Chapter 3
The COVID-19 Pandemic and Philippines–China Relations

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3.1 Introduction

As the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic continues to ravage countries all over the world, the Philippines is among those that went to unprecedented levels of crisis mode and faced enormous difficulties in getting the virus under control. The start of the year 2020 was inauspicious for the Philippines as COVID-19 follows the Taal Volcano eruption in Batangas province in January which displaced around 300,000 people. In contrast to the last quarter of 2019 where the Philippines was the second-best economic performer in Southeast Asia, the pandemic dimmed the country’s balance of payments, fiscal position, revenue generation prospects, and derailed the country’s goal to become an upper middle income country by the end of 2020. As was the case in many countries, COVID-19 did not spare famous personalities in the Philippines, celebrities and government officials alike. And as COVID-19 lingers, the crisis and disaster management responses, healthcare systems, political leaderships and control measures of national governments are put to the test and are inevitably compared and contrasted. The success stories and variegated national policy strategies on COVID-19 exemplified by developed and developing countries such as China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Germany, all demonstrate that government agency transcends political structures—whether democratic or authoritarian. In the Philippines, however, there continues to be critical public discussions about the effectiveness of the Duterte administration’s policy interventions on COVID-19. For instance, there are issues that the Philippine approach has been highly militarized similar to that with Indonesia1 and is said to be among

1Anindya (2020).
2BusinessWorld (2020).

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the strictest pandemic responses in Southeast Asia\(^2\) with the United Nations (UN) sounding the alarm on alleged human rights violations. Others believe that Manila’s approach has been very reactive\(^3\) which made support measures on containment and prevention (i.e., active surveillance, contact tracing, early detection, isolation and case management) very challenging. COVID-19 has had far-reaching consequences, apart from public health and retarded economic operations, as trust issues about China’s political system have again been accentuated over allegations of cover-up. This, in turn, has amplified the other political differences between China and the West (i.e., Hong Kong, South China Sea (SCS), Taiwan, Xinjiang). There are also those who say that “mask diplomacy” or the provision of medical supplies to countries affected by COVID-19 has allowed China to “claim global leadership”.\(^4\) But while China and the Philippines may have made substantial cooperation on COVID-19 under the framework of the “Health Silk Road,” the pandemic has had knock-on effects on the bilateral ties owing to geopolitical developments in the SCS,\(^5\) and various domestic political factors that have harmed China’s image in the Philippines.

### 3.2 The Philippine Way on COVID-19

The Philippine government’s lines of action on COVID-19 may be classified into executive and legislative actions, which is supplemented by private sector efforts and foreign aid and assistance. Executive actions include Executive Orders (EOs) or policy directives given by the President, and measures undertaken by the relevant government departments and lead agencies. Legislative actions, on the other hand, refers to the enactment of bills granting emergency powers to the President. When COVID-19 was first in China in the end of December 2019, precautionary measures taken by the Philippine government were mainly border monitoring and surveillance, selective quarantine, legislative hearings, and executive consultations. As COVID-19 cases rapidly rose in Wuhan and spread to countries such as Thailand and Japan in mid-January 2020, the Philippines decided to ban all flights to and from Wuhan (January 23, 2020). This subsequently expanded to the denial of Visa Upon Arrival (VUA) applications of tour groups from Wuhan (January 24, 2020) and suspension of VUA for Chinese tourists from Hubei province (January 28, 2020). On January 28, the Department of Health (DOH) convened the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) which led to the issuance of Resolution No. 1, underscoring the need to ensure the safety of and assistance to Filipinos in China. The IATF-EID was created during the time of then President Benigno Aquino III by way of EO No. 168 to serve as a government task force and policymaking body chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Health (DOH). Other executive departments serve as members of the IATF-EID. The COVID-19

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\(^3\)De Silva (2020).

\(^4\)Wen and Hinshaw (2020).

