

Choosing Sides? Illiberalism and Hedging in the Philippines and Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the United States' two oldest allies in Southeast Asia – the Philippines and Thailand – taking China's side against the US after both countries abandoned liberal democracy.¹ After the May 2014 military coup in Thailand and the election of strongman President Rodrigo R. Duterte in the Philippines in May 2016, the governments in Thailand and the Philippines began distancing themselves from the long-standing patron-client relationship with Washington, which dates back to the beginning of the Cold War in Thailand and to the US colonial period in the Philippines. The US government's criticism about the (poor) state of democracy and growing human rights violations in both countries angered rulers in Manila and Bangkok, leading them to distance themselves strategically from Washington and turn to China to make up for lost patronage. These changes have often been viewed in zero-sum terms as a failure of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," on the one hand, and a strategic gain for China, on the other. This is often portrayed as "choosing sides" – changing from a pro-US to a pro-China stance. In this paper, however, we will argue that both the Philippines and Thailand have engaged in a foreign policy strategy that can be characterised as omnidirectional hedging² – the diversification of states' economic, diplomatic, and security relations with multiple regional stakeholders with the aim of achieving maximum strategic flexibility. We suggest that the current illiberal rulers of the Philippines and Thailand have diversified their countries' strategic relations with other regional

* This paper was submitted on 10 October 2017.

¹ For example, Boot, M., "Duterte's Flip-Flop into Bed with China is a Disaster for the United States," *Foreign Policy*, 20 October 2016, and Parameswaran, P., "Thailand Turns to China: With a post-coup cooling of relations with the West, Bangkok is looking to its largest trading partner," *The Diplomat*, 20 December 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/thailand-turns-to-china/>.

² See, Suorsa, O., "Hedging Against Over-Dependence on US Security: Thailand and Philippines," *RSIS Commentary*, No. 317 - 29 December 2016. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/CO16317.pdf>.

and extra-regional powers to help achieve balance in the international system and avoid the “triple dilemma” of over-dependence, abandonment, and entrapment.

In our examination of the Philippine and Thai cases we will show how regime change – from relatively liberal electoral democracy to illiberal or fully authoritarian rule³ – led to short-term and seemingly dramatic changes in foreign policy. Given that these regimes’ primary concern was shoring up their domestic political legitimacy, illiberal regimes opted for a transactional, return-maximising policy towards China as they faced growing criticism from the West, and the US in particular, due to human rights concerns. Another important and related factor is the nationalist points that could be scored by distancing oneself from perceived US bullying. Duterte’s *rapprochement* with China has been read as a defensive nationalist response to the Obama administration’s criticism of the new Philippine president’s violent drug crackdown and withholding of some foreign assistance, although his anti-US nationalism had deeper roots in the legacies of US colonialism.⁴ Thailand’s turn to China in pursuit of economic gain after the coup of 2014 came after the US also criticised the mainland Southeast Asia country’s return to military rule.⁵ This has been motivated primarily by the domestic search for legitimation. This suggests choosing China’s side is motivated by a regime’s search for domestic legitimacy as they face isolation and even sanctions from the West.

These foreign policy changes, however, need to be put in a broader systemic context. The apparent embrace of China by the illiberal Duterte regime in the Philippines and Thailand’s military rulers was only possible given the relatively stable and benign security environment that followed the end of the Cold War in Asia, which offered strong incentives and opportunities for short-term economic gains with few imminent external military threats. Yet, upon closer examination, these two Southeast Asia countries’ move toward China has only been partial and their distancing from the US limited. Taking this longer-term perspective, it can be seen that over time these two Southeast Asian states, like others in the region, have striven to avoid being entrapped in the Sino-US rivalry. Rather, the Philippines, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian core states have attempted to enmesh relevant regional powers (particularly Japan but also Russia and India) in ASEAN-centric multilateral frameworks as well as in a dense network of bilateral security arrangements.

³ Thompson, M. R., “Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 3 (2016), 39-68, and Baker, C., “The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46, 3 (2016), 388-404.

