

## *Chapter 5*

# **Defying the Water's Edge: The Philippines and Its Strategic Policy toward the United States-China Competition**

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### **Abstract**

There is no dearth of studies regarding the inextricable linkages between domestic politics and the making and implementation of strategic policy—an amalgam of security, defense, and foreign policies—in the Philippines. The scholarly consensus depicted Philippine domestic politics as either a distracting (inward-looking) or a muddling (inconsistent) factor to the pursuit of its strategic interests as a small power in the Indo-Pacific. However, the role of the public and security experts (scholars and practitioners) is considered a minor influence in strategic policymaking. Using findings from an original survey of 663 members of the Filipino security community, this paper discusses their perceptions, opinions, and evaluations of the Duterte administration's strategic policies on the South China Sea dispute, US-China competition, and the Philippines' relations with the US and China. Findings reveal that the domestic security community and the Duterte administration have several diverging views. Considering the views of the Filipino security community, this paper aims to shed light on the role of domestic factors which are beyond presidential politics. Domestic factors such as strategic culture and civil-military relations can account for the bureaucratic resistance to a more accommodative strategic policy toward China.

**Keywords:** Strategic policy, Duterte, security elites, strategic culture, civil-military relations, Philippines-China relations

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## Introduction

The adage “Politics stops at the water’s edge” is a mantra ingrained in every foreign policy practitioner and often imbibed by every scholar and analyst of strategic policy. This ubiquitous tenet of foreign policy is often assumed among practitioners. For international relations scholars of neoclassical realism and liberalism, there is a great deal of variation in its actual implementation across states (Milner 1997; Rose 1988). In transitioning states with weak and un-institutionalized systems and transitioning regimes, domestic politics usually have profound impacts on the making and implementation of *strategic policy*—defined as the amalgam of security, defense, and foreign policies that seek to defend the national interest (Mansfield and Snyder 2007).

The Philippines is a prime example of a country where domestic politics have shaped the contours and trajectories of its strategic policy. The Philippine political landscape has often confounded foreign governments as well as scholars given the lack of policy continuity, shallow implementation, and ever-shifting dispositions on matters of international security and foreign relations (Baviera 2020). Factors such as presidential leadership, executive-legislative relations, partisan politics, and legitimacy deficits have influenced major policy decisions related to the Philippines’ national security and foreign relations. Examples include the failed renewal of the military bases agreement with the US, the country’s pull-out from the Coalition of the Willing in the Global War on Terror, and even its maritime policy in the South China Sea (Castro 2010; Cibulka 1999; Eadie 2011).

As a small power, the Philippines has been in the middle of US-China superpower competition in the Indo-Pacific. Its political leadership identified regional power shifts and lingering conflict flashpoints in Asia at the core of its national security interests. Since 2016, the Philippines has seriously explored expanding its network of security partnerships beyond like-minded status quo states as part of its strategic policy. Some scholars have labeled this strategy as “hedging,” which is commonly pursued by its neighbors in Southeast Asia (Kuik 2016). While the Philippines maintains its sole military alliance with the US, the Duterte administration has explored security cooperation with China, Russia, Israel, Japan, and India. President Duterte has signaled that he is even willing to downgrade the country’s partnership with the US to bolster its reputation as a “free agent” to other possible regional security partners. As the foundations of the Philippines’ foreign and national security policies are shaken by the rhetoric of its current chief executive, its bureaucracy (particularly the defense establishment) is either resisting this “pivot,” or not entirely convinced that veering totally away from established

operating practices is a good idea (Arugay 2020).

Despite Duterte's rhetoric, there is scant evidence on issues such as the pushback against the pro-China and anti-US stance espoused by the Duterte presidency from the country's defense and security establishment (Castro 2017). What are the explanatory factors behind this divergence in strategic policy preferences? This paper provides empirical evidence on the opinions, attitudes, and sentiments of the country's security elites about Duterte's strategic policy toward China. It goes beyond domestic political variables such as the idiosyncrasies of political leadership and regime characteristics to pay attention to the country's strategic culture and the state of civil-military relations (Brooks 2008; Raymond 2018). It also examines how these two variables are perceived by security elites to explain the strategic policy divergence on the role of China between security elites and the presidency.

Based on findings from an original survey on the Philippine security community comprising 663 academics, civilian bureaucrats, and uniformed officials, this paper discusses their perceptions, opinions, and evaluations of strategic policy under the Duterte administration. It specifically focuses on security issues such as the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, US-China competition, and the Philippines' relations with China, revealing divergent views between the security community and the Duterte government. The country's strategic culture (particularly its elements shared by the military, namely a domestic focus and a partiality to the US) will likely resist the development of a strategic partnership with China. This resistance is bolstered by the state of civil-military relations under Duterte as more members of the armed forces (both active and retired) have occupied the upper echelons of decision-making and directed the trajectory of strategic policy.

The next section of the paper reviews the scholarly literature on the role of domestic politics and strategic policy with an emphasis on the impact of strategic culture and civil-military relations. After that, the paper discusses the empirical findings that reflect the policy divergence between the Duterte administration and the Filipino security community. In the conclusion, this paper provides some initial insights on the likely shape of Philippine strategic policy beyond the Duterte administration.