\(^5\)Mangosing (2020).
National Task Force (NTF) is the operational arm or enforcement body of the IATF-EID. The appointed overall head of the NTF, which has various sub-task forces, is Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, the vice-chair is Secretary of Interior and Local Government Eduardo Ano, and the Chief Implementer in-charge of the National Incident Command (NIC) is Peace Process Secretary Carlito Galvez. All three are retired generals which reflect President Duterte’s political preference for military men as “men of action”. On January 29, 2020, the Philippine Congress summoned DOH Secretary Duque to inquire on the government’s readiness to address COVID-19 and on January 30, 2020, when the WHO declared COVID-19 a “public health emergency of international concern” (PHEIC), the Philippines registered its first case of COVID-19. A day after the Philippines confirmed its first case (a Chinese national who arrived from Wuhan via Hong Kong), the government decided to impose a travel ban—largely due to public pressure—on Hubei province and other infected areas. On February 2, 2020, the travel ban eventually included greater China (including Taiwan) and the Philippines reported the first COVID-19 death of a Chinese national outside of China.

Thereafter, the Philippines started the repatriation of Filipinos overseas starting with Wuhan and were given corresponding cash assistance by the government. During this time, the DOH and the WHO in the Philippines began to advise the Philippine public to observe proper hygiene and frequent handwashing to avoid COVID-19 infection. On February 4, 2020, the Philippine Senate conducted a hearing and pointed out the gaps in the DOH’s contract tracing efforts and Secretary Duque’s lack of leadership. Interestingly, it was not until March 6, 2020, that the first case of local transmission (Patient No. 5) was confirmed, which forced the DOH to raise the alert level to “Code Red Sub-level 1” (March 7, 2020). With more than 20 confirmed cases, President Duterte declared a “State of Public Health Emergency” (Proclamation No. 922) across the Philippines (March 9, 2020). A day after, the Metro Manila Council was convened to discuss contingency measures to prevent the rise of COVID-19 cases. With COVID-19 already a “pandemic” according to the WHO” (March 11, 2020), Philippine alert level was raised to “Code Red Sublevel 2” (March 12, 2020) and a “Community Quarantine” (CQ) or “partial lockdown” for Metro Manila or the National Capital Region (NCR) and Cainta, Rizal for one months (March 15 to April 14) was announced. This enabled Local Government Units (LGUs) to follow-suit and declare their own lockdowns. Under Code Red Sub-level 2, the guidelines for Metro Manila and LGUs (barangay/village, municipal, provincial levels) were: strict enforcement of social distancing, class suspension, restriction of mass gatherings, skeletal workforce (in government), and flexible working arrangements for the private sector. Manila was locked down as it was the epicenter of COVID-19 outbreak in the Philippines tallying more than 50 cases on the day of pronouncement.

On March 15, 2020, the General Community Quarantine (GCQ) took effect and all forms of travel to and from Metro Manila were prohibited although select forms of mass transportation in the Capital remained in operation. Checkpoints were established and were manned by the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Armed Forces
of the Philippines (AFP), including the latter’s reserve force. On the same day, President Duterte declared a “State of Calamity” (Proclamation No. 929) in the Philippines which authorizes the national and local governments to tap their Calamity and Quick Response Funds. A day later, with the number of cases at 100 including eight fatalities, President Duterte announced an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) or “full lockdown” for the entire island of Luzon (March 17 to April 12). The government employed four levels of risk assessment which varies in the extent of social mobility and type of economic activities that could resume depending on the number of cases in a certain area. The most restrictive being ECQ, followed by Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), GCQ, and Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ). Under ECQ, only one person per household is authorized to go out (with quarantine passes) and there were stay at home orders for senior citizens. Curfew violators were dealt with by corporal punishments at the barangay level. According to the University of the Philippines Resilience Institute (UPRI), the ECQ was highly effective in curbing the spread of COVID-19 (ABS-CBN, 2020c) and that the public health delivery system was spared from collapse.6

On March 16, 2020, the government rolled out a stimulus package worth P27.1 billion which aims to acquire the needed medical resources and provide relief to people and affected sectors through social protection programs, unemployment benefits, skills upgrading, revival of tourism programs, zero-interest loans (for farmers and fisher-folk), and credit access for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and government employees.

