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## **Professorial Address**

### **Domestic Interests and Foreign Policy in China and the Philippines: Implications for the South China Sea Disputes**

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# Professorial Address

AILEEN S. P. BAVIERA

## Domestic Interests and Foreign Policy in China and the Philippines Implications for the South China Sea Disputes

This professorial address argues the need for a greater understanding of how domestic politics influences the foreign policies of the Philippines and China in general and their foreign policies toward each other in particular, specifically on the issue of the South China Sea territorial and maritime resource disputes. The paper juxtaposes the differing views of these disputes from the perspectives of both China and the Philippines, which result in puzzles on both sides. The aim is to improve the management of relations between the two countries.

**KEYWORDS: SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES • NATIONALISM • POWER ASYMMETRY • PERCEPTIONS • CULTURE**

**T**he basic question that I would like to address in this presentation is what drives and shapes the foreign policy of the Philippines and China. The most logical answer would be that national interests drive foreign policy, and that developments and trends in the international environment that in turn affect the national interest help shape foreign policy. While these are true, such statements do not completely satisfy our need for explanation. Thus I would like to focus on the role of domestic factors in explaining foreign policy choices. More specifically, to what extent do domestic factors influence the foreign policies of the Philippines and China in general, and their foreign policies toward each other in particular? Can a better understanding of domestic influences on foreign policy provide clues on how to improve the management of relations?

Why do we ask these questions in the first place?

There is a huge deficit in trust and confidence at present between the governments of the Philippines and China, owing to their territorial and maritime resource disputes in the South China Sea. In the last few years, each side has tended to suspect the worst of the other side and to demonize the other as having only the most offensive and aggressive intentions harmful to one's own interests. Each side portrays its own actions as defensive, necessary, and therefore justifiable, in response to what the other does. This similarity in behavior is especially interesting because of the obvious power asymmetry or the huge capability gap between the two countries.

Both Manila and Beijing also seem to have similar perceptions of themselves as weak and of the other (albeit qualifiedly) as strong, which means they have widely divergent perceptions of the balance of influence tilting in favor of the other side. On the one hand, Filipinos see their country as small and weak, much too dependent on the international community, and therefore peaceful out of necessity and of no consequential threat to anyone, let alone China. In their view, their government's bark is larger than its bite. What it lacks in bite, it compensates for in bark, if only in order to be heard in a world where everyone else listens to big powers such as China, but not to weak countries such as the Philippines. On the other hand, in China's view, the Philippines's superpower ally—the United States—appears to be standing backstage and pulling the strings, so that the Philippines is not so small and weak after all. Rather, the Philippines is assumed to be a pawn helping the bigger power in its efforts to constrain and contain China. In

this context, the Philippines becomes—for some Chinese—fair game for China's "bullying."

China, meanwhile, is viewed by the Philippines as an enormous presence. Its rapidly modernizing military and technological advances arguably would be unproblematic were it not for the fact that territorial disputes exist between the two countries. However, in light of the disputes, each new development—the acquisition of more FLEC (Fisheries Law Enforcement Command) vessels,<sup>1</sup> the construction of a mega oil rig in the South China Sea, reports of submarine activity, a military exercise, the launch of an unmanned moon probe, and others—elicits imagined ominous consequences in many Filipino leaders' minds.

Contrary to the Filipinos' perception of China, China sees itself as still weak and disadvantaged in absolute and relative terms, a victim of bigger powers (the United States) and big power alliances (the US-led hub-and-spokes system involving Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines) that it suspects of trying to curtail its growth and influence. Moreover it still seeks retribution for past wrongs done to it, and to the extent that it expects retribution it behaves as a dissatisfied, revisionist power trying to change the status quo.

As they often say in studies of international relations, perceptions matter and at times they matter even more than reality. If we consider these gaps in the Philippines's and China's perceptions of self and of the other, there is little wonder that the two countries often seem to be working at cross purposes and the trust deficit between the two grows ever larger and larger.

But perceptions are just part of the problem. The power asymmetry is real. The assertive and coercive acts by one side or the other are real. And there have been pronouncements and actions performed by both sides—all objectively verifiable facts (although sometimes twisted by popular media)—that have helped escalate the mistrust.

