

Domestic Considerations and Foreign Relations: 2023 Philippine Perspective

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Introduction

With almost one year under its belt, the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is proving to be the continuity they promised to the voters in the May 2022 presidential elections. Running under the campaign platform of unity, the Marcos-Duterte presidential-vice presidential tandem is looking less about unity and more about continuity. Observers noted the visible forced smiles and awkward interactions between the two candidates, especially during the campaign's early days. The Marcoses from the North needed Duterte's strong base of allies and support from the South. Filipinos, after all, also vote along ethnic lines. Sara Duterte got 80% of the [votes](#) in Mindanao, consistent with pre-election surveys. Marcos Jr.'s pre-election numbers on the other hand showed only [8% of voter preference](#) in Mindanao. Teaming up with Sara Duterte, presidential preference right before the elections show Marcos Jr. [having 67%](#) in Mindanao. The “unity” between two prominent dynastic families was, in real terms, a coming together for vote consolidation.

According to a recent [study](#), the overwhelming majority of votes that elected yet another Marcos in Philippine history was a vote for continuity for Duterte, for Marcos Sr., and ethnic voting. Both Duterte and Marcos Sr. ruled the Philippines with iron hands while ethnic voting signals cleavages of a divided society. Both Duterte and Marcos Sr. are unpopular to the global audience because of human rights abuses and issues of crony capitalism. However, in the Philippines, both have a large, loyal base of supporters. While many analysts attributed the Marcos-Duterte win last May to disinformation and misinformation among voters, that is just one factor. Voter support for Marcos Jr. is not inauthentic support of misled voters. Duterte maintained high approval ratings throughout his presidency. Moreover, the deposed Marcos Sr. is remembered with authoritarian nostalgia.

However, winning an election is one thing, and running a government is another. The calculus becomes more complicated with strategic domestic alliances, multiple players, and unexpected variables needing decisive action. Under the towering shadows of both Marcos Sr. and Duterte, Marcos Jr., nicknamed Bongbong, will navigate governance of continuity. At the same time, Marcos Jr. needs to keep and increase his base of allies in Congress and the Senate. These allies are political dynasties who delivered the votes in the last May elections and will push for the administration's agenda in the legislative branch. These political dynasties are also the key political actors in local governments nationwide. Domestic considerations will matter in Marcos Jr.'s approach to foreign relations. Two striking features of the continuity of the Marcos Jr. administration will be human rights, especially in dealing with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Philippine-China relations because of the territorial dispute in the West Philippine Sea. The continuity of policy lines will depend on domestic concerns and how it will play out to a domestic audience as the months into his presidency lead into the budget cycle and the mid-term elections.

The ICC and Human Rights

There is an expectation of continuity with Marcos Jr. when it comes to dealings with the ICC and the thorny issue of human rights from the previous administration of President Duterte. This expectation is partly because his vice-president is the daughter of the architect of the Philippine drug war. The signals came early on during his inaugural address. Throughout his speech, Marcos Jr. did not mention human rights or the deaths during the drug war. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) rejected the plea of the Philippine government to suspend its investigation of the extrajudicial killings. These killings happened during the anti-drug campaign, which began in 2016. To this, Rodrigo Duterte, a speaker at a national convention of the Prosecutors' League of the Philippines, thundered in his usual defiant tone that he "could not care less about the ICC." Winning his audience with a combination of tough talk and populist underdog tones, Duterte says that he is "willing to die for it" and "rot in prison." The chances of this happening under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. are slim to nil, at least for now. On January 26, the International Criminal Court Pre-Trial Chamber authorized the preliminary investigation of the killings that took place during the drug war of President Duterte.

