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Southeast Asia under Great-Power Competition: Public Opinion About Hedging in the Philippines

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Abstract

Under pressure to choose between the U.S. and China, Southeast Asian countries have adopted a hedging strategy: deepening economic relations with China while strengthening security cooperation with the U.S. How does the region's public view this strategy? With tensions rising in South China Sea territorial disputes, are more nationalistic individuals more likely to oppose hedging? Using an original public opinion survey conducted in the Philippines, we find that while an overwhelming majority of respondents were concerned about the territorial disputes, more nationalistic Filipinos were no more concerned than less nationalistic ones. Further, more nationalistic Filipinos were more likely to view economic relations with China as important for the Philippines and to approve of Duterte's China policy, which follows the logic of hedging. These surprising findings suggest that under the shadow of great-power competition, the link between domestic politics and foreign policy is nuanced in the Philippines, and Southeast Asia in general.

Keywords: hedging strategy; Southeast Asia; territorial disputes; the Philippines; nationalism; US–China competition

Introduction

A significant component of the intense rivalry between the United States and China in recent years has been a tug-of-war between the two superpowers over the “hearts and minds” of third countries. While this competition for allies and partners has been playing out all over the world, countries in Southeast Asia, all of whom are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been under particular pressure to choose a side, as China's growing influence is most directly felt in its neighborhood. However, ASEAN countries have demonstrated considerable agency under the shadow of great-power competition, and a hedging strategy has emerged, whereby most nations in the region have remained equidistant between the two great powers, neither fully aligning with one to oppose the other, nor remaining too aloof to either (Busbarat 2017; Chan 2012; Ciorciari 2010; Heydarian 2017;

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Kuik 2016; Laksmana 2017; Murphy 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017; Syailendra 2017; Thayer 2017; Železný 2022).

The hedging strategy makes eminent sense from a rational decision-making perspective. China's rise has offered development opportunities for the Southeast Asian economies, but its growing military power and assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) has caused security concerns in the region, particularly for the countries that have ongoing territorial disputes with China (Kuik 2016). In the meantime, the United States, which has maintained long-standing military ties with many countries in the region, has expressed a willingness to strengthen these relationships to counter China's military dominance. The gesture has been welcomed by the governments in the region, yet a strong desire to maintain foreign policy independence and a concern for US commitment to the region have prevented them from fully embracing the offer (Heydarian 2017; Laksmana 2017; Murphy 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017). The hedging strategy allows the Southeast Asian nations to reap the benefits from both their increased economic relations with China and their stronger defense cooperation with the United States.

But a focus on the logic of hedging from the governments' perspective overlooks an important question: how has the strategy been perceived by the publics in the region? While foreign policy making has traditionally been within the exclusive purview of government elites, the rise of nationalism in Asia since the end of the Cold War, combined with a wave of democratization in the region and the advancement of communication technologies, have brought mass participation into the foreign policy-making process (Heydarian 2017; Laksmana 2017; Lee 2007; Montiel and Dela Paz 2020; Montiel et al. 2014; Tønnesson 2016; Vu 2013). In particular, the SCS territorial disputes have generated strong public reactions in countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, which may put pressure on the governments to forge closer security ties with the United States to balance against China (Bui 2017; Machida 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017). Thus, understanding public attitudes toward the hedging strategy can provide important insights on the choice and durability of this strategy. Such analyses are few and far between in the existing literature. This study fills the gap by fielding an original public opinion survey in the Philippines, conducted between October and November 2020, during President Duterte's presidency.

Duterte faced difficult domestic conditions for adopting a hedging strategy when he first came into office. The Philippines has maintained a formal military alliance with the United States for 70 years and has ongoing SCS territorial disputes with China. Duterte's predecessor, the late President Benigno Aquino, made the territorial disputes a highly salient issue for the Philippine public and bolstered security ties with the US to confront an assertive China (Heydarian 2017). A significant departure from this balancing strategy would have been costly domestically for Duterte (Murphy 2017), especially since his presidency began on the heels of the conclusion of the SCS arbitration case in July 2016, which ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines. Yet Duterte declared in Beijing on October 20, 2016: "I announce my separation from the United States" (Blanchard 2016), followed by pivoting Manila's foreign policy back to the hedging strategy: moving closer to Beijing on economic issues, while keeping the alliance relationship with the US intact (Heydarian 2017). This did not seem to generate much public backlash against him, and Duterte maintained high approval ratings throughout his presidency (Valente 2021).

The Philippine case raises several important questions about the hedging strategy. First, which issue related to China has been more important to citizens—the territorial disputes between the two countries, or their bilateral economic relations? Second, what factors influence citizens' attitudes toward the hedging strategy? In particular, does nationalism make citizens less likely to support Duterte's China policy? To answer these questions, in our survey design we replicated some of the questions from the Philippines Survey of the Pew Global Attitudes Project (PGAP) between 2013 and 2017, which probed public opinion in the Philippines on the SCS territorial disputes and the country's economic relations with China. We also asked additional questions to measure the respondents' level of nationalism. This design allowed comparison of public opinions under and before Duterte's presidency, to answer the question of whether Duterte's China policy has been a net cost to him, and to gauge the effect of nationalism on public support for the policy.