⁴ Teehankee, J. C., “Duterte’s Resurgent Nationalism in the Philippines: A Discursive Institutional Analysis,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, 3 (2016), 69-89.

⁵ Kaylan, M., “Add Thailand To The Wave Of Nationalist Regimes Sweeping The World,” *Forbes*, 16 December 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/melikkaylan/2016/12/16/add-thailand-to-the-wave-of-nationalist-regimes-sweeping-the-world/#ffedd0e466d6>.

The strategy of omnidirectional hedging thus conforms to the regional mantra of refusing to choose sides between contesting powers. Viewed in this light, the “sudden” and “dramatic” changes that have occurred as the Philippines has become illiberal and Thailand subject to military rule have involved a recalibration of this “balancing act” through a diversification of their strategic relations, *refusing* to choose sides rather than choosing one great power over the other in the ensuing Sino-US confrontation.

We address the cases of the Philippines and Thailand in detail in order to examine both domestic illiberal realignment and the mid-term systemic omnidirectional perspectives. We argue that in both of these Southeast Asian countries, short-term changes to foreign policy after the emergence of illiberal/fully authoritarian rule has involved recalibrations within a familiar spectrum of foreign policy choices rather than radical changes in foreign policy behaviour, even if exaggerated political rhetoric (most evident in Duterte’s leadership) suggests otherwise. Duterte’s opening towards China was taken with the prospect of large investments in infrastructure and other quick economic gains in mind at a time when the Obama administration was criticising the new Philippine president’s violent drug crackdown and withholding some development assistance. In undertaking this illiberal realignment, Duterte invoked a nationalist discourse based both on long-standing resentments against the US as well as its utility as a defence against US/Western criticisms of his government’s human rights violations. Under Duterte’s predecessor, Benigno “Noynoy” S. Aquino III, Philippine foreign policy had become more assertive as the Philippines aggressively (and successfully) pursued its legal claims in the South China Sea (dubbed the “West Philippine Sea” by the administration), culminating in a successful court case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague. Seen from the perspective of omnidirectional hedging, Duterte, by downplaying the arbitration court’s decision and adopting a more friendly tone toward China, managed to lower tensions between Manila and Beijing, which gave him more flexibility to denounce US/Western criticisms. Improved relations with China led to a rapid rise in pledged Chinese investments to levels not seen since the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Aquino’s predecessor, who was known for her friendly ties and large deals with China while downplaying disputes in the South China Sea. Subsequent events, particularly after the election of US president Trump, who has dropped human rights criticisms and offered Duterte closer ties,⁶ suggest that there are limits even to this only partial “realignment” as Duterte has also sought closer ties with other regional partners (particularly other ASEAN states as well as Japan and Russia) and continued to rely on the Philippines’ close ties to the US military (evident during

⁶ Thompson, M. R., “Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte: a not-so-surprising political friendship,” *The Conversation*, 5 May 2017. <http://theconversation.com/donald-trump-and-rodrigo-duterte-a-not-so-surprising-political-friendship-77008>.

the government's siege of Marawi city after it was captured by Islamist militants). It also indicates that Duterte's use of an anti-US nationalist discourse is constrained by strategic considerations, long-standing ties to the US, and suspicions of China.

Similarly, Thailand turned to China in pursuit of economic gain following the coup of 2014 after the US also criticised Bangkok over its return to military rule. This also represented a deviation from Thailand's foreign policy during the Yingluck Shinawatra administration, which enjoyed amicable relations with both Washington and Beijing. While the Thai military junta turned to China to help shore up lagging economic growth, and thus its legitimacy, through massive infrastructure deals and increased tourism in particular, it only distanced itself from the US/the West partially in order to fend off criticism that Bangkok perceives to be violation of its internal affairs. Although the Thai junta also invoked nationalism, it was directed less against the West than against domestic enemies at a time of royal succession with the death of King Bhumibol in October 2016. Yet, as in the Philippines, Thailand's "realignment" proved limited with the country still maintaining close security links with the US, particularly through the Cobra Gold joint exercise, the most important military arrangement between the countries, and official level contacts, which are also based on strategic considerations and historical ties. Tellingly, while Thailand, like the Philippines, has kept the US at arm's length while its dependence on China is growing it has, again similar to the Philippine case, attempted to hedge omnidirectionally. It has diversified its strategic relations, not only with Japan but also with Russia and India, refusing to choose sides in order to avoid being entrapped in the Sino-US confrontation.