### **Domestic politics and strategic policy: Linkages and undercurrents**

For most of international relations scholarship, factors related to domestic politics (or the second image) (Gourevitch 1978) are often perceived as distractions or muddling

influences to foreign and security policy (Fearon 1998). This effect is arguably more apparent in a small state due to the deficits in its capacities for projecting power, protecting its national interests, and influencing the regional or global arena. Often, leaders of small states are more concerned with domestic issues and trade-off participation in external affairs to score political victories at home (Magcamit 2016).

The position of a certain state in the international system's hierarchy is associated with the role that domestic politics play in its national strategy. Big powers can use their hegemonic position globally and shape the international agenda to their liking (Mearsheimer 2001). On the other hand, small powers are concerned with survival both at home and abroad. With unfinished state- and nation-building projects, small states are often caught in various security predicaments that limit their maneuverability in the international arena. This vulnerability makes domestic political dynamics a key causal factor influencing policy preferences for dealing with other states, big or small (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017).

In the Philippines, scholarly research on the impact of domestic politics on strategic policy has focused on the negative repercussions emanating from its political environment at home. The major bulk of the literature highlights the confounding role of Philippine domestic politics in articulating a coherent and consistent policy abroad. Scholars often point to the lack of state capacity, limited democratization, social fragmentation, and unfavorable economic conditions as pull factors that limit the Philippine government's ability to promote national interests through clear strategizing of its foreign and security policy (Dosch 2006; Morada and Collier 2001; Rüländ 2020; Zha 2015). In the post-authoritarian era, domestic political contexts have informed the analysis of key events related to Philippine strategic policy. Examples of such events include the non-renewal of the US bases treaty in 1991 (Stromseth 1991), the 1995 Mischief Reef crisis with China (Marlay 1997), participation in the Global War on Terror after 9/11 (Santos 2010), and the current SCS dispute with China (Santamaria 2018). As argued by Baviera, "An additional problem is that the preferences of the Philippine leadership and the elite, which matter greatly in foreign policy, are not always clearly articulated as a consensus position... democracy in the Philippines seems to thrive on the cacophony, the plurality, the multitude of voices and opinions" (2014, p. 137).

Among various domestic political variables, the role of presidential leadership and its interaction with other powerful political actors more often dominate academic debates (Castro 2018). This view is also echoed by Baviera: "Foreign policy is largely an executive function in the Philippines, with the president given much leeway as its chief

architect" (Baviera 2012, p.9). A new administration often brings its own definition of the national interest and its own priorities. Personal patronage and satisfying powerful interests tend to guide Philippine foreign policy, disrupting the engagements made by prior governments because the hold of political parties does not often last beyond a term of office. Consequently, the idiosyncrasies of the presidents and their specific political style become a critical domestic variable in Philippine strategic policy considerations (Baviera 2012, p.9).

This is palpable under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. He sought to recalibrate Philippine foreign and security policy away from the West and into the arms of countries such as China and Russia. Once a political nobody abroad, he expressed a desire to embrace China while rejecting the country's long-time ally. The often-neglected country was instantly pushed into the limelight given its new leader's musings, which usually took the form of highly emotional rants under the guise of foreign policy. At one point, he threatened to scrap the Mutual Defense Treaty with the US and at the same time pursue deep security relations during its ongoing territorial disputes with China. These "adventures" in Philippine foreign relations were officially labeled as the pursuit of an "independent" foreign policy (Baviera 2017).

Scholars immediately offered their own analysis of the domineering impact of Duterte on the country's strategic policy, often relying on concepts from political science such as populism or international relations theories such as neoclassical realism (Magcamit 2020). Duterte's populist pivots in foreign policy were seen as performative acts to invite new foreign allies like China while signaling for more commitment from its traditional partners such as the US to gain more economic and security benefits for the Philippines (Arugay 2018). To improve Philippines-China relations, Duterte seeks to leverage his domestic popularity as critical political capital to simultaneously convince China to provide economic assistance to the country (mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative), reinforce his political legitimacy at home through economic development and political stability, and sway current Filipino public opinion in favor of China (Baviera and Arugay 2021).

The current analyses do not transcend the role of the presidency despite some evidence of differences in policy preferences by the country's top decision maker and the actual implementers of strategic policy, who are uniformed officials and civilian bureaucrats as well as experts in security studies and practice. Two important variables to consider are the strategic culture and civil-military relations (CMR). Both variables can be empirically investigated by surveying the country's security community comprising

academics, researchers, and analysts to government officials such as civilian bureaucrats, and members of the security sector.

Strategic culture comprises patterns of thinking and beliefs that are capable of influencing preferences and decisions of actors. For Raymond (2018), strategic culture acts as a map (history as a guide to present policy), a millstone (social process of decision-making), and a filter (limits the options in finding solutions to security problems). Academic work on Philippine strategic culture is also few and far between. Castro (2017)'s study emphasized that strategic culture exists in the Philippines and is dictated by the country's armed forces. Like its security policy, there is little difference between strategic culture and military culture (p. 20).<sup>2</sup> Philippine strategic culture can be characterized by emphasis on the archipelagic nature of the republic, the internal security role of the military, anti-communism, and dependence on alliances from other powers, notably the US and others. There are current debates on whether the desire to reorient the Philippine military toward external defense during its maritime and territorial disputes in the SCS ran contrary to its established strategic culture (Misalucha and Amador 2016). This is a key theme in the discussion of the perceptions of the Filipino security community in the succeeding pages.