Our main findings are as follows. First, an overwhelming majority of respondents displayed concerns for the territorial disputes between the two countries. However, we did not find that more nationalistic Filipinos were more likely to be concerned about the issue. Instead, a higher level of education was predictive of more concerns about the territorial disputes. Second, while a majority of respondents viewed China's power and influence as a threat, more nationalistic Filipinos were *less* likely to hold such a view, and they were also *more* likely to consider economic relations with China to be important for the Philippines. Finally, more nationalistic individuals were *more* likely to approve of President Duterte's China policy. These findings suggest a nuanced relationship between nationalism and preferences for the Philippines' foreign policies. Nationalists may indeed support a hedging strategy because it preserves the country's foreign policy independence while deriving benefits from maintaining a good relationship with both China and the US. Because the Philippines is a hard case for public support of the hedging strategy, this logic is likely applicable to other countries in the region as well. Thus, this study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy in Southeast Asia under the shadow of great-power competition.

Why public opinion about hedging?

The competition between the US and China for influence in the Asia-Pacific has presented opportunities and challenges to ASEAN countries. Both superpowers have been eager to offer the countries improved economic relations or security assurances; yet in return, the nations have been pressured to take a side in the great power struggle. Conventional wisdom, primarily based on realist theories, suggests that ASEAN countries have little choice but to either align with the US to balance the "China threat," or join the bandwagon of a rising China and shun the US (Broomfield 2003; Chan 2012; Murphy 2017; Pan 2004; Roy 1996). In recent years, it has further been assumed that the more intense the US–China competition, the narrower the possibility for the countries to remain unaligned (East–West Center 2021; Korolev 2019; Seow 2018).

So far, these predictions have not been borne out. Studies examining the foreign policy choices of ASEAN countries have demonstrated that most of these countries

have adopted a third strategy: hedging, characterized by increased trade relations with China and robust security ties with the United States (Busbarat 2017; Heydarian 2017; Kuik 2016; Laksmana 2017; Murphy 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017; Syailendra 2017; Thayer 2017; Železný 2022). Moreover, there is little evidence that the deepening US–China competition will eliminate the space for the hedging strategy. During the US–ASEAN Special Summit held in May 2022, the ASEAN leaders welcomed Washington’s decision to upgrade relations with the region; at the same time, the leaders remained cautious about the move being seen as targeting China (The Straits Times, 2022). In an interview, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen made it clear: “We don’t have to choose between the US and China. There is no need to do so. Whether or not you force me to take one, I will refuse” (Sochan 2022). The sentiment was echoed in a speech by Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, who stressed that “between independence and dependence, our choice is always independence” (CSIS 2022).

Despite the compelling logic of the hedging strategy, domestic politics can throw a wrench into its sustainability. The Philippines’ policy toward China, for instance, has shifted back and forth as a result of domestic politics before Duterte’s presidency (Chang 2021; Heydarian 2017). Coinciding with China’s rise, several recent developments have made public opinion a major political force in foreign policy making in Southeast Asia. First, the post-Cold War era has seen the reemergence of nationalism in Asia as a result of an opening up of ideological space, lingering territorial disputes, and shifts in the regional power structure (Gries 2004; Lee 2007; Vu 2013). Compared with the earlier nationalist movements in the mid-twentieth century aimed at independence from colonial rule, the new nationalism has sought to assert national identity, exercise independent foreign policy, and defend national territories (Bui 2017; Cotillon 2017; Lee 2007; Machida 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017; Tønnesson 2016; Vu 2013). Second, a wave of political liberalization and democratization in Asia during the period has expanded mass participation in politics (Laksmana 2017; Lee 2007; Murphy 2017; Syailendra 2017; Vu 2013). Finally, the advancement of communication technologies in the last two decades has made it easier for the public to access information about foreign affairs *and* more difficult for governments to insulate foreign policies from public scrutiny (Montiel and Dela Paz 2020; Montiel et al. 2014; Murphy 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017). Combined, these developments have forced the region’s governments “to debate, justify, and seek public support for agreements with foreign countries that were previously made behind closed doors” (Murphy 2017, 179).

The Philippines offers perhaps the most interesting case and a hard case in Southeast Asia for studying public attitudes toward hedging. At the core of the hedging strategy is preserving foreign policy autonomy while not forgoing the benefits presented by either superpower. However, this goal is most complicated for the Philippines. The country has internationally well-publicized SCS territorial disputes with China, a highly mobilized public that pays close attention to the matter, an overwhelmingly favorable ruling on the disputes by an international arbitration body, and a long-time military alliance with the US. On the other hand, China did not participate in the arbitral proceedings and rejected the ruling outright. These conditions would have been ripe for nationalistic public backlash against China and a public

preference for a closer policy alignment with the US to counter perceived security threats posed by China. As a shrewd politician, Duterte must have been aware of the potential costs of appearing conciliatory regarding the disputes; yet he persisted with a hedging strategy without suffering a loss in popularity. This suggests there are nuances to the relationship between nationalism and the public's attitudes toward foreign policy in the Philippines. Moreover, if the public still supports the hedging strategy under these conditions, it is reasonable to expect that a similar logic could also apply to other countries in the region.