THAILAND: SEEKING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Thailand's foreign policy elite has a long tradition of hedging between great powers, attempting to enhance its own foreign policy autonomy. This tradition, which is sometimes called the "bamboo bending with the wind", can be traced back to the early 19th century with Siam (Thailand) managing its strategic space between the British and French colonial aspirations over mainland Southeast Asia by courting the US and Russia in order to balance against the influence of these European great powers. At the beginning of the Cold War in Asia, Thailand became a staunch supporter of the US-led front against communism in Asia and backed the American war in Indochina. As one of the US's oldest allies, Thailand's defence relationship with Washington dates back to the 1954 Manila Pact, the establishment of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk Communiqué.

The dramatic changes in Thailand's security environment during the latter half of the 1970s – the US's rapid withdrawal from Indochina and its forward bases in Thailand by 1976, and Vietnam's subsequent invasion of Cambodia in December

1978 – made it seem prudent to Bangkok to normalise its relations with China in 1975 in order to form an informal alliance to deter a mutual adversary, Vietnam, throughout the 1980s. Despite the US disengagement from the region, Washington perceived Thailand as the one “domino” it could not allow to fall and continued to provide the Thai armed forces with military aid and training as offshore balancing against the communist threat. The Paris peace treaty in 1991 finally brought the conflict in Cambodia and, subsequently, the Cold War in Southeast Asia to a close. The disappearance of the common threat, which had sustained Bangkok’s close bilateral security relationships with both Washington and Beijing, allowed Thailand to return to its traditional flexible foreign policy and to de-emphasise the security side of these relationships.

The pursuit of a flexible foreign policy – accommodating great powers’ interests – is, thus, by no means a new diplomatic strategy for Thailand. Following the end of the Cold War in Asia, Thailand’s foreign policy pragmatism sought, first, to enmesh rising China in the region through ASEAN institutions; second, to keep the US engaged in the region; third, to socialise the former adversary, Vietnam, as well as Cambodia and Laos, in the regional norms – transforming “battlefields into marketplaces”; and, fourth, to accommodate both the US and China in the newly established ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as constructive stakeholders in an attempt to shape the evolving regional order.

For Thailand, the rise of China has led to few threats but created many opportunities. The Sino-Thai relationship has generated mutual trust, building on Beijing’s significant military help in deterring Vietnam throughout the 1980s, its solidarity during the Asian financial crisis, and Beijing’s unwavering political support during the country’s continuing political crises. The popular perception in Thailand of China as a benign power, posing no near-term threat,⁷ has allowed Bangkok to seize structural opportunities offered by China’s economic expansion, courting significant investment and trade opportunities. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Beijing in 2003 while trying to negotiate another one with Washington. While carefully avoiding aggravating China, Thaksin reaped significant benefits from a bargain with the Bush administration by allowing American military access to U-Tapao naval air base in Thailand during the US-led “Global War on Terror” (GWT) in the early 2000s. Bangkok had initially been hesitant to join the GWT because it feared unnecessarily aggravating China and due to worries it might intensify the conflict against Muslim insurgency in Thailand’s deep south but in the end, however, the Thaksin government found it more prudent to ally with the US which had emphasised Southeast Asia as a “second front” against

⁷ Instead, Thai policymakers perceived China as a valuable status-quo actor in the evolving post-Cold War security dynamics. See, Chinwanno, C., “Thai-Chinese Relations: Security and Strategic Partnership”, *RSIS Working Paper Series*, No. 155 (March 2008), 19.

terror. For its support in the GWT, the US rewarded Thailand with FTA talks and MNNA (Major Non-NATO Ally) status, providing the Royal Thai Army access to enhanced American military support. This highlights how much Thailand valued its relationship with the US as it was willing to bear the domestic political costs as well as make concessions over sovereignty to gain substantial rewards. Simultaneously, Thaksin's courting of Chinese investments carried little cost but relatively substantial rewards.