CMR also received minor attention in the analysis of Philippine foreign or security policy. While there is no dearth of academic literature on Philippine CMR (Lee 2020), the current body of literature do not link CMR with strategic policy. Given the country's political history with authoritarianism, CMR is often associated with the challenges of democratization and peacebuilding as the Philippines continues to face internal challenges from a communist insurgency and from a Muslim secessionist movement in Mindanao (Arugay 2011).

CMR as a more specific domestic political variable can further enrich our understanding of Philippine strategic policy given that it is heavily influenced by the relative distribution of power between civilian political actors and the armed forces. For many years, the desire to impose civilian supremacy over the military has furthered the cause of democratic civilian control in the Philippines, but arguably at the expense of modernizing the armed forces to address external security challenges (Castro 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> He differentiated between strategic culture and military culture. A country's strategic culture comprises national strategic culture and military organization culture. The former is defined as "public and shared symbols and narratives that concern matters of military force" while the latter are "beliefs, habits, and assumptions that a military uses to adapt to its external environment and integrate internally" (p. 20).

The scholarly consensus seems to be that the more undue influence the military enjoys in a particular administration in the Philippines, the more the military can assert its institutional stance vis-à-vis the current policy defined by the political leadership. In her study of Philippine maritime security policy, Despi (2020) argued that the while the civilian political leadership wants to downplay China's assertiveness in the SCS, the military establishment (particularly the navy) continues to push for a more confrontational stance that contradicts the Duterte administration's preference. Thus, by looking into the policy preferences of the Filipino security community and how they diverge from the official government line, one can possibly attribute this to the current state of CMR in the country.

## **Methodological notes: An expert survey of the Filipino security community**

### *The role of expert surveys*

Surveys gauging public opinion in the Philippines started in the 1990s, particularly in reporting public satisfaction with administration performance, trust ratings of political leaders, candidate preferences during elections, and pre-election and exit poll surveys to validate the integrity of government-proclaimed electoral results (Abad and Ramirez 2008). As Hedman (2010) argues, public opinion has emerged as a social fact or political discourse in the Philippines.

However, much less has been said about large-N “national elite surveys” which are used to directly assess the perceptions of elites on a given topic, often with the goal of differentiating sentiments, beliefs, and knowledge by elite groups (defined by profession and economic class) from those of the public-at-large (Durch 1999; Grøholt and Higley 1972). More importantly, elite surveys reveal prevailing attitudes among those in position to inform or influence policy. In political contexts such as the Philippines, a survey of elites provides information on policy views or preferences held by a more informed group.

Similar national security expert surveys had been conducted on regional topics such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and strategic policy opinions in Southeast Asia (Huong 2018; Tang et al. 2020). Following these studies, one of the most recent expert surveys probed the perceptions and opinions of Filipino strategic elites on the role of the Quad in Philippine national security (Arugay, Misalucha-Willoughby and Amador

2019).

These surveys are often limited by low response rates, limiting their ability to express findings as definitively representative of the opinion of the elite in general or its subsections; nonetheless, they are useful in enhancing our understanding of the strategic landscape (Green and Szechenyi 2014). Given the logistical restraints of conducting research imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper believes that this is an optimal data collection strategy.

### ***Survey conducted for this paper***

The survey for this paper was conducted online from October to November 2020 with its subjects set as academics, public sector employees, and particularly the graduate classes of key defense learning institutions such as the National Defense College of the Philippines and the Philippine Public Safety College. This yielded a good representative sample of emerging leaders of the security sector with entrance qualifications and requisite recommendations from their respective educational and training institutions.

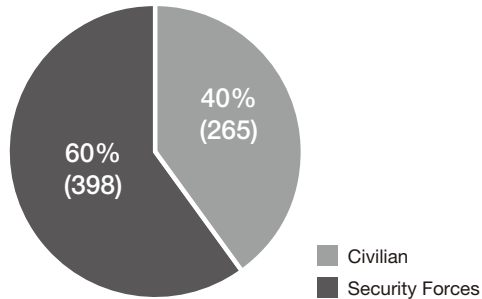
### ***Sample description***

Using an online non-random survey of Filipino members of the country's strategic community, the survey was able to collect data from 663 respondents from two sectors:

- (1) civilian sector comprising members of the (a) academe, (b) government agencies outside the security sector, and (c) civilian personnel in the security forces, and
- (2) security sector comprising military and uniformed personnel in the security forces.

Military and uniformed personnel comprising 60% (N=398) of the persons surveyed were mostly sampled from key security officials, while the civilian sector is represented by 40% of the sample (N=265). While the authors strived to have an equal balance between uniformed and civilian respondents, they had no effective control over the response rate given the non-probabilistic sampling nature of the survey.





