



**Rising Powers Initiative- Sigur Center for Asian Studies  
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## **Asia Rethinks South China Sea Disputes in Wake of Presidential Election in The Philippines**

In a [landslide victory](#) on May 9, Davao City mayor Rodrigo Duterte was elected to be the next president of the Philippines. The 71-year-old Duterte - who has been called the "[Donald Trump of the Philippines](#)" for his propensity to spark controversy - pledged to reverse the current government's foreign policy by engaging China in talks to resolve escalating maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Both China and the Philippines claim ownership over parts of the Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands.

Duterte also [promised to ride a jet ski](#) to China-administrated islands and personally stake his country's claims should negotiations fail to produce a resolution, so the world is closely watching to see how this potential flashpoint develops. In this *Policy Alert*, which is part of a series under the Sigur Center's [Energy and Maritime Security project](#), we explore the reactions of China, the Philippines, Japan, India, and Vietnam to Duterte's electoral victory and its implications for U.S. policy toward Asia.

### **CHINA**

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Lu Kang](#) hoped the new government would "[meet China halfway](#)", taking concrete measures to properly deal with [maritime] disputes so as to put the ties of the two countries back on the track of sound development." Lu touted a historical friendship between Beijing and Manila that has been "hit by major setbacks in recent years, due to reasons known to all," an indirect reference to U.S. support for the Philippines challenge to China's maritime claims.

During the campaign, Duterte advocated multilateral talks with China to settle these claims. Lu said China continued to reject this approach in favor of bilateral negotiations with the relevant parties. Should those multilateral talks fail to produce an outcome within two years, [Duterte promised he would consider bilateral talks directly with Beijing](#). He also signaled he was open to [joint oil and gas exploration with China](#) if Beijing agrees to treat the disputed waters as a "mutual corridor."

Several commentators traced today's strained relations between the Philippines and China to the U.S. foreign policy and the outgoing administration of President Benigno Aquino III.

- Eager for the Philippines to elect a president willing to "improve Beijing-Manila ties, which have been plagued by rising tensions over the maritime disputes," Yang Danzhi, researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, expected the new government to nevertheless "hedge its bets" by "[simultaneously seeking Washington's protection and enhancing the economic and political closeness with Beijing](#)."
- Blaming Aquino for "[souring](#)" Beijing-Manila ties by full-heartedly endorsing the U.S. "pivot to

Asia," Chen Qinghong, researcher in Southeast Asian studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, hoped the new government would "recalibrate its China policy.

- Xu Liping, senior researcher of Southeast Asia at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, predicted the new government would "adjust its policy on the South China Sea issue [no matter which candidate is elected](#), because the policy of the Aquino administration runs counter to the country's interests and threatens regional security."
- Another scholar at the academy, Jia Duqiang, agreed and expected "the new president will [exercise restraint](#)."
- *The Global Times* declared the Philippine public was "[fed up with Aquino's lopsided South China Sea strategy](#)" - siding completely with Washington which brought no advantage to Manila."

Others debated the role maritime disputes had on the electoral results.

- *The Global Times* reported voters were mostly concerned with their economic well-being and showed "little interest in the South China Sea issue," blaming the government and the media for hyping up the controversy.
- Wang Xiaopeng, maritime scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, alleged that "nationalist speeches on this issue from some Philippine netizens were also often used by the Western and Philippine media, but [they do not represent all the voters](#)."
- Gu Xiaosong, an expert at Guangxi Academy of Social Science remarked "Filipinos hope for proper domestic and foreign policies that can [improve their livelihood](#)."

A number of Chinese experts and media outlets offered policy recommendations for Duterte to adopt in order to restore better relations.

- *Xinhua* writer Luo Jun stressed that if the new president stopped being a "pawn" to U.S. interests, [Manila could take advantage](#) of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, its Belt and ROAD Initiative, and other economic opportunities to improve the lives of people on the island.
- In *The Global Times*, Chen also warned further U.S. interference in the South China Sea would [limit the new government's room to change course](#) on maritime rows. The author suggested Mayor Duterte's "limited political influence on the whole nation" could mean supporters of the more aggressive anti-China Aquino policy will "exert influence on the new government and force it to accept the final verdict of the arbitration."
- *The People's Daily* thought the "[Philippines will eventually have no choice](#)" but to return to equitable negotiation and dialogue" since many China-friendly ASEAN members and others nations such as Russia, India, Pakistan, and Poland have backed Beijing's bilateral talks approach over the UN arbitration panel.
- *The Global Times* sensed Duterte's "[concept of foreign policy differs greatly](#)" from Aquino as he "opposes the idea of going to war with China" and wants direct negotiations on maritime issues.
- Yang urged the new leader to "[properly respond](#) to Beijing's honest move to improve bilateral relations" by dropping the [UN arbitration case on the South China Sea](#).

## PHILIPPINES

In addition to [human rights concerns](#), the United States has viewed Duterte's rise as worrisome. He pledged "if I become president, I'm going to reach out to the Chinese and talk to them alone without American intervention." In addition to publicly opposing the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States and the related Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, [Duterte alleged he rejected a U.S. request to use Davao for a drone base](#).

Virginia Watson, a scholar on the Sigur Center's Energy and Maritime Security project and a professor at the Asia Pacific Center, argued Duterte was a "[fresh face, fresh perspective](#)" who held appeal because "people are sick and tired of the same old, same old." Furthermore, Watson doubted the new president could slow the momentum underway in the Philippine armed forces to modernize its fighting forces.

Most of the immediate coverage in Philippine media of Duterte's victory focused on his reputation and allegations of vote suppression by the Aquino administration.