China's less interventionist engagement policy with the Thai leadership contrasts with the more conditional approach to the bilateral alliance relationship practised by the US, in particular following the repeated challenges to democratisation during the 1990s and the subsequent polarisation of Thai domestic politics since 2005. Following military interventions in politics in Thailand (1992, 2006, and 2014), Washington reduced its military aid and assistance to the Royal Thai Army, downgraded its military engagements, including officers intake to the IMET (International Military Education and Training), and imposed cutbacks to the Cobra Gold exercise, the bedrock of the bilateral military relationship.

Bangkok's traditional elite has often perceived the US as meddling in its domestic affairs, especially Washington's attempt to reach out to the emerging political forces in the country in the early 2000s. This angered the elite, who began to see their country's relationship with Washington as "too close for comfort". Together with America's insistence on making its military assistance and training conditional on improvements in the democratic and human rights situation, this has led Thailand's military junta (officially known as the NCPO, National Council for Peace and Order) to seek regime legitimacy from elsewhere, particularly China and Russia. Regardless of domestic political fluctuations, however, Thailand has attempted to manage its relations with the US and China so as to achieve a degree of equilibrium between them to maximise its flexibility in foreign affairs.⁸ Facing no immediate military threats in its regional security environment, Bangkok has seen little reason to maintain intimate defence relations with Washington; hence, it is willing to strike a balance between reaping the benefits from China's growing regional influence and maintaining the mutually important treaty alliance relationship with the United States.

Against this background, Thailand's hedging between the two great powers is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as tensions in the overarching Sino-US relationship grow. To that end, Bangkok does not want to anger China by condemning Beijing's assertive actions in the South China Sea, to which it is not a party, and carefully balances between facilitating American military presence in the region while avoiding getting too close to Washington, which would complicate its

⁸ Murphy, A., M., "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise", *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2010), 23-24.

economic and political interests with China. Thailand's hedge between the two regional behemoths is thus an attempt to create a win-win situation whereby Bangkok does not need to choose sides and lose the external military, economic or diplomatic support of one or the other great power. As Pongphisoot Busbarat observes, "Thailand's general posture between America and China is simply to keep a balance between the two so long as neither becomes an immediate security threat".⁹

Thailand's embrace of China's generous so-called "no-strings-attached" investments has generated serious trade imbalances and growing dependency. As a remedy, Thailand has tried to diversify its economic, diplomatic, and security relations with other regional powers like Japan, with strong economic and security interests in Southeast Asia, and South Korea and India, as emerging regional investors, to balance against the growing asymmetric relation with China. This strategy, one of omnidirectional hedging, calls for states to maximise their relative strategic flexibility by engaging multiple partners in win-win relationships, diversifying the sources of security, economic, and diplomatic support so as to delay or deny the arduous choice between the two behemoths.¹⁰

Similarly, in military-to-military cooperation, Thailand has seen it crucial to diversify its sources of military hardware and training, especially against the background of the US reducing its military assistance to the country and downgrading joint exercises following repeated military takeovers. Combined with prolonged military rule and a sluggish economy, Bangkok's access to Western hardware has remained complicated. Therefore, the Thai military has increasingly sought to diversify its procurement sources, including to China, Russia, Eastern Europe, Sweden, South Korea, and Israel, to mention just a few, preferring less costly equipment that comes with technology transfer. Importantly, while Thailand's recent procurements have seen the introduction of a number of Chinese, Russian, and Eastern European weapons, particularly small arms, Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), tanks, and helicopters, major weapon systems, however, like fighter aircraft, command and control (C2) systems, air surveillance radars, and system upgrades for the navy and air force continue to be sourced from a handful of Western countries, particularly the United States, France, Britain, Sweden, and Israel. However, recently, the Trump administration has approved the sale of MH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and RGM-84L Harpoon anti-ship missiles to the Kingdom as a sign of re-engagement with the Thai junta.