On March 23, 2020, the landmark bill Republic Act No. 11469 also known as “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act” (Bayanihan Act) was swiftly approved by both houses of Congress and signed into law by President Duterte a day later. The Bayanihan Act provides special powers related to: the crackdown on fake news peddling, penalties for hoarding and profiteering, emergency subsidies to low-income households, the unimpeded flow of donations and health products, guaranteed flow of credit, availability of essential goods, utilization and realignment of government savings for emergency measures, moratoriums on tax and debt payments for firms and households, the takeover of private medical facilities, monetary incentives for frontline health workers, grace period for residential rents, and the expansion of cash grants for dislocated informal workers.

By March 24, 2020, the government has designated COVID-19 referral centers and pledged that the state health insurance agency, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PHILHEALTH), will shoulder the costs of medication of Filipinos hospitalized for COVID-19. On March 25, 2020, President Duterte approved the 100-day National Action Plan (NAP) or the government’s overall strategy on COVID-19 presented by the IATF-EID. Around this time, the DOH engaged in efforts to recruit more volunteer health workers. In April 2020, the government launched the Public-Private Task Force T3 (Test, Trace, Treat) to intensify anti-Covid-19 measures. This was complemented in July 2020 by the government’s designation of four government officials as “czars” to enhance the country’s T3 capabilities. Notably, the national government

6Vallejo Jr. and Ong (2020).
borrowed a page from Wuhan’s playbook by converting public establishments such as stadiums and convention centers into large-scale medical quarantine, treatment and testing (mega-swabbing) facilities, and some of these were managed by the AFP’s Health Service Command. Also in April 2020, the Duterte administration announced another stimulus, the Philippine Program for Recovery with Equity and Solidarity (PH-PROGRESO) (P1.7 trillion), which was proposed by the Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC) and consists of a Four Pillar Strategy, specifically: the provision of emergency support for vulnerable groups (Pillar I), the expansion of medical resources (Pillar II), the enhancement of fiscal and monetary actions (Pillar III), and an economic recovery plan for growth and job creation (Pillar IV). Part of this initiative is the landmark Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises or (CREATE) bill intended to jumpstart economic activities by lowering corporate income taxes (CITs). PH-PROGRESO was augmented by government efforts of bonds issuances and loans from international financial institutions (e.g., Japan International Cooperation Agency, Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, World Bank and Agence Française de Développement). Apart from these, the government extended non-medical assistance such as the “Hatid Tulong” (Send Help) Program to help send off locally stranded individuals (LSIs) that got stuck in Metro Manila because of the lockdown. Another is the “Balik Probinsya” (Return to Province) Program which is intended to decongest Metro Manila and decentralize economic growth to rural communities by incentivizing migrant workers to return to their provinces. By May 2020, Metro Manila (including other areas) had transitioned to MECQ and by June 2020 to GCQ. The Office of the Vice President (OVP) under Leni Robredo was remarkably active in the fight against COVID-19. It organized free shuttle services for medical front liners, sourced locally produced Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), provided free food, donated relief aid and gadgets to local communities, and assisted LSIs. LGUs received both directives and assistance from National Government Agencies (NGAs). The former include the formation of Regional Task Forces (RTFs), and the utilization of Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Councils and Quick Response Funds; the latter includes the receipt of Bayanihan grants from the national government. LGUs also directly received foreign donations. LGUs have the leeway to be creative in their operational responses. In fact, certain Mayors in Metro Manila stood out and have been seen as future presidentiables (e.g., Mayor Vico Sotto of Pasig and Mayor Isko Moreno of Manila) because of their outstanding COVID-19 management efforts. One example of efforts unique to LGUs is the passage of ordinances (e.g., penalties for not wearing face masks), creation of testing labs, setting up of mobile markets, drive thru testing, cash and relief goods distribution, and the preference to realign jobs affected by the pandemic (conversion of tricycle drivers into delivery riders and public schools into quarantine facilities).