In a week, the Philippines, through the Office of the Solicitor General, submitted an appeal to reverse the decision of the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber. In two weeks, the ICC's Appeal Chamber [rejected](#) the appeal to suspend the investigation into the killings during Duterte's anti-drug campaign. With the rejection of the appeal, [Bongbong Marcos](#) quickly announced that the Philippines would "disengage" with the ICC. The Philippines will not cooperate with the investigation and questions the jurisdiction of the ICC. Allies of President Duterte in the Senate and Congress quickly came to his defense and criticized the ICC. The Senate chair on the committee on justice and human rights suggested that the Bureau of Immigration should [prevent the entry](#) of ICC prosecutors into the Philippines. After the initial reactions of indignation subsided, [the Solicitor General said](#) in an interview that he would be "sending a memo for the President to explain to him the status of our appeal with the ICC Appeals Chamber. I will have to clarify with him that the appeal itself is still pending; it has not been denied or dismissed." This statement from the Office of the Solicitor General suggests that the Philippine government remains in dialogue with the ICC. Depending on how quickly Marcos can solidify support in the coming months, how his relations with his vice-president will proceed, and if he can win new allies to his side are factors that can change the position of Marcos Jr. and his administration towards the ICC. The domestic political environment constantly shifts and can steer the decision-making course.

On Philippine-China Relations

As early as the campaign period, Marcos was seen as [the candidate to continue the friendly relations that Duterte nurtured with China](#). Again, not only because his running mate, Sara Duterte, is the daughter of the President and possibly shares his views on foreign relations. Marcos Jr., in interviews during the campaign, had the same tone as Duterte in downplaying the Hague ruling, citing that China does not recognize it and an agreement can be reached with China. Marcos Jr. preferred bilateral talks with China to settle the territorial dispute and, like his predecessor, appeared to set aside the legal victory awarded by the Hague. In January 2023, Marcos Jr. went to China for a three-day state visit. His predecessor went to China five times in six years. Will Marcos Jr. provide continuity on this front? Yes, because he is projecting and advocating for stronger ties with China, and yes, because he is also engaging the US. While Duterte often railed against the US and extolled the strong friendship of China with the Philippines, before he ended his term, [Duterte welcomed US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin](#) and restored the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US. The VFA bolsters the ties of the Philippines with the US on matters related to security and humanitarian work and allows US forces to access sites in the Philippines for joint military exercises. Duterte was big on talk against the US but was

always cognizant that the Philippines needed the US as an ally and a deterrent for the increasing assertiveness of China towards the disputed territory. Two months after Marcos Jr.'s visit to China, Marcos [announced](#) that the Philippines had identified four new sites for the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States. These four new sites were added to the existing five EDCA sites in the Philippines. According to Marcos, these sites will bolster the Philippines' security nationwide. Marcos Jr shows calculated continuity in keeping China close and the US closer. Domestic considerations partly drive the balancing act.

A 2021 survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) showed that most Filipinos want to see more from the Philippine government when it comes to defending the West Philippine Sea. In 2020, SWS likewise had a [survey showing a high trust rating for the US since 1994](#) over China. The Filipino public's poor view of China has not changed over time. Furthermore, China has not assuaged the Filipino public that relations between the two countries are fair and friendly. Filipino fishermen continue to experience harassment in the West Philippine Sea. In February, the Chinese Coast Guards aimed laser beams in a threatening move against the Philippine Coast Guard, patrolling an area of the contested territory. Another domestic consideration aside from popular sentiment towards China is the military. The Armed Forces of the Philippines has strong and deep ties with the US. Moreover, Marcos Jr. knows too well how important it is to keep the military as an ally rather than an enemy. Factions within the military contributed to the fallout that led to his father's ouster in 1986.

Expectations in the coming months

While there is some continuity in the Marcos administration towards the ICC and Philippine-China relations, the public can also expect calculated responses driven by domestic considerations. These might provide areas of transition and uncertainty during the succeeding years of the Marcos presidency. Critical periods to watch out for will be the mid-term elections and if alliances will break down or consolidate in the coming months. Key allies such as former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and former President Rodrigo Duterte remain influential and popular in the latter's case. Alliances will re-align going into and after 2025 mid-term elections.

If the country continues to engage with the ICC, human rights advocates and victims can expect some resolution, if not justice, for their cases. If Marcos Jr. decides to “disengage” with the ICC completely, it will foster impunity among security forces in the country. The loyalty of these forces may not be with the president but with particular dynasties, especially those, with regional clout. Some signs of these are visible with the increasing violence between and among local politicians. With regard to China relations, Marcos Jr continues to reach out for dialogue, but it is obvious with the increased number of EDCA sites, and the expanded Visiting Forces Agreement shows continuity in the alliance with the US. However, it will be a delicate balancing act as tensions in the West Philippine Sea and the region continue to rise.