Given the high level of mutual trust, Thailand has also sought to enhance its military engagement with the region's rising power, China. In fact, Thailand became the first Southeast Asian country to start joint military exercises with China

⁹ Busbarat, P., "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind": Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the US", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (August 2016), 238.

¹⁰ Suorsa, O., "Hedging Against Over-Dependence on US Security," op. cit.

in 2005. Despite deepening military cooperation, the Sino-Thai defence engagement remains rudimentary in comparison to the US-Thailand military collaboration both in depth and scope. For instance, Thailand and China engage in a dozen military exchanges annually, whereas the more institutionalised US-Thailand alliance relationship involves more than 40 annual exercises, with only a slight decline in that number following the May 2014 coup.¹¹ Furthermore, the US-Thai annual Cobra Gold military exercise, the largest multinational drill in Asia, brings together Thailand, the US, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia while the Sino-Thai joint drills have focused on non-traditional security challenges.

The US's alleged interventions in the highly polarised Thai domestic political environment, especially following the military takeovers against democratically elected governments in 2006 and, again, in 2014, have become a growing irritant in the bilateral relationship, which has suffered from serious "trust-deficit". Such incidents have reinforced nationalist feelings within Thailand's elite that the bilateral alliance was "too close for comfort". The rise of China provided Thailand with a hedge against over-dependence on Washington. In addition, more than a decade of political polarisation and repeated military coups has underlined the importance of alternative sources for diplomatic, political, and economic legitimisation, which Bangkok has found in closer ties to Beijing. Against the background of Sino-US regional competition, China has made significant gains in its influence in Thailand. However, despite the challenges in the bilateral alliance relationship with Washington, Bangkok recognises the importance of maintaining a certain level in the relations with Washington as the alternative of getting "too close" to Beijing is also not in Bangkok's strategic interest. While still in the midst of a double transition – with Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn ascending to the throne following the death of King Phumibol Adulyadej in October 2016 and the military junta preparing for the country's return to a democracy through elections – Bangkok's sub-regional leadership aspirations in Southeast Asia have been constrained. By distancing itself somewhat from the US and embracing the immense economic opportunities and political support provided by Beijing, Thailand has also sought to hedge against having to choose sides between the two by engaging, especially, Japan for economic balance while seeking every chance to normalise its relations with Washington. However, the longer Thailand's prolonged double transition continues to complicate Bangkok's relations with the US, the more Thailand will feel the need to look for alternative sources to diversify its international relations to maintain its strategic autonomy.

¹¹ "US Relations with Thailand", *Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State*, 24 January 2017. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>.

THE PHILIPPINES: TOWARDS ENDING DEPENDENCY

Philippine president Rodrigo R. Duterte's harsh comments about US leaders (including former president Barack Obama and former ambassador to the Philippines Philip Goldberg) while making conciliatory gestures towards China has led some commentators to suggest the Philippines is moving away from close ties with the US toward warmer relations with China. But this has to be seen against the backdrop of the complicated nature of US-Philippine ties as well as the longer-term pattern of Philippine hedging between the US, China, and other powers in the region.

