

The Philippines' distinct path under Duterte: Closer ties with China

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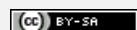
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ABSTRACT

*President Duterte's administration is showing a different approach to Philippine economic and political policies which previously leaned more towards the West, through concept formation *Dutertismo* And *Dutertenomics*. *Dutertismo* refers to Duterte's authoritarian, populist leadership style and focus on solving domestic issues such as drugs and terrorism, often with an approach that is at odds with the human rights values upheld by the United States. Meanwhile, *Dutertenomics* is a massive infrastructure development policy designed to increase the Philippines' economic competitiveness, with a focus on projects that support the Philippines' integration in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The research method used is an explanatory approach with the aim of explaining the cause-and-effect relationship between Duterte's policies and the shift in Philippine alliances, as well as their impact on the country's economic policy and foreign relations. The research results show that the mismatch between the human rights values upheld by the United States and Duterte's policies encourages the Philippines to seek a solution by strengthening relations with China, which is considered more pragmatic in supporting Duterte's agenda. *Dutertenomics* designed as a response to China's BRI, with a focus on infrastructure development as a way to improve connectivity and boost the Philippines' economic growth. This research also notes challenges in implementing this policy, such as dependence on foreign loans and domestic political uncertainty, which may affect the sustainability of this agenda.*

Keywords:

China; Duterte; dutertismo; dutertenomics; Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

The long relationship between the Philippines and the United States for more than a century has contributed significantly to the Philippines' economic development model. Since independence, the country has adopted a free market-oriented economic system, influenced by the United States economic model. However, even though the Philippines has followed the development model adopted by developed countries, it is still caught in the middle-income trap (Skinner, 2011).

The middle-income trap is a condition where a country experiences stagnant economic growth after reaching the middle-income level, making it difficult to transform into a high-income country. According to (Kalalang et al., 2022) the Philippines has experienced relatively stable economic growth since 1996, but still faces structural obstacles that prevent economic leaps like those in several East Asian countries. One of the main factors is the weak competitiveness of domestic industry which still relies on low-tech manufacturing production (Lee et al., 2020).

Development patterns in Southeast Asia tend to follow in the footsteps of East Asian countries by relying on the manufacturing sector as the main driver of economic growth. However, the Philippines lags behind in terms of industrial competitiveness and dependence on foreign investment. Therefore, every government in power tries to find strategies to encourage economic growth. Every post-Marcos regime, such as the governments of Aquino, Ramos, Estrada, Arroyo, and Aquino III, has shown a tendency towards similar economic liberalization policies. However, these policies have not been able to bring the Philippines out of the middle-income trap.

When President Rodrigo Roa Duterte took office on June 30 2016, he brought forward a new economic strategy known as 'Dutertenomics'. This strategy relies on accelerating infrastructure development through the 'Build Build Build' (BBB) program. Duterte's economic policy which prioritizes infrastructure development, was partly driven by the previous government's failure to address traffic congestion caused by inadequate transportation and slow investment in public infrastructure (Baviera & Arugay, 2021). One of the main differences between the Duterte era and previous administrations, especially Aquino III, is the increase in infrastructure spending from 2.9% to 6.8% of national GDP (Ito, 2019). While the Aquino III government relies more on Public Private Partnership (PPP) schemes to support national infrastructure development, Duterte prefers official development assistance (ODA) strategies and national financial resources (Ito, 2018). In its implementation, Dutertenomics policies are supported by closer economic cooperation with China, in contrast to the previous administration's approach which was more inclined towards the United States.

Apart from economic policies, the Duterte administration is also known for its political approach known as 'Dutertismo'. In contrast to previous governments which tended to adopt a liberal democratic style, Dutertismo reflects a combination of populism and strong governance. According to (Takagi, 2020) this leadership style is a new phenomenon in Philippine politics which has been influenced by Western democratic values since the Cold War era. Therefore, the relationship between the economic policies of Dutertenomics and the political style of Duterte is an interesting debate, especially in relation to Philippines-China relations.

Based on the background that has been explained, there is a complex relationship between the economic policies of Dutertenomics and the political dynamics of Dutertismo, especially in relation to relations between the Philippines and China. One of the main aspects of concern is China's role in implementing Dutertenomics, both in terms of investment, infrastructure cooperation, and its impact on the Philippine economy as a whole. In addition, the relationship between Dutertenomics and Duterte's political policies in the context of Philippines-China relations is also an important factor in understanding how economic and political policies influence each other. In this case, the question arises whether the economic cooperation established through Dutertenomics can be a solution for the Philippines to get out of the middle-income trap, considering the various challenges and dynamics that accompany the relationship between the two countries.