Nationalism and foreign policy independence

Nationalism is a powerful force in international politics. In Asia, rising nationalism has been credited as a major contributing factor in the increasingly assertive foreign policy postures on territorial disputes from China, South Korea, and Vietnam (Cotillon 2017; Wiegand 2015). Indeed, abundant scholarly research has found that territorial disputes are particularly prone to generating nationalistic reactions from the public (Roy 1997; Shelef 2016; Tir 2010; Vasquez 1993, 2009; Wiegand 2015). It is thus not surprising that the SCS territorial disputes, the main source of tension between China and the Philippines, have a large influence on Philippine citizens' attitudes toward China. For instance, in the June 2019 public opinion survey by the Social Weather Stations, a research institution in the Philippines, 74 percent of the respondents said that it was very important "getting back control of the islands currently occupied by China in the West Philippine Sea" (Social Weather Stations 2019). Nationalistic demonstrations against China have also broken out in the Philippines since 2012, when the issue became salient during the Aquino administration. In fact, analysts suggest that the tension has galvanized Philippine nationalism and strengthened national unity, and this itself was a worthy policy goal for the government (Dor 2015; Esmaguél II 2012). Consistent with the approach of highlighting the territorial disputes, President Aquino adopted a foreign policy of expanding the security relationship between Manila and Washington to balance against China.

However, Aquino's strategy of choosing a side may be an exception rather than a rule in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia more broadly. Both his predecessor, President Arroyo, and President Duterte adopted more accommodating and cooperative policies toward China (Chang 2021; Ciorciari 2010; Heydarian 2017; Kuik 2016). One could argue that the SCS territorial disputes were not yet salient under President Arroyo, but they had certainly become a core foreign policy challenge for Duterte. So why haven't nationalist sentiments pushed the Philippines' foreign policy toward consistent alignment with the US?

While it is easy to link nationalism with negative feelings toward others, nationalism first and foremost is about loyalty toward one's own nation. Nationalism can generate negative feelings in an individual toward others when those "others" are perceived to be harming the identity and interest of the nation that the individual belongs to. But such hostilities directed at outgroups, usually triggered by crises such as territorial disputes and particularly susceptible to elite and media constructed narratives (Montiel and Dela Paz 2020; Montiel et al. 2014), are not the only display of nationalism. Where foreign affairs are concerned, a more enduring manifestation

of nationalism, perhaps shaped by the historical experiences of a people, is a strong preference for autonomous foreign policy making (Lee 2007), with the natural idea that “the pursuit of national interest is best served through an independent policy” (Laksmana 2017, 117). This logic very much underlies the hedging strategy. The desire for independent foreign policy making is particularly strong for Southeast Asian countries, who experienced centuries of colonization by Western powers, during which they lost their autonomy and suffered exploitation as a result (Ciorciari 2010; Heydarian 2017; Laksmana 2017; Noor and Qistina 2017). Even though these countries have achieved national independence for a long time, the goal of foreign policy independence remains relevant today, and they are vigilant against serving the grand strategy of a superpower rather than their own respective national interests (Laksmana 2017). Foreign policy independence is even written into the constitution of the Philippines. Put differently, anti-colonial nationalism and the resulting determination to maintain foreign policy independence mean there is domestic resistance against being too closely aligned with *any* outside power in Southeast Asian countries.

In the case of the Philippines, there is a long history of anti-imperial and anti-American nationalist sentiments due to a half-century of US colonial rule (San Juan 2007; Webb and Curato 2019). According to historian Reynaldo C. Ileto, Filipino nationalism is “constructed upon a history of opposition to a colonial and alien ‘other’” (Ileto 1993, 78). Even at the height of the Philippines–US alliance relationship during the Cold War, President Ferdinand Marcos rhetorically distanced himself from Washington to blunt the criticisms from domestic nationalists of his reliance on American support to stay in power (Ciorciari 2010, 165). Immediately after the Cold War, the Philippines closed US bases on its territories as the country “witnessed a rise of pacifism and nationalism” (Heydarian 2017, 224). Thus, anti-American sentiments may still exist in Philippine society. In fact, analysts suggest that such sentiments may explain Duterte’s foreign policy realignment from his predecessor and his bitterness toward the US government when it criticized his domestic policies (Suorsa and Thompson 2017; Teehankee 2016).

However, it is not obvious that the anti-American sentiments based on historical grievances in Duterte’s generation (Teehankee 2016, 70), and perhaps in some ideological communities, are large enough forces to lay a foundation for the hedging strategy. In a Pew Research Center global attitudes survey published in January 2020, the Philippines showed the most positive view of the US, at 80 percent among 33 countries surveyed. By contrast, 42 percent of Philippine respondents expressed favorable views of China in a similar Pew survey around the same time (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2019; Wike et al. 2020). Moreover, in the State of Southeast Asia 2020 survey of specialists from five professional categories by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singaporean think tank, 83 percent of the respondents from the Philippines chose the US rather than China when asked: “If ASEAN were forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals, which should it choose?” (Iwamoto 2020). These survey results show that there is significant goodwill toward the US in both the Philippine public and foreign policy elites.

More likely, anti-colonial nationalism and a strong preference for foreign policy independence have continued to play an important role in the persistence of hedging

strategy. Closely associated with a desire to have autonomous foreign policy making is skepticism of US commitment to Philippine interest, which has accompanied the alliance relationship since the Cold War era (Ciorciari 2010, 166; Heydarian 2017). In the June 2019 survey by the Social Weather Stations, while 81 percent of the respondents answered that they had much trust in the US, when asked whether they believed that “most of what the American government want to happen in the Philippines is good for the Filipinos,” the responses were more split—55 percent answered “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree,” 17 percent answered “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree,” and another 27 percent were “undecided” (Social Weather Stations 2019). These findings are consistent with an earlier survey by Pulse Asia Research, conducted in December 2016, in which 17 percent disagreed and 33 percent were undecided when asked whether “security/defense relations with the US have been beneficial to the Philippines” (Pulse Asia Research 2017).