## Questions on Both Sides

Recent crises in Philippines–China relations appear to be attributable in part to a lack of understanding on what drives decision makers of the other side to pursue such policy pronouncements and actions. Both are puzzled by the other's behavior. For the Philippines (and perhaps for other countries and peoples in China's periphery), some examples of questions that persist about China are the following:

Why has China in recent years suddenly become so assertive or even aggressive in its defense of its territorial sovereignty claims, undoing over two decades of its own “charm offensive” when it waged successful regional diplomacy and confidence building with its neighbors, including the Philippines? Is China an aspiring regional hegemon beginning to show its true colors, abandoning Deng Xiaoping’s earlier exhortation of *taoguang yanghui* (that China should “bide one’s time and hide one’s capacities”)?

Why does China refuse to participate in the arbitration case filed by the Philippines under Annex VII of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) to address issues of maritime rights and entitlements in the South China Sea, when this approach is so obviously consistent with the rule of law? Does it mean that China does not believe in international law, despite having signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)?

Of course, China has its own questions about Philippine behavior and attitudes toward it.

Why did the Philippines file that ITLOS arbitration case in the first place, when—in China’s view—there were political and diplomatic options and mechanisms in place for addressing these issues, including the South China Sea Declaration of Conduct and the upcoming Code of Conduct negotiations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)? Related to this question, why is the Philippines trying so hard to internationalize the solution to the disputes, rather than negotiating bilaterally with China?

Why did the Philippines suddenly become unfriendly toward China when the Aquino administration took over from Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, whereas during the previous administration both sides were even proclaiming that a “golden age of partnership” had dawned and the Philippines had even allowed a Chinese oil company to engage in joint oil surveys in disputed areas closest to the Philippines? Was the unfriendliness intended to help justify and pave the way

for the US rebalancing to Asia, which China suspects to be directed against it?

I will return to those mutual puzzles later, but my argument is that the answers lie not entirely in each side’s assessment of geopolitical trends or even foreign policy goals, but also in domestic factors such as political culture, the influence of domestic interest groups, public opinion, or issues of regime legitimacy, among others.

My goal in drawing attention to domestic factors is simply to help encourage sensitivity about how important domestic politics in each country is to the recent deterioration of relations, and secondly to try to draw implications for the management of disputes and disagreements. Knowing that I can barely scratch the surface in the limited time allotted to me, I will simply mention three domestic factors that I feel must be better understood by both sides.

## Regime Type

The first domestic political factor I wish to talk about is regime type.

Obviously, the Philippines and China have very different regime types. China has been led by the same single political party since 1949; the Philippines, by ever-shifting coalitions of parties.

Chinese observers of Philippine society, which is very open and transparent, are befuddled by the difficulty of filtering through layers and layers of information in the attempt to distill what the Filipino worldview is. An additional problem is that the preferences of the Philippine leadership and the elite, which matter greatly in foreign policy, are not always clearly articulated as a consensus position. In China’s case, the government tries its best to speak with one voice and to bring its whole society onto the same page. In stark contrast, democracy in the Philippines seems to thrive on the cacophony, the plurality, the multitude of voices and opinions.

Having said that, we need to mention a caveat. With regard to China’s worrisome territorial assertiveness against the Philippines, which is the issue that is of immediate concern to us now, there appear to be greater unity and cohesion among Filipinos on the need to staunchly defend Philippine interests. There may be differences of opinion on how to defend Philippine interests, but, as had happened many times in Philippine history, when threatened by external forces, dissent becomes muted and the Filipino people rally behind common goals.

China, as a matter of fact, is also not the monolith that many Filipinos assume it to be. More and more, it is becoming pluralistic in terms of numbers of interest groups, the roles of media and public opinion, and a more complex structure of actors and stakeholders in foreign policy making. From a foreign policy standpoint, there are moderates as well as hardliners within the Chinese leadership. But China's political system remains closed and secretive, so it becomes difficult to know what levers are available to a party who might need to influence such processes, such as if one wanted to encourage the moderates to step up. Unfortunately, there is not enough attention paid or effort made in the Philippines to understand the complexity of domestic politics in China and to learn how to navigate China's political environment. And I am quite certain that China also lacks a good understanding of the Philippine political and policy environment.

## Nationalism

The second important factor is nationalism. Nationalism is growing in both China and the Philippines. Chinese nationalism is an emerging force, a double-edged sword that can be wielded against perceived "enemies" of the state (e.g., Japan, the US, the Philippines) or potentially against the state itself such as when Chinese citizens demand—as a matter of right—better governance, cleaner air, and food that is healthy and safe. Netizens, in particular, are identified as a formidable force in this new nationalism.

