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Vacillations and Dramas Exist in Sino-Philippines Relations Too

BY CHU YIN

The new Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has damaged diplomatic relations for his country with his bold anti-US attitude and warming of Sino-Philippine relations. The Philippine attitude towards China has vacillated heavily. Since the founding of the Third Republic of the Philippines in 1946, there have been six distinct periods in Sino-Philippine relations:

Chu Yin, Associate Professor at the University of International Relations in Beijing, explains that “The Philippine attitude towards China has vacillated heavily.”

The first period lasted from 1946 to 1960 when the Philippines adhered to anti-Communist party and anti-China policies, and thus was opposed to Chinese revolutionary rhetoric.

The second period began in late 1960 and ended in 1986 when the Marcos dictatorship fell. Under the Nixon Doctrine, Sino-Philippine relations began to thaw. The Chinese leadership took measures (such as lowering fuel prices to the Philippines in 1975) to promote economic activities and speed up the establishment of diplomatic relations. This was a steady, long-term process.

The third period from 1986-1998 commenced with the ascent of the Aquino-Ramos government. Due to the growth of the Taiwan economy especially during the latter part of the 1980s, the Philippine government sought Taiwanese investments to develop its economy; to that end, Manila strayed from the One China policy in favor of a One and Half Chinas policy, and thus was seen with suspicion in Beijing. Although the Ramos government — successor to Aquino — adapted a foreign policy emphasizing full-scale diplomacy with Asia, it did not substantially change the policy prioritizing Taiwan. Meanwhile, sovereignty disputes between China and the Philippines over the South China Sea were on the rise in the mid-1990s.

The fourth period took place during the Estrada-Arroyo governments from 2001-2010. The Philippines continued to pursue territorial claims in the South China Sea as its predecessors had, however, both the Chinese and Philippine governments took more realistic and flexible stances and communicated more often with each other, strengthening mutual trust. During this period the Philippines returned to a One China policy. In 1995, Manila removed China from the list of Communist Central Ruled Economies, and in 1996 Chinese president Jiang Zemin made a state visit to the Philippines. During this visit, the two governments agreed on terms for a Sino-Philippine relationship of friendship, mutual trust and cooperation for the 21st Century, and decided to shelve differences and seek joint development over the South China Sea. The Arroyo government, though, continued to strengthen its political connections to the US during this time.

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The fifth period was marked by the Benigno Aquino III government from 2010-2016. In 2009, the US, under the Obama administration, undertook a “Pivot to Asia,” while concurrent shifts in the domestic atmosphere of the Philippines earned the Arroyo government massive criticism for its economic cooperation with China. Aquino the Third — being pro-America and anti-China — won the election. Having campaigned on the slogan of anti-corruption, he not only cleared Arroyo’s political assets, but also took a strong stance on the South China Sea issue.

President Duterte, elected in 2016, represents the sixth period of Sino-Philippines relations. In contrast to his tough rhetoric towards the US, Duterte has shown a realistic attitude towards China, after President Aquino III had forced China to take a back seat. The Philippines under President Duterte shelved the arbitration against Beijing and thus won generous aid and the opening of fishing grounds on Huangyan Island from China, though the decision did not solve the impasse facing Sino-Philippine relations over the South China Sea.

Sino-Philippine relations have three basic features. First, relations with China are never the most important diplomatic relationship for the Philippines; Philippine-American ties are always more important. On the one hand, the Philippines adapts its relations with China according to the state of its relationship with the US. During the Nixon-era Sino-US cooperation against the Soviet Union, Sino-Philippine relations improved rapidly; however, when the U.S. returned its focus to the Asia Pacific area, Sino-Philippine progress was largely undone. On the other hand, the Philippines hedge against American influence by entertaining Chinese interests. This strategy is demonstrated in Duterte’s diplomatic turn.

Second, the Philippines’ self-centered, national interest-based foreign policy is always at the core of relations with China. When the Philippines perceived Taiwan as more valuable than China, it distanced itself from Beijing. When Manila saw China as a threat to its national security in the South China Sea, it turned back to the US. Later, feeling the pressure of US interests, the Philippines again warmed to China. Although many hold the point that the Philippines is merely a pawn of China and the US, the Philippines shows its own will and interests through these strategic vacillations.

Third, compared with the US, China functions as a more external and secondary factor for the Philippines. China’s policy on Taiwan and the South China Sea do influence Sino-Philippine relations. On the contrary, the US is the primary actor in American-Philippine and Sino-Philippine relations. American choices for pro and anti-China Filipino politicians are always a crucial factor in Philippine elections. Philippine elite families wield top down influence over the country, and thus when more citizens participate in democracy, the impact of American policy upon Philippine lawmakers will be mitigated. Duterte might represent an inevitable step in the Philippine transition from family politics to democracy. However, this does not mean that the US will lose the Philippines or that Duterte will be an anti-America hero. It only means that the US cannot depend on its historical influence over Philippine elites, and may turn to other means of courting the Philippine decision makers.

As for China, the periodic swing of Sino-Philippine relations means China should remain cautiously optimistic. On the one hand, China should take advantage of this chance to bolster relations with Manila. On the other, Beijing should remain wary of historical fluctuations in the relationship. China should take a realistic attitude and seek cooperation with the US, to steady the swing of Philippine policy instead of attempting to dominate the region. Such a strategy would make Philippine policy less likely to change with each new administration, and would protect Duterte from American scorn. Shelving differences over the South China Sea issue for the time being could make a later renegotiation more likely.

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