trump as US President, IR scholars have predicted that he will pursue foreign policies that are "off the equilibrium path" given the unorthodox manner in which these bellicose populists have swept to power (Drezner 2017: 24). The basic contours of this kind of foreign policy often run against the status quo. For example, the disdain with multilateral institutions is something populists share since they seek to challenge established institutional mechanisms often impose limits the powers of the states they govern. This was clearly seen in Chávez leadership in forming alternative regionalism projects in the Americas that ran against the Organization of American States (Chodor & McCarthy-Jones 2011) influenced by a re-imagination of the democracy in the hemisphere from liberal-representative to more direct and participatory versions.

Populist foreign policy is also fraught with risk. Given their often surprising and unexpected political victory in the electoral arena, populists often carry this risky strategy in the international domain. Risk tolerance is a mark of populist regimes, particularly relevant for personalist leaders. Populism emboldens leaders to carry out their political ambitions and use the world stage to further increase their leverage against their domestic enemies. Given their outside status, international recognition is something that populists crave so much and they carry out foreign policy less as the voice of the government that they lead but more as an idiosyncratic expression of their personality and charisma (Drezner 2017). In these

cases, populist foreign policy often are not consistently carried out by the bureaucracy as it becomes prone to misinterpretation, errors, and conflicts emanating from rival institutions within the state (Saunders 2017).

With the populist's mastery of rhetoric, complex problems and issues arising from international relations get oversimplified. Distorted debates, oversimplified solutions, and intentions branded as authentic and pure are all trademarks of a populist foreign policy that intends to solve the country's domestic problems arising out of a crises of legitimacy and democracy (Mudde 2007). Scholars have labeled this as "megaphone diplomacy" since it is loud, often not grounded on evidence and research but able to significantly shape public opinion. In this regard, foreign policy is seen as a populist tool to realize the domestic agenda of the leader as the total embodiment of the people's will. The burden of foreign relations is bearable for the populist until the strategic realities impose themselves to a point where pronouncements can no longer be taken at face value. The thin scholarly literature on populist foreign policy recommended that the first step to analyzing it is to distinguish what populists say and what they actually do. The European cases concluded that populists have little transformative ability in sustaining foreign policy changes as they tend to function more as a blocking force than a source of viable alternatives (Balfour 2016: 49).

There is prevailing skepticism on the ability of populism to sustainably determine foreign policies in a coherent and consistent manner. Empirical cases from different parts of the world show that the space for populists to frame diplomatic and international issues depend on their proximity to the public sentiment and popular mood which they are their critical points of vulnerability. The ability of populists to raise foreign issues to the attention of an often domestically distracted public is inevitably limited since the intricacies and complexities of this policy area are often beyond the people's knowledge and imagination (Balfour 2016).



### **Performative Populism and Duterte's Foreign Policy**

To say that Duterte is appealing will be a gross miscalculation of the kind of hallucinogenic power that his appeal does to 'the people' who come from various social and economic cleavages and represent diverging aspirations and interests. While a consensus over what and/or who should constitute 'the people' remains elusive among populism scholars and experts, nonetheless, in Duterte's populism, 'the people' are comprised of ordinary Filipinos suffering from poverty, inequality, and injustice. A huge bulk of them are the urban precariat in Imperial Manila as well as the rural poor in the peripheral regions of archipelagic Philippines. In particular, Duterte's constituency lies in the conflict-

ridden, underdeveloped, and politically marginalized people of Mindanao. However, his base has since expanded as the incorporation of other groups such as the more affluent classes that wanted law and order as well as overseas Filipinos longing for their homeland to achieve a modicum of progress and stability. The larger-than-life chief executive has not descended from his campaign soapbox as he continued to lure Filipinos to rally behind him. Duterte has a hypnotic quality to it that induces 'the people' to willingly set aside their own principles and positions on various issues and replace them with the president's preferred views and values, regardless of their contrasting backgrounds and circumstances.