But to what extent does public opinion now help drive policy in China? The answer to this question is not clear at all. Some would argue the other way around—that the Chinese state still has the capacity to mold and use public opinion as it sees fit. A vanguard party such as the Chinese Communist Party, after all, is intended to lead and to be the most advanced force for change in China; it is not intended to trail behind or be led by popular opinion, especially from a public that for historical and ideological reasons is not particularly well informed and is quite prone to the influence of propaganda.

Philippine nationalism, in contrast, is also evolving. Traditionally anti-US because of its colonial legacy and neocolonial dependency, Philippine nationalism seems to be moving rapidly toward becoming anti-China, especially since the Chinese occupation of Mischief Reef in the mid-1990s (although in Philippine sociocultural norms, being "anti-US" or "anti-China" refers to how the actions and policies of these governments are negatively

perceived and does not necessarily translate into being anti-American people or anti-Chinese people).

China's analysts and regional affairs experts do not seem to understand the wellsprings of Philippine nationalism—or the complex love-hate relationship between the Philippines and the US, which is an outcome of a shared history with mixed elements. On the one hand, there was colonial occupation and war against each other.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, they share strong cultural-ideological convergences and a history of fighting side by side against common enemies.<sup>3</sup>

More importantly, Chinese observers may not be aware of the crucial role that China itself now plays in the choices faced by Filipinos who hold opposing views: (a) those who believe that the Philippines needs the US more than before, and therefore must learn to love the US more, and (b) those who think the Philippines needs the US less, and therefore can afford to love it less. The greater the perceived threat from China, the more the Philippines will feel that it needs security guarantees, which only its alliance with the US can offer.

## Culture

A third, often underestimated, domestic factor that figures in foreign policy is culture.

Many Chinese and foreign observers argue the importance of "face" (or *mianzi* 面子) as a primary value in Chinese culture. In the debates about the management of Philippines-China relations, some say that whatever approach the Philippine government must take in addressing its disputes with China, it is important that China is not made to "lose face." The act of filing a case for international arbitration, especially if the outcome will be considered a defeat for China, will ostensibly lead to a "loss of face."

But "face" as a value is not unique to the Chinese. It is in many respects an Asian value. The Philippine counterpart is *amor propio* (self-respect) and *hiya* (shame/sense of propriety). The Philippine president's *amor propio* is challenged when Hong Kong politicians demand—under threat of punishment—that he issue an apology for the Hong Kong tourists' hostage tragedy.<sup>4</sup> President Aquino no doubt felt *napahiya* (humiliated) when—after bravely standing his ground on Scarborough Shoal during a two-month standoff with China—he commanded Philippine ships to withdraw from the shoal, only to find that the Chinese did not keep their end of a

negotiated mutual withdrawal agreement.<sup>5</sup> He was again *pinahiya ng Tsina* (humiliated by China) when the Chinese government in effect disinited him from the China–ASEAN Expo in Nanning, China, in September 2013. The Philippines was the country of honor at the Expo, and Aquino had announced that he was attending, only to learn that China had imposed conditions for his visit, including withdrawal of the ITLOS arbitration suit.

Could there perhaps be a more “Asian” face-saving and face-giving approach to conflict management that both sides could learn to use in this case?

### Clues from Domestic Politics

Now let me return to the questions I raised earlier, in search of clues in the two countries’ respective domestic politics.

Why has China become much more aggressive in the last few years and apparently more ready to employ force or threaten to use force? There are of course external factors that help to explain this readiness to use force, such as China taking advantage of the opportunity to advance its own power status at a time when the US faces internal political and economic challenges, or alternatively China responding defensively to Obama’s pivot or rebalancing strategy that portends increased US presence in what China sees as its strategic backyard.

But there are also other plausible domestic explanations that can help deepen understanding, perhaps including: (1) the new Xi Jinping leadership facing high expectations from rival power groups and from a watchful public to demonstrate stronger nationalist credentials than the previous government; (2) nationalists in China demanding greater respect for China’s higher status, especially after China overtook Japan to become the world’s second biggest economy; (3) energy industry players in China pursuing a more ambitious energy-acquisition program (thus the continuing interest in joint resource development in the South China Sea); and/or (4) the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)-Navy becoming more intent on justifying its military modernization.

Why will China, on the one hand, not go to arbitration? Here let me speculate a bit: (1) China comes from a rationalist (cost–benefit, win–win) philosophical tradition, rather than a legalistic (win–lose) one, and it abhors third-party involvement; (2) China lacks experience in similar litigation and therefore does not fully trust international courts; and (3) if the outcome of the arbitration should affirm the Philippines’s legal entitlements and

diminish the validity of China’s nine-dash line claim, China risks humiliation in the eyes of its domestic public, which in turn can undermine regime legitimacy.