Given these, it is interesting to note how the Philippine private and non-government sector reinforced the national government’s efforts in combating COVID-19. For example, MSMEs in the food and beverage industry, in appreciation

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7 ABS-CBN News (2020).
of the heroic efforts of medical front-liners and law enforcement agents manning checkpoints, provided free food and other consumables. Local garment exporters such as the Confederation of Wearable Exporters of the Philippines (CONWEP) have collaborated with the government to locally produce PPEs. The academic community such as the University of the Philippines National Institutes of Health (UP-NIH) had helped develop indigenously made test kits. Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, and De La Salle University have published medical (data analysis and forecasts) and economic policy briefs related to COVID-19.\(^8\) Community-based organizations (e.g., Caritas Manila, Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Pantawid Pamilya) provided assistance to frontliners and vulnerable communities while volunteers helped design isolation tents and create websites for charity efforts. Some doctors offered free telemedicine services, and private citizens gave away tablets for poverty-stricken students for their online learning classes. Private companies heeded the plea of the government to provide the salaries of their employees (during ECQ) and advanced bonuses for the same for humanitarian considerations. Numerous corporations have waived rental fees, provided medical supplies, gave moratorium on utilities bills, shouldered the cost of electricity and internet of some quarantine facilities, and arranged free transport services for health workers. Some conglomerates and big companies have also made financial donations to the tune of hundreds of millions (to a billion) pesos, including those by Project Ugnayan, a coalition of 36 firms.\(^9\) Moreover, there was a local developer that volunteered to create an online application system to monitor people with symptoms of COVID-19 in behalf of the government. Relatedly, the Philippines was able to receive donations of medical supplies (test kits, polymerase chain reaction machine, ventilators, oxygen concentrators, PPEs, laboratory and medical equipment, face masks, sanitizers) and financial assistance/grants from countries and multilateral organizations such as China, Singapore, US, Japan, France, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Canada, European Union, and Asian Development Bank, among others.

### 3.3 Problems in Government Response

Many say that COVID-19 is the “blackest swan” event that the Philippines had faced since World War II and the cholera epidemic in 1902–04. In view of this, major problems with the Philippine government’s pandemic response are highly evident at the policy and operational levels. At the policy level, there were glaring lapses in three aspects: (1) attitude/orientation; (2) plans and decisions; and (3) communications. This is in spite of the fact DOH Secretary Duque said in February that “it is a question of when, not if” before the virus reaches the Philippines and in saying “yes”

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\(^8\)See David et al. (2020); Monsod et al. (2020); Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) (2020); Torneo et al. (2020).
\(^9\)CNN Philippines Staff (2020).
when answering to congressional inquiries whether the Philippines is ready for the pandemic.\footnote{Luna (2020).}

First, the policy attitude of the national leadership was apparent when President Duterte early on repeatedly downplayed the threat of COVID-19\footnote{Holmes and Hutchcroft (2020).} and when there were lapses in the initial contact tracing efforts of the DOH. This was accompanied by pronouncements by the DOH and WHO in the Philippines until early March, 2020 that masks are only to be worn by people showing COVID-19 symptoms and that proper hygiene and social distancing practices will suffice.\footnote{It was only until April 1 that the wearing of face masks became mandatory (IATF-EID Resolution No. 18), see Republic of the Philippines Department of Health (2020).} This is against the backdrop that the Philippines had already registered its first case of COVID-19 in January 2020 and the wearing of face masks were already being practiced in countries such as China, South Korea and Japan. This, as a consequence, made the public more vulnerable and less vigilant than they should be, not to mention that Metro Manila is among the densest urban centers in the world which hosts a large number of informal settlers with poor sanitation. Another factor that reflected the government’s general lack of risk awareness is the failure to strictly observe quarantine protocols evidenced by the number of high-level national (Senators and Congressmen) and local government officials, including members of the IATF-EID itself (e.g., Interior and Local Government Secretary, AFP Chief of Staff) that tested positive for COVID-19. This drew overwhelming public backlash because they had to be prioritized (including their families)—over ordinary citizens—to undergo tests given the limited number of available test kits then. Notable high-profile cases of health protocol violations was a senator who engaged in social activities even if he was already on home quarantine for possible infection of COVID-19 and a high-ranking police officer who hosted a birthday celebration amidst a lockdown. President Duterte refused to denounce them, making the public more indignant of the wanton display of double standards. In addition, at the start of the implementation of the ECQ, some members of state security forces (PNP and AFP) deployed to man checkpoints were only armed with guns and not with face masks. This is an indicator that they were not properly briefed about the dangers of the virus and/or that face masks were scarce. Thus, unsurprisingly, the number of PNP personnel that have been infected have been more than 1,000 with over a dozen deaths as of August 2020. To make matters worse, the country’s health insurance system, PHILHEALTH, which is under the auspices of the DOH, continues to be hounded by accusations of corruption in the wake of the pandemic. The country’s Ombudsman has launched investigations into the DOH for alleged anomalies in the overpriced procurement of medical supplies and equipment, and for the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. If in China there were heads that rolled due to the mishandling of the COVID-19 situation, in the Philippines, there were none. Repeated calls and appeals for Secretary Duque to resign by the Senate and the private health sector on account of alleged incompetence and failure of leadership were not heeded by President Duterte. Furthermore,
criticisms on the Duterte administration’s COVID-19 response have coincided with controversial domestic issues such as the closure of the country’s biggest media company (ABS-CBN) and the passage of a contentious anti-terrorism law. These raised public concerns as to where the national leadership is directing its resources amidst a pandemic thereby triggering a series of protests which some said might have contributed to the transmission of COVID-19.