The Philippines' relationship with the US is often described as unusually close, with a recent Pew global attitudes opinion survey showing Filipinos have the most positive view of the US, higher than any other country, including the US itself.¹² After the Philippines became a US colony in 1898, when Spain ceded the islands to the Americans for \$20 million and following a bloody war of conquest, the US undertook what then US President McKinley dubbed "benevolent assimilation" and began setting up democratic self-governance, which became known as "colonial democracy." Thus it is not surprising that Filipino attitudes toward the US have always been ambiguous. While being seen as having given the country democratic governance as well as advanced education and public health care systems, the US war to colonise the Philippines was brutal. In what is often described as the "first Vietnam war", the US sent 126,000 US soldiers to the archipelago to fight a war that soon became a prolonged anti-insurgency campaign, with numerous atrocities, in which 4,234 of them died, as did up to 22,000 soldiers of the fledgling Philippine Republic, as well as up to 500,000 Filipino civilians, mostly as an indirect result of famine and an uncontrolled cholera epidemic during the hostilities.¹³ Despite the close ties between the Philippines and the US after independence in 1946 and during the Cold War, in which the Philippines was seen as one of the, if not *the*, closest US ally in Southeast Asia, relations were overshadowed by US pressure on the Philippines to sign the Bell Trade Act. This legislation gave US businesses one-sided "parity" rights to do business and own land or natural resources in the Philippines as well as control over the country's monetary and exchange policies, representing an "obnoxious infringement on Philippine sovereignty."¹⁴ In reaction to such US impositions,

¹² Rappler, "Filipinos like the US even more than Americans do – Pew Research," *Rappler*, 22 April 2014. <http://www.rappler.com/nation/56085-philippines-usa-pew-research>.

¹³ Abinales, P. N. and Amoroso, D., *State and Society in the Philippines* (Manila: Anvil, 2005) p. 117, and Shaw, A. V. and Francia, L., eds., *Vestiges of War: the Philippine American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 3-21 and 134-162.

¹⁴ Golay, F., *Underdevelopment and Economic Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969, p. 49), quoted in Abinales and Amoroso, op cit., p. 171.

the 1950s also saw the Philippines adopt strong economic nationalist policies with import and exchange controls.¹⁵

As a student at Lyceum University in Manila in the late 1960s at the height of student activism, one of Duterte's professors was Jose Maria Sison, the founder of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines. Sison saw US imperialism propping up feudalism in the Philippines and criticised the two huge US bases in the country as well as the Philippine government's support for the US war effort in Vietnam. Like millions of Filipinos, Duterte had been denied a visa to visit the US even though he was by then mayor of the large southern city of Davao. A self-proclaimed nationalist, in a speech during a trip to Beijing in September 2016, Duterte promised a "separation" from the US and a tilt toward China. While this was driven in part by Duterte's anger at US criticism of his violent "war on drugs" (that saw thousands dead), he also developed a strong nationalist narrative striving for an "independent foreign policy", early in his presidency.

There was a brief "honeymoon period" in US-Philippine relations during the administration of President Noynoy Aquino.¹⁶ The most notable aspect of these warm ties was the 2014 signing of the EDCA (Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement), giving the US greater access to several Philippine air and naval military bases. The background to this increased cooperation with the US was China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea (recently dubbed the "West Philippine Sea" in the Philippines), particularly in the Scarborough Shoal area, where the Philippines suffered a humiliating setback when the Chinese Coast Guard seized control over it in 2012. These territorial disputes with China led the Philippines to file a case with the United Nations' Convention of the Law of the Sea Permanent Court of Arbitration. China angrily rejected the court's jurisdiction in arbitrating competing claims in the South China Seas and issued a White Paper of its own underlining its "nine-dash-line" claim over the disputed area. In July 2016 the court ruled in favour of the Philippines, but by then Aquino was no longer president, replaced by Duterte, who had been inaugurated just days before the ruling was announced. The Duterte administration's reaction was notably subdued, indicating it had little intention to push for the enforcement of the decision in order to avoid further antagonising Beijing.

In his first half year as president, Duterte threatened to throw the American Special Forces out from the insurgent-ridden Mindanao in the country's south, cancel or relocate contentious bilateral military exercises, and cease the joint

¹⁵ Takagi, Y., *Central Banking as State Building: Policymakers and their Nationalism in the Philippines, 1933-1964* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press; Kyoto: Kyoto UP, 2006).