**Figure 1: Distribution of sample**

Survey findings showed that 491 (74%) respondents were identified as male, 156 (24%) as female, and 16 (2%) preferred not to answer. As for educational attainment, 60% (401) of respondents possessed master's degrees, 31% (203) possessed an undergraduate or bachelor's degree, and 7% (47) possessed a doctorate. Moreover, given the sample profile of respondents who are normally mid to senior level in their respective careers, 58% (386) of respondents obtained overseas training.

### **The Philippine security community survey: Findings and analysis**

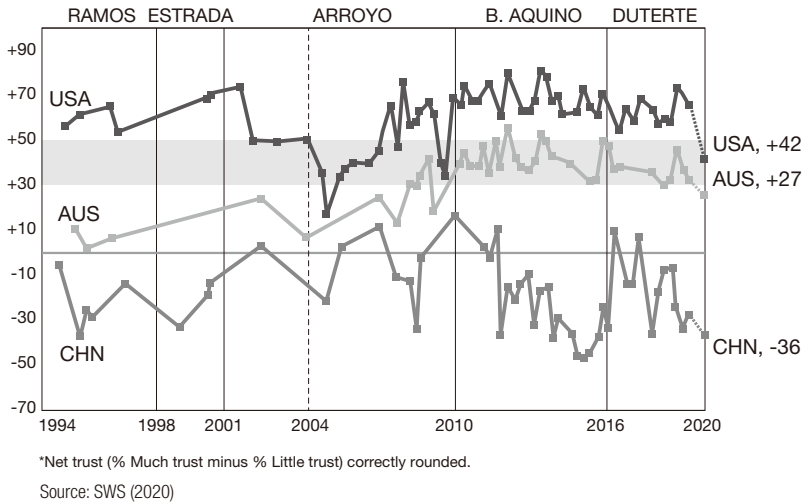
This section provides empirical evidence on the policy preferences of officials and experts that form the Philippine security community. Do the strategic policy preferences of the Duterte administration diverge from those of the larger security community of the country? Given the uncertain conditions of the regional strategic environment amid US-China competition, the relevant part of the survey that can be used for this question is the alliance preferences of the Philippines.

Despite the Duterte administration's desire to forge new security partnerships with countries like China and Russia, the strategic policy experts tended to disagree with the Duterte administration and support the republic's old allies. The results indicate an apparent deep loyalty with traditional security partners: Japan (91.1%), the US (85.2%), and Australia (80.2%). The latter two have respective visiting forces agreement or status of forces agreements in the country. The Philippines and Japan have an existing strategic partnership prior to Duterte's tenure as president. China is the least preferred partner, with Russia not far behind.



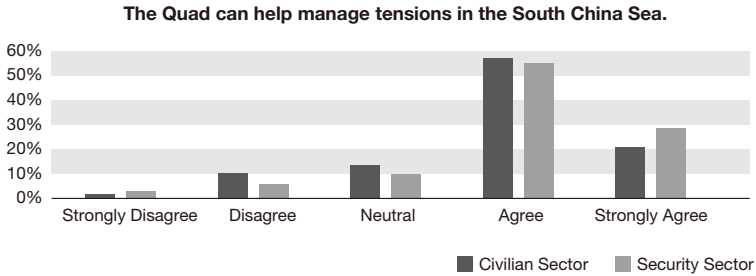
**Figure 2. Preferred security partner-countries of the Philippines**

Some of the survey respondents engaged in activities that emanate from the Philippines's long standing strategic partnerships with Japan, the US, and Australia. As stated earlier, six out of ten survey respondents had foreign education and/or training that were mostly provided by these three countries. Evident from these preferences are the years of strong relations and overlapping linkages between both security sectors in these countries. While the Duterte administration appreciates the role of these traditional partners and the accompanying benefits, it also desires to diversify the partnership portfolio of the nation. However, buy-in from the country's security community remains lukewarm, an indication of bureaucratic pushback from officials in government who have invested in cultivating relations with established partners and scholars who also see the value of deepening strategic relations rather than exploring new ones. There seems to be a sense that forging new partnerships can divert the attention on an inward-looking security sector away from the meager resources it possesses (Manantan 2020).



**Figure 3. Filipino public's trust in China, the US, and Australia.**

The hesitation of the security community to break away from the state's orthodox position suggests that the security community's policy differs from the Duterte administration in two ways: (a) its push for an independent foreign policy is characterized as being "friend to all, enemy to none" and (b) the Philippine president's ideological disagreement with the US-led alliance system (Amador, Arugay, Misalucha-Willoughby and Baquisal 2020). But the opinion of the Filipino security community is like the public at-large in terms of its low regard or trust with China and positive view toward countries like the US and Australia (Figure 3). Net trust in China recovered after Duterte took over, but China still ranks much lower than other countries.