Second, there was policy indecisiveness when the government was not able to immediately ban flights from China and when a “State of Emergency” was only declared a week after Health Secretary Duque had recommended to do so. Another case is the extension of the ECQ two times (April and May 2020), indicating the lack of time frame in getting the virus under control. And even after two months of ECQ, cases continued to rise which put the imposition of an ECQ in question. The difference between the lifting of the lockdown between the Philippines and China is that China did so when it had the virus under control, while that of the Philippines’ is because of the growing pains of a closed economy. Due to the mounting cases after the lifting of the ECQ, medical associations issued a formal letter to President Duterte in August to reimpose ECQ for Metro Manila as the country’s health system was on the brink of collapse. Crucially, the declaration of lockdown or ECQ for Metro Manila on March 15, 2020 showed a clear lack of policy planning because instead of instituting order, it resulted in “pandemonium”\textsuperscript{13} This is because on the day of declaration, when the number of cases was already rising, there was a three-day lead time, that is, between the date of announcement (March 12, 2020) and date of effectivity (March 15, 2020). As a consequence, fearing limited access to food supplies and getting stuck in Metro Manila—due in part to lack of policy specifics—the public was forced to go on panic buying (hoarding) and rushed to go back to their hometowns thus congesting bus terminals, airports and seaports. One can argue that the lockdown accelerated, instead of decelerated, the transmission of COVID-19 across the country as most cases then were only in Metro Manila. According to the government, the only people exempted from the lockdown are those who work in Metro Manila but live in neighboring areas provided that they have to go through temperature checks at designated checkpoints when returning back for work. Realizing that many members of the workforce in Metro Manila live outside and have to undergo temperature checks, the ECQ was broadened to cover the entire Luzon island on March 17, 2020.

Seeing the urgency to lessen economic dependence on Metro Manila, which accounts for 37.5\% of Philippine GDP—because of Covid-19—the government decided to carry out the Balik Probinsya Program to help promote development in the countryside. This, however, ended up as a disaster and partly contributed to the proliferation of cases in the provinces because there were no proper coordination with LGUs.\textsuperscript{14} In fact, after the program was launched, Ormoc and Cebu provinces became new COVID-19 hotspots. Similarly, the government’s Hatid Tulong Program for thousands of LSIs lacked organization as thousands of people were crammed into

\textsuperscript{13}Aspinwall (2020).
\textsuperscript{14}Jazmin (2020).
a baseball stadium where social distancing measures were disregarded and some were even found to have tested positive for COVID-19.\textsuperscript{15} The lifting of the ECQ in Metro Manila was disastrous just as it was imposed because while people were allowed to go back to work, the resumption of public transportation was very minimal which forced commuters to crowd terminal stations and wait for long hours causing many to be stranded thus heightening their exposure to COVID-19.