That nationalists view both China and the US with skepticism, for different reasons, and that such sentiments may interact with the Philippines’ economic and security interests, suggest the relationships between nationalism and support for Duterte’s hedging strategy may be nuanced. We now turn to our empirical analysis of an original public opinion survey conducted in the Philippines to explore these trends in public attitudes toward China and Philippines–China relations.

Research design

We administered the survey in the Philippines through Qualtrics between October and November 2020.¹ Respondents were recruited from an online panel of Filipino adults using a quota sampling strategy to match census data on age, gender, and geographical location. Because of the difficulty in reaching respondents in remote areas, we oversampled those living in urban areas, especially in the capital area (see [Appendix A1](#) for more details). A total of 1,206 respondents completed the survey.

We replicated four questions regarding China and Philippines–China relations used in the Spring 2017 Philippines survey in the PGAP (Poushter and Bishop 2017). We did so to compare the attitudes of the Philippine public in the early stages of Duterte’s presidency with those more than three years later, as the comparison can reveal changes in attitudes due to the effects of Duterte’s handling of relations with China. With the exception of a question on Duterte’s China policy, which was only asked in 2017, the other three questions were also asked once during the term of President Aquino III, making it possible to track changes across two administrations. The questions are as follows:

1. Do you think territorial disputes between the Philippines and China are a very big problem, a big problem, a small problem, or not a problem for the Philippines?
2. Do you think that China’s power and influence is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to the Philippines?
3. Thinking about our relations with China, in your view, which is more important—being tough with China on territorial disputes between China and our country or having a strong economic relationship with China?

4. Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Rodrigo Duterte is handling relations with China?

The first two questions gauged concerns about territorial disputes and Philippine security in the shadow of China's power and influence, while the third question prompted the respondents to consider the trade-off between the two components of Duterte's China policy. The last question addressed the net effect of those two components.

In order to investigate the relationship between nationalism and respondents' views on the above questions, we constructed a measure of nationalism by asking respondents to what extent they agreed with each of the following statements, using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree):

1. I am very proud to be Filipino.
2. I would rather be a citizen of the Philippines than a citizen of any other country.
3. The Philippines is the greatest country in the world.
4. I am proud of Philippines' history and culture.
5. The Philippines should first take care of its self-interests, even if this means having conflict with other countries.

These statements are commonly used to measure nationalism in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP)² and the World Values Survey (WVS).³ The sentences tap an individual's general attachment to the nation as well as "domain-specific national pride" regarding the country's political and cultural setting (Smith and Kim 2006, 128). Scholars have used different combinations of these questions to construct indices of nationalism, patriotism, or national sentiment (e.g., Davidov 2009; De Figueiredo et al. 2003; Fang and Li 2020; Huddy and Khatib 2007). We adopt a similar approach and measure nationalism by combining respondent evaluations of the above statements. Specifically, since responses to each of the five items are measured on a five-point Likert scale coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), we take the simple average to create an overall index of nationalism, ranging from 1 to 5. The average of the nationalism measure in the sample is 4.26, suggesting the overall level of nationalism is quite high.

In the remainder of the survey, we asked a battery of standard socioeconomic questions, including age, gender, education, place of residence, income, employment, ethnicity, and party affiliation. [Appendix A2](#) provides the summary statistics of these measures.

Findings

We begin by looking at the overall patterns of the responses to the four questions, presented in [Figure 1](#). For comparison, we include the results for the same questions from previous rounds of the PGAP. We first present the results on territorial disputes and security concerns over China's power and influence, followed by the results on

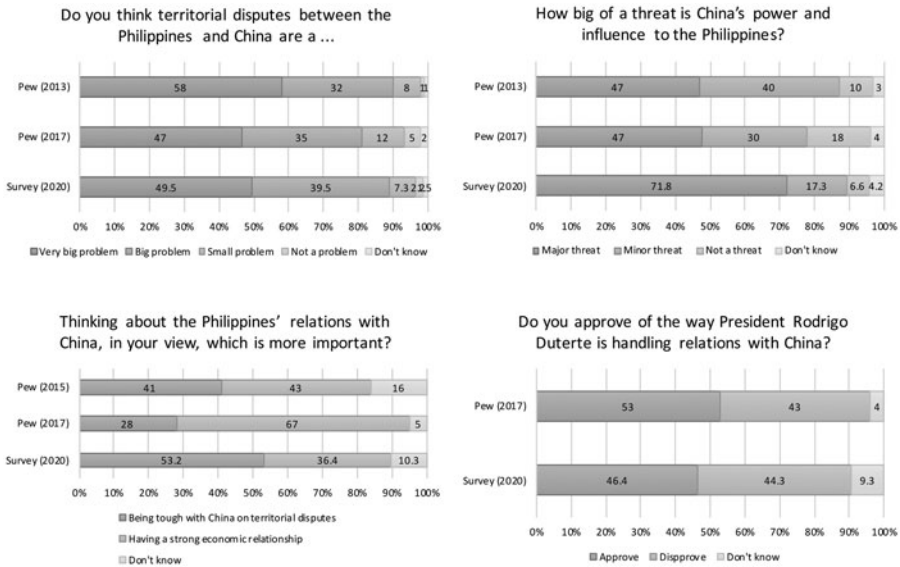


Figure 1. Attitudes toward China and Philippines–China Relations over Time
 Data From: Authors' survey and Pew Global Attitudes Survey (various years).

economic relations with China and Duterte's China policy. Finally, we present the results from several regression analyses that show how individual characteristics, particularly nationalism, contributed to respondents' choices.