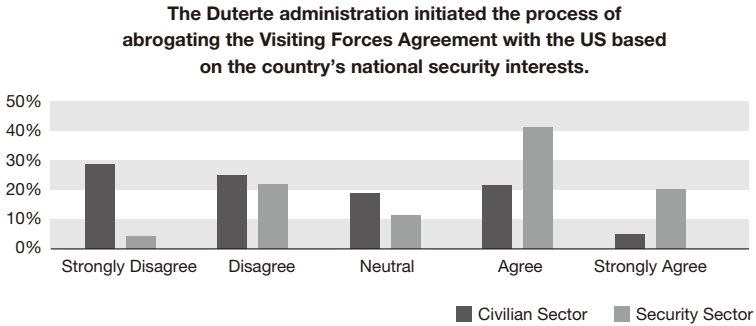


**Figure 4. Preferences on the role of the Quad in the SCS dispute**

The more conservative preferences of the security community are also consistent with their appreciation of the role of the Quad in promoting Philippine national security by advancing its strategic interests in the SCS. According to regional observers, after the sudden withdrawal of Australia in 2008, both the post-2017 revival of the Quad and the promulgation of the United States’ Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy served to counterbalance China’s growing military power and assertiveness in the region.

Across the board, respondents positively affirmed the Quad’s role in managing tensions in the SCS and its positive benefit to the Philippines’ geopolitical position and national security. This is despite the lukewarm treatment of the Duterte administration by some members of the Quad (i.e., the US) and the possible role of the US in the SCS. For the Filipino security community, what the Quad contributes to the Philippines is a sense of familiarity and cordiality in diplomatic and military relations. The Philippines and the US, despite some heated rhetoric coming from Malacanang in recent years, have committed to more security and defense-related activities and exercises in 2019 (Viray 2018). Strong bilateral ties exist between Japan and the Philippines because both countries “have common cause to seek closer security cooperation with each other” (Amador 2013). The implication is that anti-Western policy rhetoric by President Duterte and some of his loyalists in his government is being tempered by more sober actions by the members of the country’s strategic community, whether in government or academe, through informal track-two diplomatic channels.

The Duterte administration’s statements of appreciation for the US role are possibly due to the impact of the push by the bureaucracy, particularly the country’s security sector. Evidence for this is the extension of the deadline for the abrogation of the country’s visiting forces agreement (VFA) with the US.



**Figure 5. Opinions about the abrogation of the US VFA**

On this issue, one can see that the divergence in the preferences of the Filipino security community could be a function of bureaucratic politics. While 65% of respondents in the security sector tended to support the administration's decisions, only 55% of civilian respondents disagreed with the move to abrogate the VFA with the US.<sup>3</sup> This comes as a bit of a surprise since it is expected that the security sector would oppose the move of the Duterte administration given its probable deep linkages with the US. However, this also reflects the Filipino security sector's perception of the declining US commitment to defend Philippine national interests (Venzone 2020).

To summarize, evidence of policy differences between the Duterte government and the Filipino security community can be seen in the choice of strategic partnerships that the Philippines would likely benefit from as well as in the possible stabilizing role of the Quad in managing tensions in the SCS. The survey findings clearly show that the rhetoric at the top of the country's strategic hierarchy is not necessarily shared by those below and those outside of it. However, the often messy, muddled nature of bureaucratic politics was also apparent in the divided view toward Duterte's unilateral desire to abrogate the US VFA. While the civilian sector expressed disagreement with this move, the security sector—cognizant of the declining US commitment in the region—shared the view of President Duterte.

<sup>3</sup> The mean scores between the civilian sector and security sector also indicate a wide gap. Out of the highest score of 5 and the lowest score of 0, the entire sample has a mean score of 3.11, while the civilian sector has a mean score of 2.51, which is a whole point less than the security sector (3.51).

***Viscosity of security priorities: The role of strategic culture***

For small states, strategic culture is less about the projection of force and power abroad and more about an understanding of its status in the strategic environment. It contains “deeply embedded conceptions and notions of national security that take root among the elite and the masses alike. It encapsulates a country’s security posture, its place in the international hierarchy of power, and the nature and scope of its external ambition” (Castro 2014, p. 250).

As bureaucratic politics reveal the intra-policy differences within the security community, the strategic culture in the Philippines seemingly acts as an anchor against “political adventures” by the government of the day. One can use the identification of security priorities of the Philippines as a useful proxy. As the Duterte administration has put the highest premium on security and order, this paper will examine whether the priorities of the larger security community and political leadership are similar.

<b>TOP 3 PRESSING NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES</b>	
	Percentage of respondents who picked the issue
1 COVID-19 Pandemic	53.4%
2 Terrorism and Violent Extremism	48.0%
3 Communist Insurgency	46.0%
4 Natural and Human Disasters	44.0%
5 External Territorial Defense	43.4%
6 Cybersecurity	24.1%
7 Disinformation and Fake News	20.1%
8 US-China Competition	14.0%
9 Regional Secessionism	3.6%
10 Others	5.2%

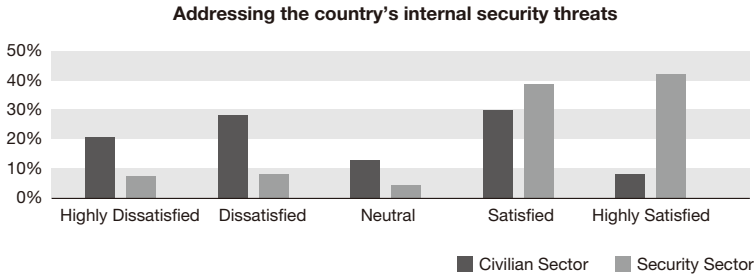
**Figure 6. Top national security issues**

Respondents in our survey were asked to identify what they perceive as the top three pressing national security issues confronting the Philippines. The COVID-19 pandemic, a non-traditional security issue, occupies the top spot.<sup>4</sup> Following this, terrorism and violent extremism (48%), communist insurgency (46%), natural and human disasters (44%), and external territorial defense (43.4%) were also identified as security priorities. More internal-oriented security threats are prioritized by the survey respondents—something that they shared with the Duterte administration in keeping with the inward-looking nature of the country's strategic culture.