Third, faulty policy communication can be observed in the government’s statements that lacked sensitivity to public sentiment and the seeming avoidance of accountability in dealing with COVID-19. Examples of these are President Duterte’s expression that imposing a travel ban on China would be “unfair;” and Secretary Duque’s statements that “there might be serious diplomatic and political repercussions” in implementing a travel ban, “no country anticipated COVID-19”, and that the Philippines “is not late in making orders, but other countries just acted earlier”. Moreover, President Duterte’s press conferences have appeared to be “late night shows” as they were always conducted late into the night and became a platform for him to crack jokes and attack the opposition instead of presenting concrete government action. This approach missed valuable opportunities for the government to educate and make the public realize how grave the situation is. A private lawyer even petitioned the Supreme Court to determine President Duterte’s state of health given his strange behaviors during press conferences. The government had also developed a narrative that Filipinos are “pasaway” (hardheaded) which in a way legitimized state reliance on the use of hard power, instead of medical and science-based solutions. Another issue of great import is government incoherence seen in conflicting statements of key public officials. For instance, in May 2020, Secretary Duque announced that the Philippines had already entered the second wave of COVID-19 infections only to be refuted publicly by the Interior and Local Government Secretary and Presidential Spokesperson.

At the operational level, while hospital congestion and overwhelmed public healthcare systems (e.g., critical care capacity, isolation beds, ventilators) are a common sight in many countries, problems in the Philippines, however, are broader in scope which include the lack of healthcare workers,\textsuperscript{16} medical supplies (surgical masks, PPEs, test kits), test laboratories, and contact tracers.\textsuperscript{17} These problems were compounded by patients who did not fully disclose their contact/travel history, and issues of red tape with regard to the processing of medical supplies from other countries. All these factors contributed to the Philippines’ very low testing capacity—which lagged behind other ASEAN countries\textsuperscript{18}—and the country with the highest fatalities of healthcare professionals on COVID-19, causing the WHO to be alarmed. At one point, almost half of the tests results have been delivered after patients have already expired.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, in May 2020, it is was Philippine Red Cross that

\textsuperscript{15}Aurelio and Corrales (2020).
\textsuperscript{16}Magsaysay (2020).
\textsuperscript{17}For stats on insufficiency of Philippine healthcare workers, see Yee (2020).
\textsuperscript{18}Cordero (2020).
\textsuperscript{19}Sabillo (2020).
conducted 45 percent of the tests nationwide. Also, the Philippines was reported as the country with the “most number” of cases in Southeast Asia (regional epicenter), “riskiest” or “least safe” country for COVID-19 in the Asia-Pacific with the “highest mortality rate” in August\textsuperscript{20} and the “lowest recovery rate” in ASEAN.\textsuperscript{21} The Philippines likewise had the fastest rise in COVID-19 cases in the West Pacific, overtaking China’s figures.\textsuperscript{22} The situation was so grave that the government banned medical professionals for leaving for abroad.

Aside from health concerns, government efforts have been hounded by administrative issues and controversies. First is the lack of coordination between NGAs and LGUs. For example, the national government was not able to coordinate with LGUs the details of quarantine classifications and subsidies that has to be rolled out for the vulnerable.\textsuperscript{23} In May 2020, only 104 of 1,632 LGUs have completed the first tranche of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) payout\textsuperscript{24} due to problems of inaccurate data (varying lists of residents and recipients) and an exercise of patronage politics by some LGUs.\textsuperscript{25} There was also a case of unrest because relief goods were not properly distributed and has even been dismissed as being instigated by leftist groups.\textsuperscript{26} The return OFWs posed an additional challenge to public authorities wherein some were subjected to a cumbersome process of testing and quarantine procedures.\textsuperscript{27} This was aggravated by insufficient coordination between the line agencies (i.e., Department of Labor and Employment, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) and LGUs in facilitating the return of OFWs.\textsuperscript{28}

Second, there were complications in policy execution or enforcement at the local levels. When the country transitioned to MECQ and GCQ, government monitoring and enforcement also relaxed, especially in malls and markets, and checkpoints have been recalled. This made the public feel confident, prompting a spike in new cases. President Duterte remains popular in the Philippines but various surveys indicate the public was not satisfied with the government’s COVID-19 response. On a May 20, 2020 survey on Telegram (PH Coronavirus Updates Group), an instant messaging app, more than 70% of subscribers were “dissatisfied” with the government’s COVID-19 response. This increased to 78% on June 13, 2020, where respondents became “very unsatisfied” with the government’s COVID-19 response. By June 30, 2020, more than 90% of respondents believe that the country is not winning the war on COVID-19. And because of the government’s mismanagement of COVID-19, the hashtag “OustDuterte” trended on Twitter.