Concerns about territorial disputes and China's power

Filipinos are very concerned about the territorial disputes between the two countries. In our survey, 49.5 percent and 39.5 percent of the respondents saw the disputes as a “very big problem” or a “big problem” for the Philippines. Less than 10 percent said they were a “small problem” or “not a problem.” These numbers are slight increases over those in the Spring 2017 PGAP survey, which saw 47 percent and 35 percent answering that the disputes were a “very big problem” or a “big problem.” This question had also been asked once before, in the Spring 2013 PGAP survey, where 58 percent of the respondents answered that the disputes were a very big problem. That is, there is a noticeable difference in the public attitudes between the current and the previous administrations. This may reflect the influence of the president in power at the time on public opinion as well as the large influence of Philippine domestic media in shaping nationalistic discourses during the Scarborough Shoal conflict (Montiel and Dela Paz 2020; Montiel et al. 2014). President Aquino repeatedly rejected China's preference for bilateral talks (Teehankee 2016) and instituted arbitral proceedings against China at an international tribunal in 2013. The case generated numerous headlines around the world and rallied strong domestic public support (Dor 2015; Esmaguel II 2016).

Regarding China's power and influence, 71.8 percent of the respondents answered that they were a major threat to the Philippines, a substantial increase from 47 percent

in the 2013 and 2017 PGAP surveys. Correspondingly, the number of respondents who saw China as a minor threat or no threat nearly or more than halved. This finding is intriguing given that the percentage of those who believed the territorial disputes to be “very big problems” has remained more or less stable between the two surveys conducted under Duterte. China’s increased economic and military capabilities since 2017 have likely contributed to the heightened threat perception. That is, the responses might have captured a sense of uncertainty or anxiety over the growing power disparity between the two countries and its implications for Philippine interests that go beyond the territorial disputes.

Attitudes toward economic relations with China and Duterte’s China policy

When it comes to choosing what takes priority in the Philippines’ relations with China, public preferences have fluctuated over time. While 36.4 percent of our respondents prioritized having a strong economic relationship with China, slightly more than half (53.2 percent) believed that being tough with China on territorial disputes was more important. The remaining 10.3 percent were not able to make up their mind.

There has been a large shift on this question during Duterte’s presidency. In 2017, two-thirds of the respondents (67 percent) valued having a strong economic relationship, while only 28 percent said it was more important to toughen up against China. In contrast, when the question was asked in 2015 under Aquino’s presidency, the number of respondents was quite evenly divided between those who favored acting tougher on China (41 percent) and those favoring more economic exchange (43 percent). So in the early stages of Duterte’s government, support for prioritizing a strong economic relationship with China surged, but this enthusiasm seems to have significantly waned after three and a half years, to a point below that in the previous administration. The decrease might indeed reflect increased dissatisfaction with Duterte’s policy on the territorial disputes.

How did these attitudes toward different aspects of the Philippines–China relationship translate into overall support for Duterte’s China policy? On the question of their assessment of “the way President Rodrigo Duterte is handling relations with China,” there is virtually no difference between the number of respondents who disapproved of Duterte’s China policy in 2020 (44.3 percent) and in 2017 (43 percent). Those who approved of how Duterte handles these bilateral relations dropped from a slight majority (53 percent) in 2017 to 46.4 percent in 2020. Concomitantly, the number of “don’t know” responses more than doubled from 4 percent to 9.3 percent. Hence, despite big changes in attitudes toward the relative importance of the Philippines’ economic relationship with China, support for Duterte’s more conciliatory China policy has not weakened substantially. However, there appears to be more ambivalence about the policy, as reflected in the higher percentage of “don’t know” answers.

Overall, the descriptive data show that the Philippines have become more wary of China’s growing power and influence, while continuing to be concerned about the territorial disputes. In the meantime, compared with in the early stages of Duterte’s presidency, their enthusiasm for prioritizing a closer economic relationship has decreased. Comparison of the various surveys’ results thus revealed shifts in predictable directions, given different political circumstances, boosting our confidence in

the external validity of the survey. Combined, these results suggest that Duterte's hedging strategy has cost him some domestic support because of territorial disputes, but the loss is not significant, at less than 7 percent.

Whose support has Duterte lost? In particular, has the territorial issue cost him support from those who are more nationalistic? We turn to this question next.

Nationalism and attitudes toward China and bilateral relations

To understand how individual-level characteristics influenced respondents' views, especially the role of nationalism in attitudes toward China and support for Duterte's hedging strategy, we estimated four logistic regression models corresponding to each of the four questions in the survey. In constructing the dependent variables, we transformed ordinal responses to binary measures for the first two questions. Specifically, we coded responses of "very big problem" and "big problem" to the first question and "major threat" to the second question as 1 and the rest as 0. For the third question, we coded "having a strong economic relationship" as 1 and "being tough with China on territorial disputes" as 0. For the final question, we coded "approval" of Duterte's China policy as 1 and "disapproval" as 0.