This research aims to analyze the extent to which economic cooperation between the Philippines and China contributes to the implementation of Dutertenomics policies, as well

as examine the relationship between the Duterteonomics economic strategy and the political style of Duterteismo. In addition, this research also aims to evaluate the impact of Philippines-China economic cooperation in efforts to overcome the middle-income trap, by considering various factors that influence the effectiveness of such policies.

This research has significance in several aspects. First, academically, it is hoped that this research can contribute to the study of political economy in Southeast Asia, especially in understanding the relationship between economic policy and political leadership styles. Second, practically, this research can be a reference for policy makers in designing more effective economic development strategies in the future. Third, from a geopolitical perspective, this research can also help in understanding how Philippines-China relations are developing amidst competition between global powers such as the United States and China.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with the main data collection technique in the form of a literature study which collects information from various secondary sources such as books, journals, working papers and other scientific publications. The sources used were selected based on relevance, credibility, and suitability to the research topic. This selection process is carried out by considering the methodological quality of each publication used, as well as ensuring that the data taken does not have significant bias. In addition, source verification techniques through cross-checking between sources are also applied to increase data validity.

The type of research carried out is explanatory research which aims to explain the cause-and-effect relationship between two main variables (Sofya et al., 2024), Duterte's populist agenda and Philippines-China economic cooperation through Duterteonomics. To facilitate analysis, this research adopts the Infrastructure-Led Development (ILD) theory which was chosen because of its relevance to the context of economic development driven by large infrastructure projects (Kanai & Schindler, 2022; Schindler & Kanai, 2021; Szabó & Jelinek, 2023). ILD is considered as part of an international development regime used to integrate regions with global production and trade networks (Lim & Limbach, 2023; Winarno, 2014). Large-scale infrastructure projects such as railways, roads, dams, ports and power grids, which underlie the region's development strategies, are discussed in the relevant literature.

Data screening also involved critical analysis of existing literature, particularly relating to global infrastructure initiatives, particularly focused on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policies and interactions with the economic policies of major powers such as the United States (Kaa & Greeven, 2017; Kanai & Schindler, 2022; Liu & Dixon, 2022; Rapley, 1996; Rekhviashvili & Lang, 2024). This research limits the analysis period to 2016 to 2022, which covers the period of the Duterte administration in the Philippines. However, external factors that can influence the relationship between variables in this period are also considered contextually in the analysis.

The analytical method used in this research is thematic analysis which identifies the main patterns that emerge from various literature sources. ILD theory will be applied to assess the impact of infrastructure projects on the Philippine economy and the influence of Duterte's economic policies on cooperation with China. In maintaining data quality, this research relies on source triangulation which allows researchers to obtain a more holistic picture and reduces the possibility of bias in research results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Narrative of Duterte's Populism

Populism articulates communitarianism, characterized by a vertical split between society and elites, where selfish and corrupt elites betray the beliefs of an essentially homogeneous society. Populism displays concern for personal security and protectionist values, as well as hostility towards those who are not considered part of the group (Ruzza, 2020). Conceptually ambiguous and politically ambivalent, populism creates a dichotomy between people and elites, supports popular sovereignty, and focuses on reclaiming power from government forces deemed anti-people (Canovan, 2004). Judis (2017) Recognizing that populism can move from left to right. However, the difference lies in the left wing being vertical and inclusive, while the right wing is triadic, defending society not only from elite groups but also horizontally from third groups who are considered foreign.

The populist narrative that is developing in Southern countries is different from the narrative that is generally understood in Northern countries, where populist leaders mobilize public sentiment and emotions against those who are considered not part of their country. This rhetoric was evident in the UK during the period of Brexit, President Trump's promise to build a border wall with Mexico, and Marine Le Pen's campaign in France. In contrast, populist views in Southern countries do not focus on downward globalization, but rather upward globalization, where the shifting alliances of the great powers become the focal point. However, this narrative does not appear in campaign speeches as it does in left-wing or right-wing populist groups in Northern countries. This difference is caused by the increasing concern for domestic problems among voters (Montiel et al., 2019). For example, in Duterte's 2016 campaign speech, the 5 issues raised only discussed poverty, crime, corruption, rebellion and public services. In other words, the electoral success of populists in developing countries like the Philippines is based on their rhetoric on national issues. According to Hawkins (2008) and Grant (2009) these populist leaders can decide which superpower best suits their relatively authoritarian agenda once rule begins. Leaders in economically weak countries will need foreign assistance to meet their needs in providing public goods.