¹⁶ Cruz De Castro, R., "The Duterte Administration's Foreign Policy: Unravelling the Aquino Administration's Balancing Agenda on an Emergent China," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, 3 (2016), 139-159.

patrols with the US in the South China Sea. Duterte's then foreign minister Yasay Perfecto Jr. said that the Philippines would cease to be just America's "little brown brothers" and, to demonstrate this independence, would open new trade and investment alliances with both China and Russia, also with the motivation of procuring weapons from both countries. Duterte also ordered the country's military establishment to turn its attention back to the more imminent internal security challenges – a departure from Aquino's re-emphasis on external security matters and military modernisation to meet these threats.

Yet arguably it was not Duterte's anti-US rhetoric that was the exception to the informal rules of recent Philippine foreign policy, but the one-sided reliance on the US of the Aquino administration. Since the collapse of Ferdinand E. Marcos's dictatorship and the end of the Cold War, and with the subsequent rise of China, Philippine foreign policy has generally been oriented toward hedging between its old ally, the US, and the region's new power, China. Leases for the two major US bases the Americans held in the country were not renewed after a Senate vote rejecting a new treaty in 1991. The vote represented both an upsurge in anti-US nationalism in the country in the aftermath of a long dictatorship that had American backing as well as recognition that with the end of the Cold War, the bases' major function as part of an anti-communist alliance had been lost. Although friendly toward the US, the Ramos administration (1992-1998) took no major initiatives to draw closer to the US after the closure of the US bases. His successor, Joseph E. Estrada, was known for his anti-US nationalism (as a senator he had been a leading member of the Philippine senate's anti-bases force) and undertook cautious confidence building measures with China concerning the South China Sea issue. Estrada was ousted from office in 2001 by elite-supported demonstrations, for which he blamed US machinations.¹⁷

Estrada's successor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, initially moved closer to the US after the 9/11 terrorist incident, but ultimately endeavoured to improve ties with China, particularly in the economic realm. Expressing strong backing for the US after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Philippines supported the US invasion of Iraq with a small troop contingent focused on humanitarian goals. But the Philippines withdrew from the US-led coalition after the kidnapping of a Filipino truck driver in Iraq; a pull-out which drew condemnation from the Americans and other allies involved in Iraq, such as Australia and the UK. The cooling of ties with the US after its Iraq withdrawal was accompanied by a warming of ties with China. A turning point was the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) agreement, signed during a visit by Arroyo to China in 2004, which allowed China (as well as Vietnam) to conduct joint explorations of the contested South China Sea although 80% of the

¹⁷ Interview of former president Joseph E. Estrada by Mark R. Thompson and Marivic Raquiza, Manila City Hall, 1 October 2014.

JMSU site is within the Philippines' 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. The Arroyo government also signed a record 65 bilateral agreements with China as well as received major pledges of development assistance and foreign investment. It also allegedly encouraged a bid by a Chinese firm, ZTE, for a controversial broadband project that led to the filing of graft charges against her administration. As the International Crisis Group reported: "Critics of President Arroyo alleged she had agreed to trade Philippine territory for Chinese development assistance and filed a case in the Supreme Court challenging the constitutionality of the JMSU."¹⁸

Hedging toward China and away from the US during earlier administrations indicates that it was less Duterte who is the outlier with his critical remarks toward the US and friendly gestures toward China than Noynoy Aquino with unremitting hostility toward China and growing dependence on the US. As the International Crisis Group notes, in regard to the South China Sea dispute, China viewed "the Aquino government's stronger stance as provocative, and has responded by increasing its presence in disputed areas."¹⁹

Further evidence supporting the argument that Duterte, despite his reaction to US/Western criticisms of his drug crackdown and strong nationalist convictions, was returning to a policy of hedging in the region was his visit to Japan shortly after his trip to China as well as inviting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to his Davao home in January 2017. His goal was continued Japanese investment packages and reinforcing long-term security relations. Duterte has even made a nod toward Russia, which has recently shown greater interest in Southeast Asia, allowing them to conduct a goodwill port visit in Manila, with discussions of joint maritime drills in the near future.