The main independent variable for each model is nationalism. Additionally, we included as control variables the following socioeconomic characteristics: age (12-point scale), gender (1 for male and 0 for female), level of education (9-point scale), income (10-point scale), whether the respondent lives in an urban area, is Tagalog (the largest ethnolinguistic group in the Philippines), has a full-time job, and supports PDP-Laban, the ruling party (see the Appendix for summary statistics). In all of the models, we used robust standard errors clustered by respondent region. The results are presented in [Table 1](#).

Focusing on the measure of nationalism first, we can see that the coefficient estimates in models 2, 3, and 4 are statistically significant. More nationalistic respondents were less likely to view China as a major threat, more likely to believe economic relations with China are important for the Philippines, and more likely to approve of President Duterte's China policy. The exception is model 1, which used the response on whether or not the territorial disputes are a big problem as the dependent variable; here, the coefficient estimate of nationalism does not cross the conventional threshold of statistical significance. In other words, the more nationalistic individuals did not view the territorial disputes differently than those who were less so. One possible reason is that very few respondents in the sample considered the territorial dispute to be "a small problem" or "not a problem at all," making it difficult to distinguish the effects of nationalism on this question.

To better understand the magnitudes of the effects of nationalism, [Figure 2](#) plots the changes in public attitudes as a function of nationalism in each model. The predicted probabilities with 95 percent confidence intervals are calculated using estimates from [Table 1](#), with the rest of the control variables in the model held at their mean. We first examine those who are the least nationalistic—that is, with a score of 1 on the nationalism measure. An "average" Filipino (i.e., one with average socioeconomic characteristics in the sample) with the lowest level of nationalism will almost certainly see the territorial disputes as a big problem, and there is a

Table 1. Nationalism and Attitudes toward China and Bilateral Relations

Dependent variable:	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Big problem	Major threat	Econ. relations	Duterte approval
Nationalism	−0.304 (0.175)	−0.388** (0.132)	0.227** (0.0627)	0.658** (0.104)
Age	−0.0444 (0.0281)	−0.0177 (0.0234)	−0.0360* (0.0152)	0.0404* (0.0172)
Male	−0.192 (0.194)	0.114 (0.145)	0.236 (0.171)	0.0812 (0.181)
Education	0.161* (0.0678)	0.142** (0.0484)	−0.0393 (0.0465)	−0.137* (0.0672)
Income	0.00991 (0.0572)	0.00738 (0.0508)	0.0151 (0.0684)	−0.0524 (0.0389)
Urban	−0.239 (0.226)	−0.238 (0.205)	0.155 (0.135)	0.0725 (0.103)
Tagalog	0.288 (0.202)	0.288** (0.117)	−0.156 (0.166)	−0.232 (0.158)
Full-time job	−0.0208 (0.182)	0.0139 (0.143)	0.268* (0.125)	0.267 (0.161)
PDP–Laban	−0.783** (0.204)	−0.506** (0.154)	0.676** (0.171)	0.966** (0.188)
Constant	3.090** (0.948)	1.846** (0.707)	−1.592** (0.412)	−2.027** (0.629)
Observations	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,045
Pseudo R-squared	0.0416	0.0324	0.0322	0.0742
Chi-squared	170.1	350.8	800.7	237.9
Log-likelihood	−338.5	−652.7	−729.9	−670.3

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by region in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

nine-in-ten chance that the respondent will consider China's power and influence to be a major threat. Consistent with this view, there is a little over two-in-ten chance that the respondent will view a strong economic relationship with China as more important than being tough on territorial disputes. Consequently, the individual is highly likely (90 percent) to disapprove of Duterte's China policy.

In contrast, an average Filipino who is highly nationalistic—that is, in strong agreement with all five of the statements that measure nationalism—expressed nearly the same level of concern about the territorial disputes as those who are the least nationalistic. At the same time, this type of respondent had a more positive perspective on

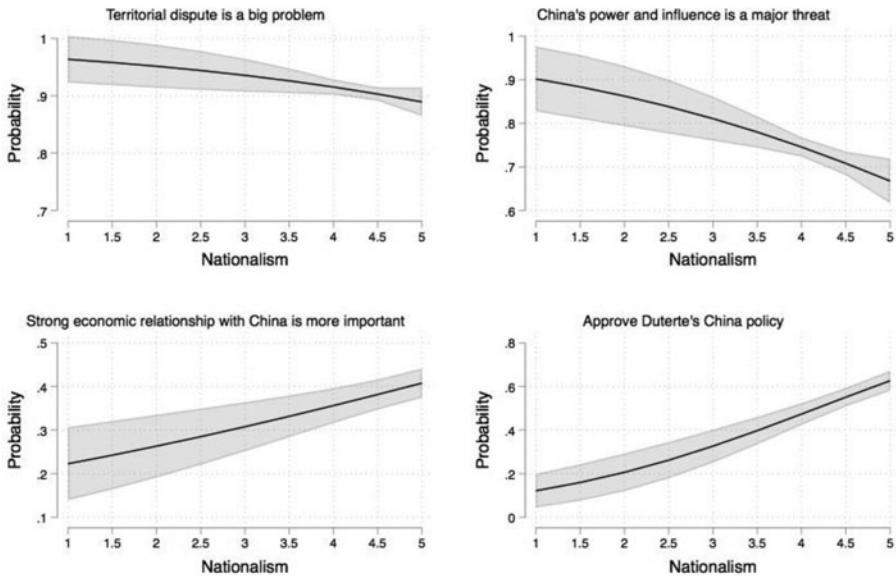


Figure 2. Effects of Nationalism on Attitudes toward China and Bilateral Relations

Note: The predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals are calculated using estimates from Table 1 with the rest of the control variables in the model held at their mean.

the other three questions than the least nationalistic counterpart. In particular, there is now a seven-in-ten chance that this individual will see China as a major threat and a four-in-ten chance they will support having a stronger economic relationship with China. The shift in attitude is even more dramatic with respect to Duterte's handling of the Philippines' relationship with China. Compared to the least nationalistic counterpart, they are more likely to approve (60 percent) than disapprove (40 percent) of Duterte's China policy.