\textsuperscript{20}Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker (2020).
\textsuperscript{21}Benjamin (2020).
\textsuperscript{22}Yee (2020).
\textsuperscript{23}Ranada (2020).
\textsuperscript{24}Ronda (2020).
\textsuperscript{25}De Silva (2020); Malindog-Uy (2020).
\textsuperscript{26}Ramos (2020).
\textsuperscript{27}Gotinga and Tomacruz (2020).
\textsuperscript{28}Rita (2020).
To be fair with government, at first, the gap between the number of deaths and recoveries was wide; but over time, the rate of recoveries began to outpace the cases of deaths. And by early August 2020, the Philippines had the highest testing capacity in ASEAN. While flawed policy choices and implementation may be blamed on the Duterte administration, issues such as worn out public health and transport system, and the overconcentration of commercial activity in Metro Manila is not his alone but also falls squarely on the shoulders of that of his predecessors. As former Philippine Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales put it, “years of neglect and corruption has led to a broken health care system”.  

3.4 The Net Impact of COVID-19 on the Philippines

COVID-19 plunged the Philippines into recession, shrinking by 0.2% in the first quarter and 16.5% the second quarter of 2020—the lowest in history. In the second quarter, FDI net inflows decreased by 68%, unemployment rose to 17.7% or 7.3 million jobless people (April 2020), 5 million Filipinos were pushed below poverty line, and overall trade imports and exports decreased by 31.13% and 24.8%, respectively (June 2020). The top 10 Philippine industries that had the most losses from the ECQ were: arts, entertainment and recreation industry (82.3%); travel, hotel and restaurant industry (81.9%); technical repair services (77%); educational services (76.8%); construction (74.6%); motorized vehicles servicing (73.4%); financial and insurance services (71.2%); sports and fitness services (70.4%); real estate (68.6%); and professional, scientific and technical services (67.1%). In a data compiled by GZERO Media, the Philippines is found to be the most dependent country on tourism (24.7% of GDP). COVID-19 put to a halt as much as 75% of Philippine economic activities and showed how economically dependent the Philippines was on Metro Manila and nearby areas (i.e., CALABARZON region) for economic growth (70% of GDP). COVID-19 also shook a major pillar of the Philippine economy as remittances, which constitute 11% of Philippine GDP, are largely contributed by OFWs (around 10% of Philippine population) who have mostly gone out of work. As of July 2020, the employment of more than 400,000 OFWs have been affected by COVID-19. Outstanding debt, mostly foreign borrowings and bond issuances, breached P9 trillion at the end of June 2020. The government’s economic team had to cut the budget for infrastructure for 2020 and 2021 due to the need to prioritize COVID-19 efforts. For the rest of 2020, various multilateral institutions forecast that the Philippine economy will contract by $-3.6\%$ (IMF), $-1.90\%$ (World Bank), $-\ldots$
3.8% (ADB), −6.6% (ASEAN + 3 Macroeconomic Research Office), and −5.50% (DBCC) for 2020.  

Socially, just like congressional and court hearings, classes at both the basic and higher education levels, were forced to migrate online. The country’s most marginalized people particularly those living below poverty line, and informal/contractual workers have been the hardest-hit by COVID-19. In fact, those that suffered from economic dislocation have resorted to begging on the streets or have taken on menial jobs just to get by. The pandemic also “exposed the weaknesses in healthcare and social protection systems—notably inequality in coverage and access”. Around 300 hundred small private hospitals are on the brink of closure because of delays in the release of insurance claims of PHILHEALTH, some schools at risk of closing down, and enrolment from Kindergarten to Grade 12 had decreased. Additionally, some of those infected by COVID-19 experienced discrimination from their neighbors.