On the other hand, why has the Philippines internationalized the management of the disputes and resorted to arbitration? One reason is that arbitration is a strategy that can work best for weak powers, leveling the playing field somewhat by bringing the parties under a common legal framework such as UNCLOS. Moreover, a law-based approach hopes to diffuse the need for a military solution (i.e., “Right is Might” rather than “Might makes Right”).

On the domestic politics side, this preferred approach possibly reflects a legalistic, liberal-institutionalist political culture—rather than a realist or pragmatic orientation—of the Filipino elite. Constitutional obstacles to joint development of disputed resources are taken very seriously. If Filipino policy makers were more realist in orientation, they would probably resort to bilateral negotiations and try to cut a deal, perhaps in the path that Malaysia or Vietnam had gone with the Chinese. My saying so does not mean that that will not happen in the future, only that it has not happened yet.

Why does the Aquino government’s policy toward China seem so different from that of Arroyo’s? Because the Aquino government initially sought to strengthen regime legitimacy by distinguishing itself as a principled, clean, and transparent government versus the more transactional, patronage-dispensing style of Arroyo. Arroyo was perceived to be too cozy with the Chinese—having entered into major deals such as the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) in the South China Sea,<sup>6</sup> the NBN-ZTE broadband agreement, and the North Rail project. She made a record-breaking ten visits to the People’s Republic of China while in office. These agreements, along with accusations of electoral fraud, were at the center of massive calls for her to be impeached. Repudiating her record of corruption therefore required Aquino’s suspension of all major new agreements with China, but most especially the JMSU.

### Conclusion

Do these instances mean that foreign policy is a mere extension of domestic policy, as is often said? This may not be entirely the case, but domestic politics certainly matters. Arguably, the failure to properly manage the effects

of domestic politics on foreign policy potentially has graver consequences for China than for the Philippines, both because of China's global footprint and because of the lack of mechanisms for its public to vent their frustrations, given China's closed system.

But for both countries, understanding the other side's domestic constraints (apart from one's own) may help develop greater sensitivity to the motivations and driving forces behind certain policy choices. Although this heightened sensitivity may not necessarily lead to a different set of foreign policies altogether, it may contribute to more measured and calibrated responses that can help avoid further fueling the tensions.

Because perceptions clearly matter, efforts to better understand the other side, to clarify the reasons behind one's own actions and pronouncements, as well as to calm down nationalist public opinion, will all play an important role in any future initiatives at conflict management. Managing conflict requires keeping the doors to dialogue regularly open, suspending the urge to react in a knee-jerk manner to every perceived provocation, avoiding sending mixed signals, and ensuring responsible reporting by media. For the longer-term improvement of Philippines–China relations, each side also needs to deepen multidisciplinary expertise on the other's government and people and promote close links among their think tanks, opinion leaders, analysts, and scholars.

## Abbreviations used

<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>FLEC</b>	Fisheries Law Enforcement Command
<b>ITLOS</b>	International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea
<b>JMSU</b>	Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking
<b>PLA</b>	People's Liberation Army
<b>UNCLOS</b>	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

## Notes

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- 1 China's Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC) is an armed organ of the state, tasked with the enforcement of laws concerning fishing and maritime resources in Chinese territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZ), as well as protecting Chinese fishing vessels and personnel.
- 2 The Philippine–American War raged from 1899 to 1902, but the Americans were able to completely pacify certain areas of the Philippines only in 1913.
- 3 Filipinos and Americans fought on the same side during the resistance against the Japanese occupation, during the Korean War, and during the Vietnam War.
- 4 In August 2010, when Benigno Simeon Aquino III was only a few months in office, a rogue Philippine policeman took a group of Hong Kong tourists hostage in Manila. A bungled attempt to rescue the hostages led to eight tourists being killed with others seriously injured.
- 5 From early April to June 2012, Chinese maritime surveillance and FLEC vessels faced off with vessels of the Philippine Coast Guard and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal.
- 6 The agreement was for the national oil companies of China, Vietnam, and the Philippines to jointly conduct seismic studies (a preexploration activity) from 2005 to 2008. The agreement was allowed to lapse in 2008, without extension, after it was criticized in the Philippines as a “sell-out” to China by Arroyo.

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