- Ana Marie Pamintuan of *The Philippine Star* said Duterte's election was a "[resounding slap](#)" and a "repudiation" of the Aquino administration policies. Another writer for the paper called the vote a "[primal scream](#)" expressing profound anger at the economic policies of the ruling elite.
- *The Daily Tribune* wrote that Duterte was the "overwhelming choice of the Filipino nation," which has given him the "[strongest mandate ever for a president](#)." The newspaper also compared Duterte to both Donald Trump and [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#).
- In contrast, columnists for *The Rappler* said Trump and Duterte were "[actually polar opposites](#)" except for their language proclivities since Duterte is a socialist who lives in a humble home and dresses simply.
- Bong Wenceslao, a columnist at *Sun Star*, argued Duterte "should be given the benefit of the doubt," but wanted the press to stay vigilant of the excesses and abuse of power" that may come during the "wild ride" of his presidency.
- *The Inquirer* was encouraged by the [high turnout of voters and quick reporting of results](#) and hoped this would calm fears about election fraud and lead to a period of unity within the country.

Duterte spokesperson Peter Laviña said the next administration will be willing to "[form partnerships with China to extract gas and oil deposits](#) that are believed to be in the sea." Philippine scholars and media outlets debated the future direction of the country's foreign policy under the new government and what this meant for Washington.

- "Foreign relations has been a major gap in Duterte's published platform to date," said [Jay Batongbacal](#), director of the University of the Philippines' Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea. He argued Duterte and "his team have yet to publicly define their approach to the South China Sea."
- Richard Javad Heydarian, assistant professor at De La Salle University, warned Duterte needed to be cautious if he went ahead with joint development or bilateral talks with China. "Given strong domestic anti-China sentiment and institutionalized security ties with America," he argued, "[Duterte will have to keep Washington](#) - a key strategic partner - on its side."
- Babe Romualdez, columnist for *The Philippine Star*, said Duterte felt "[American influence is too strong](#), that we're too dependent on U.S. intervention in anything we do."
- *The Daily Tribune* warned Duterte's "pledge for a peaceful and orderly nation under his term is [nothing but a myth](#)" as the Philippines will experience "strife and turmoil" in the coming years.

## JAPAN

Japanese newspapers showed concerns about Duterte's presidency.

- Pointing out the lack of specific policy proposals made by President-elect Duterte, *Yomiuri Shimbun* warned his populist measures will "[undo](#)" the achievements of sitting President Aquino's economic policy. The editorial also showed concerns about Duterte's pro-China stance, emphasizing he "must not forget the importance of continued maritime security cooperation with the United States and Japan for the region's stability."
- *Sankei Shimbun* shared a similar view, urging Duterte to [take a firm stance against China](#) over the South China Sea and maintain Aquino's legal approach of using the rule of law and international courts to resolve the territorial disputes.
- Duterte needs to focus on infrastructure, employment, and poverty, argued *Asahi Shimbun*, now that the country, with its GDP per capita reaching \$3,000, faces a "[moment of truth](#)" in transforming its economy.
- Drawing a comparison between Duterte and Trump, *Mainichi Shimbun* posited Duterte's victory reflects a larger "worrying" global trend of electoral demands for "[high-handed](#)" method of government. *Sankei Shimbun* was also troubled by the Philippine public's desires for "[charismatic](#)" and even "dictatorial" leadership, stressing the similarities between Duterte and former President Ferdinand Marcos, a dictator ousted by the 1986 People Power Revolution.

## INDIA

Earlier this year, U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Harry Harris announced [joint naval exercises by India, Japan, and the United States](#) in the Philippine Sea near the East and South China Seas. The January 2015 U.S.-India [joint strategic vision](#) for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region signaled support for "freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea."

While Indian media commentary on the Philippines' election was sparse, some writers likened Duterte to Indian politicians while trying to understand his appeal.

- Peter Kammerer, a senior writer for *South China Morning Post*, compared Duterte's rise with others politicians seen by their publics as a strongman "[who can get things done](#)," such as India's Narendra Modi and Japan's Shinzo Abe.
- *Outlook India* previewed the election of Duterte who had "[hypnotised millions with profanity-laced tirades](#) promising brutal but quick solutions to the nation's twin plagues of crime and poverty."
- *New Delhi Times* characterized Duterte as a "[foul-mouthed, crime-busting mayor](#)" and reported at least 15 people were killed in elections-related violence.

## VIETNAM

Like the Philippines, Vietnam disputes some of China's maritime activities in the South China Sea, including a Chinese oil rig that has prompted an increase in Vietnamese maritime patrols in the waters. Vietnam's ambassador to the United States recently asked President Obama to [lift the U.S. lethal arms embargo](#) so Vietnam as a sign of support for Hanoi's efforts to resist China. According to the *Thanh Nien News*, Duterte expressed consternation at the Vietnamese coastguard seizing a ship trying to refuel illegal Chinese fishing boats in the Gulf of Tonkin since these moves threatened his "envisioned regional peace."

In the past, Vietnam has supported Aquino's strategy of bringing its maritime clashes with China to The Hague, a policy Duterte signaled he will change. After his victory, Duterte urged multilateral talks "[probably this year](#)" between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, the United States, and other South China Sea powers to negotiate a resolution of maritime disputes. Writing in *The Diplomat*, U.S. Army Captain John Ford predicted the "moment Duterte enters bilateral talks with China, the [Philippines will be undercutting Vietnam](#)" and the "unified diplomatic front [against China] will crumble. Duterte seems oblivious to this."

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*This Policy Alert series on **Energy and Maritime Security** is part of the Rising Powers Initiative's new project [The Linkages between Energy Security and Maritime Strategies in the Indo-Pacific](#). The series informs readers on ongoing energy and maritime security debates in India, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam and U.S. policy implications. This effort is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.*

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