In line with societal demands to eradicate corrupt government, Duterte has emerged as a voice advocating the interests of the lower and middle classes against the elite, in line with the populist narrative. His speech about the incumbent's inability to build good governance succeeded in sparking national anger and frustration among those with similar complaints. This strategy succeeded in building his popularity and continued to gain a high level of public trust even after his election victory (Montiel et al., 2019). Duterte does not align with left-wing populism in the United States or right-wing populism in Europe. He has not promised more aid to the poor than his rivals or incited xenophobic sentiment. Dutertismo is more accurately described as a socio-political process that emerged as a solution to the previous regime's failure to provide public goods (Capuno, 2020). Labastin (2018) argues that Dutertismo is a form of radical politics that embraces antagonism as an effort to create collective harmony. This political view highlights the fact that power can drive social change, so recognizing social divisions in populism is seen as an important value for achieving this.

The populism of Duterte is characterized by a disregard for institutions, norms, and liberal practices such as human rights and democracy—even though his leadership emerged through democratic processes. His disillusionment with liberal democracy, as a descendant of Mindanao, became one of the main factors mobilizing his authoritarian actions. McCoy (2017) argues that Duterte's regime exhibits a contradictory pattern: he employs violence to consolidate domestic political power while adopting a permissive stance in diplomatic affairs, particularly with countries that support his aggressive policies through economic

assistance, such as China. This is evident in the withdrawal of the Philippines' maritime claims to accommodate China's presence in the South China Sea (Heydarian, 2017). This unstable mix is described as *Cariño Brutal*—a combination of a desire for power, an authoritative personality, and a gangster-like approach to ending national disorder (Pernia, 2019).

The characteristics of his leadership include: (1) Positioning himself as a political rebel against the mainstream; (2) Undermining public trust in elected representatives, thus opening the way for authoritarian rule; (3) Maintaining control by restricting individual rights, press freedom, and opposition while strengthening the military's position (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Duterte's flagship policy, which also drew the most international condemnation, was his war on drugs, which severely weakened human rights protections and the system of checks and balances in the Philippines (Kenny, 2019). During his administration, over 7,000 Filipinos—both proven and suspected drug offenders—were killed (Simangan, 2018), although the police officially acknowledged only 5,526 deaths in military operations (Javate de Dios, 2022). Kalayan village became a hotspot and primary target of the government's brutal anti-drug campaign, despite delivering Duterte a landslide victory of nearly 80% in the presidential election (Arguelles, 2019).

According to Amnesty International (2018) Duterte's first two years of administration marked a disaster and a significant regression in human rights. This was highlighted by the arrest of Senator Leila de Lima on drug trafficking charges, widely believed to be politically motivated, as she had been a vocal critic of Duterte's war on drugs during her tenure as Minister of Justice and Chair of the Commission on Human Rights. The culmination of Duterte's crackdown was the removal of Maria Lourdes Sereno, the first female Chief Justice of the Philippine Supreme Court, due to her opposition to his policies (Pernia, 2019). Additionally, the United Nations (2017) called for "an urgent action to reverse spiraling rights violations" and Human Rights Watch (2018) criticized Duterte, describing him as responsible for plunging the Philippines into its worst human rights crisis since the fall of Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship. The European Trade Commissioner also threatened to revoke the Philippines' tariff-free trade privileges as a response to Duterte's human rights violations (Kine, 2020).

The Philippines' shift from the United States to China

Duterte's background as mayor reflects his agenda of fighting separatism and drug trafficking prevalent in Davao. As a result, during his presidency, Duterte reoriented the country's defense towards counterterrorism and drug eradication. China has emerged as the most reliable partner in the war on drugs, while the United States is difficult to provoke due to its persistent human rights narrative in various security contexts (Montiel et al., 2019). Additionally, Duterte doubted the United States' willingness to support the Philippines in any confrontation in the South China Sea (Castro, 2018).

According to Magcamit (2021a) Duterte's leadership reflects a bold paradigm shift. While other developing countries tend to support the status quo in their foreign policies, the Philippines emerged with a confrontational strategy—aligning itself with Beijing while distancing from Washington. The opposition and certain sectors of society criticized Duterte's leadership style, arguing that it did not demonstrate an independent foreign policy but instead positioned the Philippines as a pawn for China's expanding influence in the South China Sea (Balotol, 2018; Ramos, 2020). However, consistent with his tough stance during his tenure as Mayor of Davao City, Duterte dismissed criticisms of China as predatory and susceptible to conflicts of interest by rejecting Washington's request to impose sanctions on China's companies involved in the construction and militarization of islands in the South

China Sea, although the Philippines had legally won the territorial dispute during the Aquino III administration (Magcamit, 2021; Morales, 2020)

The Philippines changed its policy after the United States strongly criticized Duterte's policies on the war on drugs. At the ASEAN and East Asia Summit in Laos, Duterte made a statement that was perceived as an insult to the United States. In late September 2016, he announced plans to forge an alliance with China and Russia, to mitigate the potential impact of his separation from the United States (Castro, 2018). As a follow-up to the decision to distance the Philippines from American influence, Duterte affirmed his commitment to strengthening relations with China during his visit to the country in October 2016. In his statement, Duterte stated, "I announce my separation from the United States, both militarily and economically... I am separated from them, so I will depend on you for a long time" (Montiel et al., 2019; Ranada, 2020).