Taken together, these results support our conjecture that the relationship between nationalism and attitudes toward the challenges and opportunities presented by China's growing power is complex in the Philippines. Lurking in the background of our survey questions is an obvious policy option of taking a more confrontational approach to China by relying on American support, as President Aquino chose to do during his presidency. While this policy may satisfy nationalist sentiments toward the SCS territorial disputes, it would also mean taking a side in the great-power competition, which nationalists might also wish to avoid for fear of losing foreign policy autonomy. It is likely that these two conflicting desires were both at play in producing these results.

Moreover, that China presents trade-offs between security concerns and economic opportunities might have further conditioned the effect of nationalism on the respondents' attitudes. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, China was the Philippines' top trading partner between 2016 and 2019, with bilateral trade growing at an average of 17 percent annually (World Bank 2020). China has also ranked as either the top or the second-largest source of foreign investments for the Philippines since 2018 (Philippines Board of Investment 2020). Finally, as a popular

incumbent president, Duterte might have been able to change domestic discourse and bring his supporters closer to his ideological and policy positions (Montiel et al. 2019). Notably, both Duterte and Aquino pushed for nationalistic narratives—no doubt with the media playing a crucial role (Montiel and Dela Paz 2020; Montiel et al. 2014)—but aiming at different targets: Aquino’s targeted China over the territorial disputes, while Duterte’s targeted the US over imperialism in the history of the Philippines (Dor 2015; Kinzer 2016; Moss 2016).

We now turn to the other control variables in the models and highlight three findings. First, support for the ruling party (PDP–Laban) is consistently significant across all four models, and its substantive effects are in the same direction as nationalism. This is unsurprising, as support for Duterte’s party should be correlated with higher support for his foreign policy and, consequently, with more favorable attitudes on China. Second, education is a significant predictor in three of the four models, and its effect is the opposite of nationalism. More highly educated respondents tended to have more unfavorable views on China and were less approving of Duterte’s China policy. This supports the notion that Duterte’s nationalist discourse resonates more with populist than elitist groups of the population. Finally, older respondents were more likely to approve of the way Duterte handles the Philippines’ relationship with China but at the same time also supported getting tough on China with respect to the territorial disputes.

Conclusion

President Duterte’s pivot to China in 2016 has been viewed as one of the most dramatic foreign policy reorientations of any country in Asia in recent memory. It seemed that almost overnight, the allegiance of the Philippines was there for China to seize, while it had hitherto been taken for granted that the country was a close ally of the United States (Heydarian 2018). The reality tells a much different story: Duterte’s predecessor, President Aquino, was an outlier in the region by choosing to side with the US to balance against China. Rather than switching sides, Duterte created some space between the Philippines and the US, without breaking the alliance, and moved the Philippines closer to China for economic engagement. This repositioning returned the Philippines’ foreign policy to hedging, a strategy that had existed under President Arroyo and has been widely adopted by other ASEAN states. The logic of the strategy is easy to understand: enjoying the benefits of having amicable relationships with both superpowers while avoiding the risk of being dragged deeply into the great-power rivalry.

However, choosing the hedging strategy is not without risks for leaders. With rising tensions in the SCS territorial disputes between China and some of the countries in the region, nationalist pressure from the public may pose challenges for leaders trying to adopt a nuanced strategy such as hedging, especially when security guarantees from the US are readily available. In fact, numerous reports and analyses have been written on the domestic pressure for Duterte to reverse the policy and get tough on China, particularly given the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling that backed the Philippine positions. Throughout his tenure, Duterte resisted walking back on his China policy, and yet his approval ratings did not suffer significantly as a result. This phenomenon points

to the need to better understand the link between nationalism and public opinion toward foreign policy in Southeast Asia in general, and in the Philippines in particular.

Indeed, our study of Philippine public opinion on China and Philippines–China relations revealed surprising patterns. Most importantly, Duterte’s hedging strategy did not cost him support from those who are more nationalistic, as one might have expected, given that the main criticism of his foreign policy has been his conciliatory stance toward the SCS territorial disputes. On the contrary, more nationalistic individuals were no more concerned about the territorial disputes than those who were less nationalistic, more supportive of economic engagement with China, and more supportive of Duterte’s handling of China policy. Instead, we find that individuals with higher education levels were more likely to be concerned about the territorial disputes and less likely to support Duterte.

How sustainable is the Philippines’ hedging strategy? Findings from any public opinion research are subject to the influence of the timing and context when the survey is conducted, thus leaving open the question of how generalizable the findings are. On July 30, 2021, eight months after our survey was conducted, Duterte reinstated the Philippines–US Visiting Forces Agreement, reversing his earlier stance to terminate the agreement (Gomez 2021). He also took a more affirmative tone toward the 2016 arbitral ruling in his address before the UN General Assembly in September 2021 (CNN 2021). These gestures seemed to indicate that a recalibration of the Philippines’ foreign policy posture might be forthcoming, perhaps in response to a substantial increase in threat perception against China captured in our 2020 survey, and a presidential election looming in less than a year. Yet, the newly elected President Marcos Jr., who won the election by a large margin, has signaled that the hedging strategy is here to stay. In his first State of the Union address in July 2022, President Marcos Jr. articulated his foreign policy principles as such: “the Philippines shall continue to be a friend to all, an enemy to none ... We will stand firm in our independent foreign policy, with the national interest as our primordial guide” (Marcos 2022).