These diplomatic initiatives concerning Japan and Russia not only underline the Duterte administration's desire for greater independence from the US in its foreign policy but also its move toward the regional norm of omnidirectional hedging – balancing between the overpowering influences of the US and China and engaging multiple regional actors as stakeholders in regional security as a means of regional dominance denial. In the security field, for instance, the Philippines is in negotiations with Japan for a visiting forces agreement (VFA) and official basing rights for naval vessels and maritime patrol aircraft in the Philippines on a rotational basis. The level of access envisioned by this proposed VFA goes beyond the more ad hoc port calls. Japan would be the third country to gain such access, following the US and Australia, signalling a new level of strategic trust between Manila and Tokyo. Furthermore, Japan's growing defence diplomacy with Philippines is part

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, "Stirring up the South China Sea (II): Regional Responses," *Asia Report* N°229, 24 July 2012, pp. 6-7. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/229-stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-ii-regional-responses.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

of a trilateral US-Japan-Philippines security interaction. Duterte's administration has thus signalled interest in continuing to diversify security arrangements in the region. Although still at a nascent stage, the Philippines' strategic dialogues and security cooperation, from unit training to technological collaboration, with India, Russia, and South Korea, within the region, and most recently its signing of a defence pact with France in May 2016 and a similar one with the UK later in that year, indicate that Manila is continuing to increase its strategic flexibility.

CONCLUSION

In Thailand and the Philippines, seemingly dramatic changes in foreign policy have been triggered by domestic political upheavals – the May 2014 coup d'état in Thailand and the election of a strongman president, Rodrigo R. Duterte, in May 2016 in the Philippines. As both regimes began practising increasingly illiberal politics at home, they seemed to be choosing China's side against their traditional ally, the US, which was critical of these domestic changes. US and Western demands for improvements in the human rights situation and criticisms of back-tracking on democratic development made this old alliance appear “too close for comfort” for both regimes. In turn they could both use this seeming break with the US as an instrument for nationalist appeals to their citizens to rally behind illiberal rule.

However, we have shown that seen from a longer-term perspective the Philippines and Thailand have maintained their treaty obligations with the US even if in the current permissive security environment there have been fluctuations in the closeness of the alliance. Viewed historically, these changes within certain limits are evident. Thailand went from being a staunch US ally against communism during the Cold War era, with cosy relations again enjoyed under the Shinawatras, to a more distant relationship following a military coup in 2006 and, again, in 2014, when relations worsened. In the Philippines, over the past twenty years, Filipino presidents have varied in their attitudes, alternating between distancing themselves and getting closer to the US: for example, President Fidel V. Ramos engaged China for economic leverage, while signing the VFA (Visiting Forces Agreement) with Washington, which came into effect after Philippine Senate approval in 1999; President Arroyo's closer embrace of China backfired after a series of scandals involving Chinese investors; and the successor Aquino administration, also started with closer ties with Beijing, but ended its time in office with a confrontational attitude toward China and closer security relations with Washington. Now, under the Duterte administration, the Philippines is again distancing itself from Washington politically, embracing Beijing for short-term gain. A more careful look into the Philippine case, however, shows that the uncertainty about the long-term nature of China's rise in the region has meant that, despite repeated efforts by different administrations to embrace

Beijing for enhanced aid and investment opportunities, Beijing's assertive moves in its maritime space (in the Kalayaan Island group, known internationally as the Spratlys, the Scarborough Shoal, and, most recently, Benham Rise) has led Manila to maintain its pragmatic treaty alliance with Washington.

Despite political fluctuations, however, both the US-Philippines and the US-Thailand relationships have maintained their interest in cultivating the treaty alliance as an important fallback strategy against long-term uncertainty. While moving closer to China under illiberal rule, these two Southeast Asian countries have nonetheless striven to maintain diversified ties with multiple powers in the region. Not only have they kept up important ties with the US despite some distancing, they have also reached out to other powers, particularly Japan, but also India and Russia.

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