Duterte's decision is based on geo-strategic analysis, where distancing himself from the United States allows the Philippines to build new partnerships with other countries in the multipolar world. This also helps the Philippines avoid the adverse effects of intensifying competition between China and the United States in the South China Sea. Despite its long-distance alliance, the United States has shown hesitation in its foreign policy, for example by withdrawing from Syria and the Asian Axis and showing low commitment to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Additionally, the United States has not been very active in the global infrastructure market, where China has emerged as a major player (Kazianis, 2016).

Before President Duterte's inauguration in June 2016, many political pundits questioned his foreign policy, which was never discussed during his campaign. Some assume that Duterte will continue Aquino III's policy of opposing Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, while others believe that Duterte will adopt a pragmatic and balanced approach by maintaining security ties with the United States while exploring potential economic cooperation with China. However, Duterte challenged all these assumptions by changing Aquino III's agenda by 180 degrees. During Aquino III's tenure, the Philippines challenged China's maritime claims and responded to the country's expansion by strengthening security ties with the United States. The two countries signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which gave US forces access to Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base, which had been vacated in 1992. The consequence of this policy was increased tensions between the Philippines and China. Meanwhile, the Duterte regime sees Chinese investment as successfully encouraging infrastructure development in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. In addition, BRI has a sustainable plan that promises to increase connectivity between Southeast Asian countries via roads, railways, waterways, airways and internet connectivity to encourage seamless trade. Duterte is trying to defuse the South China Sea dispute by hosting the 27th ASEAN Summit in 2017. The effort was intended to increase economic cooperation, which required a softer approach towards China (Castro, 2018).

In the midst of the heated South China Sea dispute, Duterte presented Dutertenomics as the Philippines' development agenda. As an archipelago with 200 international ports, the Philippines is directly impacted by the BRI. In November 2018, the two countries agreed to a memorandum of understanding on BRI cooperation during Xi Jinping's state visit to the Philippines. China promised investments of US\$15 billion and loans of US\$9 billion. The most highlighted are the rail and port network projects in Luzon and Mindanao, as well as the New Clark City development project. In April 2019, the two countries signed an investment agreement totaling US\$12.2 billion (Gerstl, 2022).

Dutertenomics as a Strategy for Building Relations with China

The Philippines is classified as a lower middle-income country which has difficulty making economic policy choices to recover. According to [Kalalang et al. \(2022\)](#), the middle-income country trap lasts an average of 50 years and is usually followed by indirect impacts such as social conflict stemming from domestic market failure. Until now, the factors that influence the occurrence of the middle-income trap are still being studied because there are many different possibilities depending on the characteristics of a country. Commonly known factors include education level, research and development (R&D), and foreign direct investment (FDI). Other related variables include regime change, financial instability, trade liberalization, and trade value shocks ([Bresser-Pereira et al., 2020](#)). [Montes & Cruz \(2020\)](#) specifically stated that the factor causing the stagnation of Philippine economic growth was the failure to create high value-added industries due to a lack of interest in innovation. Facing an unfavorable national economic situation, policies aimed at getting the country out of this trap include accelerating economic growth to exceed the lower middle-income segment within a maximum period of 28 years and the upper middle-income segment within a maximum period of 14 years ([Felipe et al., 2012](#)).

Other prominent problems in the country are inadequate infrastructure, rapid population increase, and slow economic growth. Based on these three considerations, the gap between infrastructure and required investment continues to haunt the ruling regime. The global infrastructure gap between 2016 and 2030 is estimated at \$3.3 trillion per year, with \$1 trillion of that in developing countries ([Woetzel et al., 2016](#)). Financial limitations and infrastructure planning capabilities make PPP a development alternative that is expected to accommodate all funding, knowledge and technology needs.