In the beginning of his presidency, Duterte caught global headlines mainly due to his anti-US rhetoric that went side-by-side with a generous appreciation of China and other powers such as Japan and Russia. Despite being a phenomenon in the country, he was still a political nobody abroad until he expressed a desire to embrace China while rejecting the country's long-time ally. The often-neglected country was instantly pushed into the limelight given its new leader's musings usually in the form of highly emotional rants. Pundits and policymakers, used to the idea that any Filipino president sets the contours of its foreign policy, found themselves in a tailspin by downplaying Duterte's statements, carefully clarifying their meaning, or directly issuing contradictory opinions.

Many did not expect that the new president will cause a political shockwave in the country's once predictable foreign policy, especially since Duterte refused to see himself as a statesman. During the 2016 electoral campaign, the former Davao City mayor did not issue any major foreign policy positions. Though Duterte has expressed acerbic remarks against the US, the Catholic Pope, and the West, many thought that this was all within the ambit of political campaigning. A contributing factor are serendipitous events like the PCA ruling that gave legal victory to the Philippine in the case it filed against China over territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. In addition, the Philippines is the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. These provided opportunities for Duterte to project his extreme and unorthodox viewpoints on international relations. However, the firebrand leader also created his own opportunities to articulate Philippine foreign policy in international fora and state visits. This paper examines his various rhetorical remarks and performances on his attempt to steer a new path through two important aspects of the country's current foreign relations: the South China Sea dispute and the Philippines relationship with the US.

## **Crisis, Breakdown, and Threat: Duterte's Approach to the South China Sea Dispute**

The PCA handed its unanimous award in the arbitration case filed by the Philippines against China concerning the SCS on July 12, 2016. Though the Tribunal's decision did not include aspects related to sovereignty and boundary delimitation between the parties, it rendered final and binding judgments in favor of the Philippines on a host of critical issues. It ruled that there is "no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line'". Second, it also stated that certain sea areas in the SCS fall within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines and none of the features in the Spratly Islands could generate its own EEZ. Third, it observed that China has caused serious damage to the marine environment through its "large-scale land reclamation and construction of artificial islands" and "violated its obligation to preserve and protect fragile ecosystems" (PCA 2016).

The arbitral case was the previous administrations major foreign policy thrust with significant US prodding but without regional consultation with other SCS claimants and ASEAN members. Instead of immediately doing the groundwork for its enforcement, the Duterte administration chose to put the ruling aside. The president described the ruling as one that "fell on his lap" but he swore that he will deal with the ruling in due time (Viray 2016). For the time being, his government has expressed a desire to smoothen bilateral relations with China.

Duterte was widely criticized by some for his inaction toward the favourable arbitral ruling the country received against China. The populist president sought to delay action on the award and instead seek common ground with its big neighbour. This led to pledges of economic and security cooperation, taking advantage of China's economic largesse and military might, benefits already partaken by other states that have existing territorial disputes with China. Opinions are divided whether this was a sound move but many believe that it temporarily de-escalated tensions in the South China Sea. Both countries are now ready to embark on a "new beginning" after years of hostile relations including when the Philippines' previous president likened China to Hitler.

Though Duterte officially visited Indonesia, Brunei, and Vietnam, it was his visit to China that caught global attention. Chinese President Xi Jinping described Duterte's visit as springtime after years of mutual discontent. Both leaders pledged to continue stalled cooperative ventures and embark on new ones ranging from intelligence sharing to combat illegal drugs to public infrastructure, agriculture, and people-to-people exchange (Blanchard 2016). The Philippine president left China with reportedly US\$24 billion worth of deals, loans and aid (Calonzo & Yap 2016).

As expected, Duterte's fiery rhetoric trumped the economic outcome of the trip. He praised China's generosity, identified with its ideological slant and promised to pursue a joint alliance with other countries. In that same vein, however, he announced his economic and military "separation" from the US. Some fear that the president will abandon Scarborough Shoal in exchange for economic deals or reinstated fishing rights for Filipinos (Rauhala 2016). After the trip, it was reported that China's coast guard granted Filipino fishermen access to the disputed shoal. During the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Lima, Peru, the Philippines government announced that the internal lagoon within the shoal is a no-fishing zone in order to preserve marine life in the area. China did not seriously reject the idea of a marine sanctuary and has even hinted the possibility of a fishing deal with the Philippines (Ives 2016).