This finding is also consistent with the existing national security documents of the Duterte administration, such as its National Security Policy (NSP) and National Security Strategy (NSS). Both documents identify external defense and issues such as the SCS dispute as significant security threats, but they are only mentioned after the threat of illegal drugs, communist insurgency, and terrorism (Arugay and Kraft 2020). The Philippine security community therefore continues to be guided by a strategic culture that is inadequate for the Philippines, a small power in the geopolitical middle of a turbulent regional neighborhood. Thus, one can surmise that the viscosity of this internal focus will affect future efforts to further re-orient the security sector to put more premium on external security threats.

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<sup>4</sup> Observers, however, have raised the Duterte administration's militarized response in non-pharmaceutical interventions (e.g., lockdown or mobility restrictions) and the more contentious stewardship of interagency initiatives by former generals, notably the Secretary of National Defense as head of the National Task Force on COVID-19, and the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity—a former general—being the “Chief Implementer” of the pandemic response and its vaccination strategy (Beltran 2020; Dizon 2020).



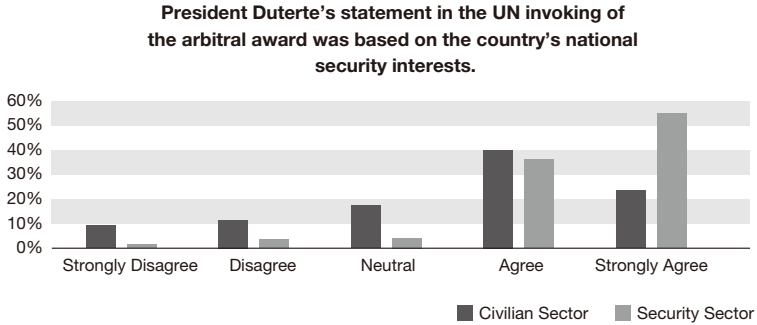
**Figure 7. Performance of the Duterte administration in internal security**

The evaluation of the country's performance in addressing internal security threats (such as the communist insurgency, terrorism, and armed regional groups like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Moro National Liberation Front) has been generally positive. The mean response from the entire sample is 3.51 out of 5. However, there is noticeable difference between the civilian and the uniformed sample. Strong positive performance evaluation in addressing internal security threats does not go beyond the security sector. Albeit with a less within-group representative sample, bureaucrats outside the security sector, scholars of the academe, and members of the private sector that were sampled in this survey reported a strong general dissatisfaction in national security performance overall, including internal security. This is indicative of the prevalence of a more internally oriented strategic culture in shaping the assessment of the performance of the government. However, observable differences within the security community (with the military and police enjoying a more positive evaluation of performance) could be a function of smooth CMR under Duterte. Another explanation could be that the security sector has imbibed the country's strategic culture more than the other members of the Filipino security community.

Another critical part of this strategic culture is anti-communism. Considering the emphasis given by the security community (particularly the security sector) to the communist insurgency threat, it is confounding how the Duterte administration can balance this with a cordial approach to China. Philippine military doctrine as a pillar of the country's strategic culture has identified communism as a non-negotiable enemy, and the insurgent movement's Maoist origins can be seen as something irreconcilable. This is particularly salient as the security sector has branded the New People's Army as a communist-terrorist group. The addition of the "terrorist" label is an unequivocal



declaration that Chinese Communists are enemies not only of the government but of the Philippine state.



**Figure 8. Views on the invocation of the Philippines' UN arbitral award**

Castro (2014) argued that it is part of Filipino strategic culture to rely on multilateralism, considered a strategy of a small power. Prior to the Duterte administration, there was little doubt of the country's commitment to multilateralism, liberal-democratic norms such as human rights and democracy, as well as its proximity to more Western beliefs as a product of its colonial past. The resort to international law to clarify territorial claims in the SCS shocked China and others in the region, since this maneuver defied pragmatism and reflects little regard for negative repercussions. While the Duterte administration seemed to downplay the arbitral award in the beginning of its term, it has recently invoked the award as seen in the speech of President Duterte at the September 2020 meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. According to the survey, respondents uniformly positively receive the invocation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration award in international fora such as the United Nations and accept ASEAN's role in advancing Philippine national interests. It seems like that the security community, whether civilian or uniformed respondents, clearly espouses a strategy that confronts the SCS issue with international law and a strategy involving multilateral institutions, a key component of Filipino strategic culture.