More broadly, the findings of this research suggest that the prevailing view, equating nationalism with favoring hawkish foreign policy toward a foreign country, or seeing it as the main driver of alignment decisions, risks oversimplifying the relationship in some region- or country-specific contexts. In the case of the Philippines, and Southeast Asian countries more generally, because of the historical experiences of colonization, there is a deep-seated concern about losing autonomy by too closely aligning with a superpower. Countries in the region see foreign policy independence as essential to guard their national interests. We believe this important manifestation of nationalism, which has been overlooked in the analysis of Southeast Asian countries’ foreign policy choices, goes some way toward explaining why the leaders in the region have been able to choose the hedging strategy without suffering significant public backlash, even in countries where territorial disputes often stoke up nationalist sentiments against China.

This research contributes to a better understanding of the domestic foundation of hedging, the dominant foreign policy choice of Southeast Asian countries thus far under the shadow of the great-power competition. It also demonstrates the value of taking local contexts seriously when studying the linkage between nationalism and foreign policy. Such an approach can be applied to other countries in Asia, such as South

Korea, which has also faced pressure to pick a side and is known to have complicated relationships with both China and the US, fueled by persistent bouts of nationalism.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved this survey in Study ID: H18-01667.
2. The ISSP (<http://w.issp.org/menu-top/home/>) is a cross-national collaborative program that since 1984 has been conducting annual surveys on diverse topics relevant to the social sciences.
3. The WVS (www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp) is a global research project that since 1981 has explored people's values and beliefs, how these change over time, and what social and political impact they have had, in almost 100 countries.

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Appendices

A1. Sampling Strategy

The following census-based quotas for gender, age, and region were used. Quotas for gender and age were achieved. Some urban regions were oversampled (e.g., the National Capital Region) due to the difficulty of reaching rural and coastal respondents.

Gender

Male 50%

Female 50%

Age

18–24 years old 27%

25–54 years old 45%

55+ years old 27%

Region of the Country

National Capital Region 13%

Ilocos Region 5%

Cordillera Admin. Region 2%

Cagayan Valley 3%

Central Luzon 11%

Southern Tagalog Mainland 14%

Southwestern Tagalog Region 3%

Bicol Region 6%

Western Visayas 7%

Central Visayas 7%

Eastern Visayas 4%

Zamboanga Peninsula 4%

Northern Mindanao 5%

Davao Region 5%

Soccsksargen 5%

Caraga Region 3%

Bangsamoro Autonomous Region 4%

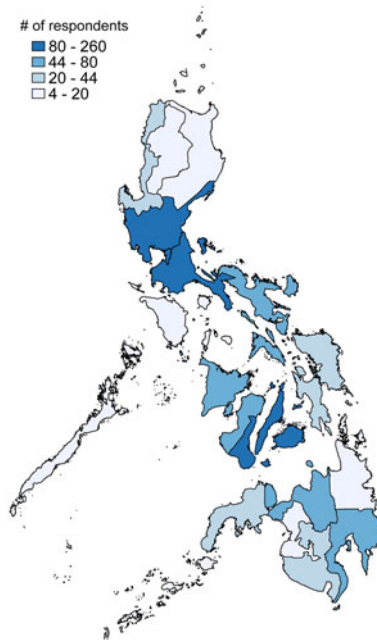
The table and figure below summarizes the actual distribution of regions in the sample:

Region	Respondents	Percent
National Capital Region	226	18.74
Cordillera Admin. Region	20	1.66
I – Ilocos Region	44	3.65
II – Cagayan Valley	13	1.08

(Continued)

A1. (Continued.)

Region	Respondents	Percent
III – Central Luzon	161	13.35
IVA – Calabarzon	260	21.56
Mimaropa Region	17	1.41
V – Bicol	45	3.73
VI – Western Visayas	80	6.63
VII – Central Visayas	113	9.37
VIII – Eastern Visayas	24	1.99
IX – Zamboanga Peninsula	27	2.24
X – Northern Mindanao	49	4.06
XI – Davao	76	6.3
XII – Soccsksargen	25	2.07
XIII – Caraga	17	1.41
ARMM – Bangsamoro	4	0.33
I currently live overseas	5	0.41
Total	1,206	100



A2. Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Major threat	1,206	0.72	0.45	0	1
Big problem	1,206	0.90	0.29	0	1
Tough on China	1,206	0.53	0.50	0	1
Duterte approval	1,094	0.51	0.50	0	1
Nationalism	1,206	4.26	0.64	1	5
Age	1,206	4.29	3.15	1	12
Male	1,206	0.49	0.50	0	1
Education	1,145	6.40	1.32	1	9
Income	1,206	5.72	1.59	1	10
Urban	1,206	0.63	0.48	0	1
Tagalog	1,206	0.48	0.50	0	1
Full-time job	1,206	0.37	0.48	0	1
PDP-Laban	1,206	0.22	0.41	0	1

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