Yet, the underlying logic behind Duterte's simple and direct answers to some of the most divisive national issues that he has faced thus far, is neither 'simple' nor 'direct'. His willingness to disregard the principle of human rights is based on what critics view as biased and selective application of the concept by powerful countries in states where they wish to intervene to pursue their own interests. His aversion toward multilateral treaties intended to combat the effects of climate change is grounded on what critics view as an attempt by the core countries to prevent the global south from developing by kicking away the very same ladder that they used to industrialize their economies. His desire to revive the Philippines' tumultuous relations with China is influenced by Thucydides' realist outlook of international relations in which the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. His confusing relations with the Marcoses could be an indication of his subscription to a postmodernist view that there are as many stories as storytellers. But given Duterte's gripping portrayal of a crisis, coupled with the sheer magnitude of his popularity, the president may not even have to dig deep into his intellectual faculties to secure the approval and support of 'the people'.

As one of the oldest US allies in the region, China was open to deepening relations with the Philippines under Duterte. This paper argues that Duterte's anti-US rhetoric carried out in his performances seen in media and transmitted to the Filipino public provided some credibility to his more cordial approach to China. In this case, the audience of Duterte's performance was China and not the US. He was signaling to China that even the Philippines under his leadership can have the ability to distance itself from its colonial power.



## **Conclusion: The Foreign Policy Payoffs and Tradeoffs of Performative Populism**

The term 'populist' has commonly been used both by academic scholars and media practitioners to refer to politicians whom they find rather unpleasant and disagreeable. But as revealed by Duterte's repertoire of populist performances and tropes, populism can also be employed as an effective political style. If understood properly and used adeptly, the performative elements of the concept can yield significant political capital for anyone who dares to harness their powers. Duterte's gamble with populism has rewarded him with legions of devoted fans and supporters who have bestowed the qualities of invincibility and infallibility upon him. His potent combination of enthralling charisma, gripping portrayal of crisis, and alluring display of political incorrectness, have catapulted him into a demigod status, commanding absolute trust and demanding unquestionable faith from 'the people'.

Duterte's rise from political obscurity to a force to be reckoned with in Filipino politics is a familiar development in many democracies facing a populist challenge. Widespread discontent caused by predatory elites too lazy to build responsive institutions coupled with the inability of previous governments to address inequality and exclusion provided fertile ground for the rise of populists like Duterte. But these popular sentiments and state failures need to be harnessed, politicized, and projected by performative populists into platforms of change and renewal. The country's structural conditions made possible the entry of Duterte to the national political arena but it was his performance style and rhetoric that clinched him the presidency. Whether or not his brand of populism can be translated to concrete and positive changes for Philippine democracy will depend on Duterte's ability to combine his performativity to sustainable and institutionalized policies that would benefit Philippine society.

The Philippine president's singlehanded approach to re-crafting foreign policy is risky and could take a toll on the ability of the Philippines to make credible commitments abroad. Foreign policy requires a level of consistency that reduces significant risks and a shared strategic playbook influenced by expertise and long-term planning. Duterte's policy approach implies a careful distinction between impulsive pronouncements and actual implementation with a keen eye on the latter. However, his future antics on foreign policy might not be given the same amount of patience by elites and masses alike especially if it threatens the country's national interest. Duterte must also be wary of members of his government who might not share his strategic playbook and use his hedging strategy as a way to promote their own personal political ambitions. Politics in the Philippines rarely stop at the water's edge (Arugay 2016b).

As for now, the jury is still out there whether a populist-guided foreign policy can accomplish the goals set by the Duterte administration to generate beneficial outcomes for ordinary Filipinos. One necessary condition for this is that the president as chief architect of foreign policy sets the basic design that is faithfully followed by engineers and other workers belonging to the bureaucracy as well as appreciated by those who have thrown their political support. As for the bigger picture, Duterte has an era-defining choice to make: to exploit the populist will of 'the people' in order to clear the road toward authoritarianism. Or he can to harness this populist will in order to emancipate 'the people' from all the ills and shackles of its low-intensity democracy.



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