*The internal counter-flow: The role of civil-military relations*

The military has become a key partner of the Duterte administration not only in strategic affairs but in overall governance of the republic. From its bloody war on drugs to its various policies to deal with the lingering communist insurgency and Mindanao conflict, it has heavily relied on the security sector, particularly the military and police, to accomplish its national security goals (Esguerra 2019). Clearly favoring military officers for their apparent efficiency and obedience, by 2017 President Duterte had started to appoint more than the usual number of retired generals to the executive branch of the government. To date, he has the greatest number of retired generals in any presidential cabinet in the post-dictatorship period (Ranada 2018). Although defense and security institutions (such as the Department of National Defense) are usually led by former military officers, the Duterte administration distinguishes itself by also appointing them to the cabinet and chief government departments, such as those dealing with the environment and social welfare, and even the office in charge of the peace process.

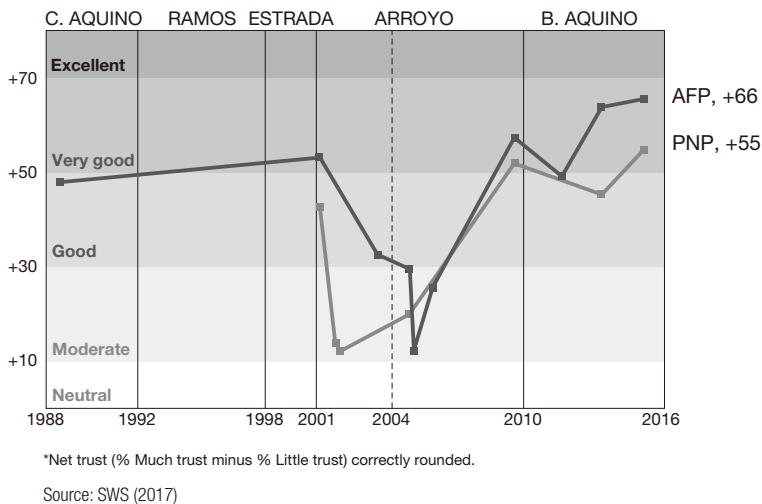
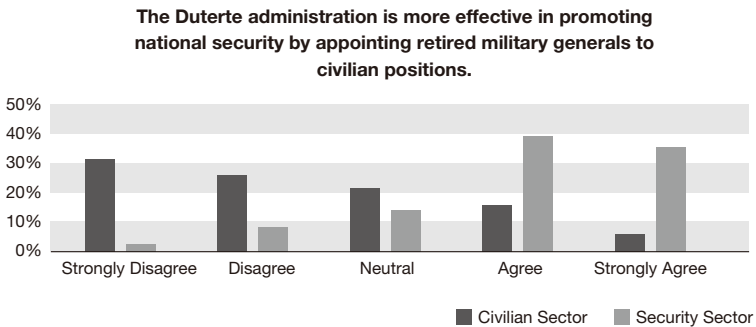


Figure 9. Public trust ratings on the military (AFP) and the police (PNP)

Duterte's successful propping of the military has also affected the conventionally negative view of the public toward the security sector. A 2016 survey revealed that the AFP was enjoying its highest trust ratings since public opinion polling began (SWS 2017). A March 2020 survey by the same firm also revealed that 79% of respondents were satisfied with the military's performance (SWS 2020).

From the question of whether the Duterte administration is more effective in promoting national security by appointing retired military generals to civilian positions, one can see polarization within the Filipino security community: the security sector agreed with the practice, while the civilian sector vehemently opposed the practice. This glaring division is reflected in the mean averages of the respondents. With five as the highest score, the civilian sector has a lower response average (2.39) compared to the security sector (3.99).



**Figure 10. Views on the role of retired generals in Duterte's cabinet**

The balance in CMR is tipped in favor of the latter when some of these ex-soldiers replaced officials endorsed by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) who formed part of Duterte's first cabinet.<sup>5</sup> Despite the Duterte government's promising start, the window for peace negotiations with Filipino communists started to close. Duterte's policy reversal from all-out peace to all-out war became evident at the beginning of December 2018 with the issuance of Executive Order No. 70, which created an

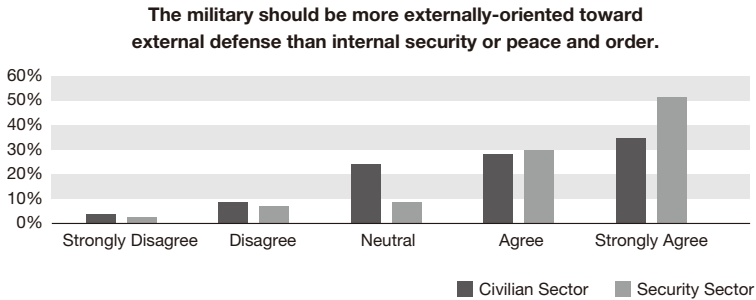
<sup>5</sup> An example of a CPP-endorsed appointee is the former secretary of social welfare and development, Judy Taguiwalo, who is a retired professor of community development. She was replaced by a retired general, Rolando Bautista.

inter-agency body tasked with ending the local communist armed conflict. A year before December 2018, Duterte recognized the New People's Army (NPA) as a terrorist group. With both retired and active leaders of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in charge of implementing this executive order, it seems that the military is determined to put a violent rather than negotiated end to perhaps the longest Maoist-inspired insurgency in the world.