The Philippines is one of the earliest countries to adopt the PPP system among developing countries. In 1990, the country passed the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) Law, the first in Asia. After that, PPP projects were promoted in the clean water, electricity and transportation sectors. This development also became the basis of Aquino III's program during his administration. PPP is a collaborative mechanism between the government and the private sector in providing public services, including the stages of development, operation, and maintenance of infrastructure. Historically, this mechanism originated in France in the mid-1919th century through the water supply business, but the term PPP only became popular in the late 1990s in England ([Ito, 2018](#)).

The election of President Duterte introduced Dutertenomics as an effort to overcome the country's economic stagnation. This agenda includes a large-scale infrastructure development plan worth around 8 trillion pesos, equivalent to \$160 billion ([Ito, 2019](#)). According to [Pitlo \(2021\)](#), infrastructure is the second of 12 pillars that contribute to a country's competitiveness. Strengthening this area can improve the manufacturing, extractive and real estate sectors, ultimately leading to independent growth. Meanwhile, [Castro \(2018\)](#) stated that infrastructure development is very important because it can create jobs, revitalize underdeveloped areas, and reduce inequality and poverty. [Camba \(2023\)](#) found a positive correlation between the number of infrastructure projects and economic growth in more than 100 countries in the 1960s to 2000s. What drives the BBB initiative in the Dutertenomics agenda is the quality of the Philippines' infrastructure which lags behind other island countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Vietnam. Other areas that also received attention in this agenda include free higher education, expanded value-added tax and conditional cash transfers, tariff exemptions, and improvements in healthcare services ([Javate de Dios, 2022](#)).

Over the past three decades, infrastructure development has consistently been a pillar of the Philippines' Medium Term Development Plan (MTPDP). However, what differentiates Duterte's policy is the source of funding for these projects which is obtained from Official

Development Assistance (ODA). This approach stems from the reality seen in the previous government where of the 28 PPP-based projects, only 15 projects were successfully completed (Ito, 2018). However, this program does not eliminate the role of the private sector, because the government's priority is to complete the construction phase, while operation and maintenance are entrusted to the private sector. Therefore, this method is also called a hybrid scheme. Apart from relying on bilateral donors from partner countries such as China, South Korea and Japan, the government also maintains relations with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In addition to ODA, the government has budgeted for 80% domestic borrowing, stemming from tax reforms passed by Congress in 2017. The Philippines' public debt-to-GDP ratio decreased to 32.6% in 2017 from the previous high of 68% recorded in 2003. Due to the relatively stable financial situation, the Duterte regime sees this as an opportunity to advance its large-scale infrastructure ambitions. Basically, the budget focuses more on national financing to mitigate the influence of external shocks (Ito, 2018).

Dutertenomics targets 75 large-scale infrastructure projects and plans to increase national investment in infrastructure to 7.3% of total GDP by 2022. This brings the average infrastructure spending to 6.8% in 2017-2022, much higher than the Aquino III administration's average of 2.9%. Among all the targeted projects, the rail transportation sector is the dominant agenda, with the Metro Manila Subway and North-South Commuter Rail projects in Manila being the main initiatives (Ito, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation in this article, it can be concluded that the populist political style implemented by President Duterte, known as Dutertismo, played an important role in the shift in the Philippines' alliance from the United States towards China. Duterte's populism, which tends to be authoritarian, includes hardline policies in dealing with counterterrorism, solving drug problems, and other crimes, which are often criticized by the international community, especially by the United States, for allegedly violating human rights. In addition, there are doubts about the United States' commitment to maintaining its alliance with the Philippines, especially in the context of the South China Sea dispute. This uncertainty prompted Duterte to look for alternatives in building stronger relations with China as part of his Dutertismo strategy, which prioritizes political and economic pragmatism. One of the main aspects of this policy is Dutertenomics, which is geared towards infrastructure development as a priority. The focus on infrastructure is not only motivated by the need to improve the Philippine economy, but also to create synergies with international initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Major infrastructure projects, including transport and port development, are part of the Philippine government's efforts to strengthen economic ties with China, which it sees as a strategic partner. Some projects, such as cooperation in port and railway construction, show the extent to which this policy is integrated with China's interests.

However, Dutertenomics policies and the alliance with China are not without challenges. The Philippines still has to face crucial domestic problems, such as political instability, human rights problems, and dependence on foreign loans which could lead to debt problems in the future. In addition, although infrastructure development has the potential to increase connectivity and economic growth, its effectiveness in creating sustainable jobs and alleviating poverty still needs to be further evaluated. Overall, although Dutertenomics provides a potential solution for the Philippine economy, the sustainability of this policy requires a more holistic evaluation. To escape the middle-income trap and achieve long-term prosperity, the Philippines must consider a balance between

infrastructure investment and strengthening critical sectors such as education, research and development, as well as more inclusive social reforms.

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