The appointment of retired military officers to the civilian government is common in the Philippines (Gloria 2003). What sets the Duterte administration apart is not only the unprecedented number of these officers, but also the portfolios that they are responsible for and the dominant voice they possess in the current government. Decades of fighting the communist insurgency led these ex-combatants to decide that what is needed is a "whole-of-nation" approach, with the appointment of former military officers (instead of civilian officials) as heads of key civilian institutions. This decision threatens to undermine democratic CMR, especially in a country where the military has often exercised political autonomy vis-à-vis politicians and bureaucrats (Arugay 2011).

There is little doubt that this group of retired generals dictate current peace and security policy. More than that, their placement in other agencies involved in rural development and public services delivery obscures the civil-military divide that is essential for maintaining civilian supremacy in governance structures and democratic civilian control over the military. This trend also potentially confounds the military's reformist stance and reorientation toward external defence that form the focus of its current doctrine and strategy. Therefore, formulation or implementation of strategic policy, especially one that focuses on the military's external mission, is affected by the imbalance between the civil and military spheres in Philippine politics.

One can argue that with the military possessing leverage to influence the civilian government, it can divert precious attention and mobilize scarce resources to more strategic concerns. However, the Philippine military seems to be more interested in quashing domestic enemies rather than in countering external security threats. The Filipino security community seems to have more idealistic aspirations for a more professional military that is more outward-looking (Figure 11).



**Figure 11. Views on the appropriate mission of the Philippine military**

For the Filipino security community, there is consensus that a more professional military must be externally oriented. While this was shared by Duterte’s predecessor, the current government dominated by retired generals who have fought the country’s internal enemies such as the communists, terrorists, and Mindanao rebels have doubled down on internal security challenges. The passage of the draconian Anti-Terrorism Law and the current communist purge in the country’s top universities are more recent manifestations of this policy leaning.

**Conclusion and prospects: The future of Philippine strategic policy toward China**

This paper discusses the role of two domestic factors affecting Philippine strategic policy toward China under the Duterte administration: strategic culture and CMR. Focusing on these two conceptual handles added more complexity to the domestic political terrain that profoundly influences the security and foreign policies of the Philippines. This paper also gives a nuanced picture of the common one-sided view that domestic-level variables or conditions act as a distracting or muddling factor in the protection and promotion of the country’s strategic interests abroad. Using an expert survey on members of the Philippine security community comprising academics, civilian bureaucrats, and uniformed officials, this paper provides empirical evidence on how their strategic policy preferences diverged from the official line of the Duterte administration, particularly President Duterte himself. These differences in policy positions could be attributed to the nature of bureaucratic politics, given the long tenure and inter-institutional juxtaposition of the interests and agendas of relevant strategic actors. From the discussion, the ripples

generated by different bureaucratic institutions such as the military, diplomatic corps, and other civilian agencies ran contrary to the viewpoints of the government of the day. In terms of dealing with China, the country's bureaucracy is not entirely convinced that it is in the interest of the country to forge closer strategic relations. In this sense, there is sub-state evidence that the Philippines might likely rely on China for economic benefits while continuing to be loyal to its traditional partners to further its security interests despite the prodding of Duterte and his political allies. As his government ends its tenure in 2022 and unless his true proxy wins the presidency, it is doubtful whether this pro-China push will be sustained.

These two domestic factors obfuscate the Duterte administration's accommodative stance toward China. The Filipino security community maintains the viscosity of the state's strategic culture —one that is inward-looking, pro-West, anti-communist, and liberal. Even if China offers economic incentives for closer ties, it will not be easy to depart from conventional beliefs, especially if China continues its unwarranted aggression in the SCS. Even the Duterte administration might change its friendly stance. If it does, then the entire security establishment, influenced by its strategic culture, will have to confront China. On the other hand, strategic culture also prevents the Philippines from being more externally focused in its strategic priorities. The anti-communist orientation of the security community exposes a dilemma of mutual exclusivity: focusing inwards prevents the country from adopting a more external orientation. This current inward-looking orientation might actually work in China's favor.

Finally, the Duterte administration has unduly empowered the military establishment through a politico-military network of retired and active officials from the security sector. This troubling development for the country's democratic CMR is an indication of the larger process of democratic erosion. There is some evidence that the process of de-democratization is aligned with China's support to the Duterte government (Arugay 2020). This civil-military imbalance can shape the future of Philippines-China relations. On the one hand, the country can "navel-gaze" and focus on defeating its communist insurgency, thereby countering the flow of promoting national interests in a coherent and unified manner. The security sector also cannot decouple the communist movement from China as its ultimate inspiration and inceptor. Thus, any form of strategic cooperation with China can easily be spoiled by this monkey wrench.

More research in the future can be devoted to further tease out these two complex domestic factors with more empirical data. This expert survey of the Philippine security community serves as a crude snapshot of the perceptions, views, and opinions of those

working on strategic policy, whether inside or outside the government. Other types of evidence and methodologically sound ways of gathering information should be used in order to look for other ways that domestic politics defy the water's edge as well as to find solutions in order to keep the country's water flowing in accordance with its national interests.

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