Grocery stores, supermarkets, computer retailers, bike sellers, and online businesses have (as much as 65% increase) were the winners during ECQ. The Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI) has classified the Philippines as among the frontier emerging markets best positioned to recover given the resilience of its banking sector and the strength of its foreign exchange reserves. A Report by The Economist in May 2020 ranked the Philippines sixth out of 66 emerging economies with high-levels of financial strength taking into account levels of debt-to-GDP ratio, foreign debt, and cost of borrowing. Because of these, various international credit ratings agencies have given the Philippines a good score with the S&P affirming a BBB+ long-term credit rating (May 2020), Japan Credit Rating Agency giving the Philippines an ‘A minus’ (June 2020), and Moody’s maintaining its Baa2 rating (July 2020). Philippine economic recovery is expected to be U-shape and grow by 6.1% in 2021. The CEO Magazine had also included the Philippines as among the 10 Best Countries to Invest In Post-Covid (ranking 7th).

The upside of the pandemic is that it forced the government to make adjustments in a positive way. In particular, bike lanes have been arranged due to lack of available public transport. Nurses have been given special risk allowance and salary raise, and there are plans to pass the Nursing Education Act (to improve the education and prospects of those in the nursing profession) and a Bill that would establish permanent quarantine facilities in densely populated areas in the Philippines. Other prospects include the creation of a Medical Reserve Corps, National Disease Prevention Authority, Pharmaceutical Development Center, and Virology Science and Technology Institute. The government also made it a point to prioritize digital socioeconomic connectivity and inclusivity (i.e., Digital Philippines,

34Weirsing and Francis (2020).
35Mendez (2020).
36Vögel (2020).
37Villanueva (2020).
38Bird (2020).
39Pidgeon (2020).
3 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Philippines–China Relations

Philippine Identification System, and acceleration of the National ID System) and e-governance, among others.

3.5 The Implications of COVID-19 for Philippines–China Relations

3.5.1 Economic Ties

The economic impact of COVID-19 on Philippines–China relations should be viewed within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it serves as China’s main point of reference in fostering cooperation with most countries. In the case of the Philippines, this is most evident in the BRI pillars of policy coordination, trade and investment facilitation, infrastructure development, and people-to-people ties (tourism). In terms of policy coordination and during the COVID-19 outbreak in China, high-level meetings and bureaucratic talks on Chinese Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects had been postponed.\(^\text{40}\) The extent of the Philippines’ economic partnership with China became clear when COVID-19 wrought havoc in China. For example, the Philippines is the 18th most exposed country to Chinese production disruptions where at least 13 Philippine industries (worth $300.4 million) faced export reduction risks.\(^\text{41}\) Moreover, the Philippines’ exposure in terms of export goods to China is around 1.6% of GDP which includes the semiconductor industry (accounting for around 40% of Philippine merchandise exports in 2019).\(^\text{42}\) Similarly, infrastructure projects in the Philippines faced delays as raw materials or key components like steel, where 46.2% of steel imports is sourced from China, incurred supply shortages due to factory shutdowns in China. The slowdown of business operations in China also created market access difficulties for Philippine agricultural (e.g., banana) exports. Despite these, however, China was still the Philippines’ largest trading partner in the first (fourth largest export market, largest import source) and second quarter (second largest export market and largest import source) in 2020. As for people-to-people ties, the Philippine tourism industry sustained huge losses given that China is its second largest tourist market which comprises nearly 20% of total tourist arrivals. Regarding investments, the commercial operations of the telecommunications project with China Telecom was delayed to March 2021 because of reported difficulties in getting the necessary material inputs out of China.\(^\text{43}\) Although, in August 2020, the China Telecom-partnered project (with Dito Telecommunity) had officially been given a 25-year franchise by the government to operate as the third telecommunications player in the Philippines. Curiously, COVID-19 also caused

\(^{\text{40}}\)Rabena (2020).
\(^{\text{41}}\)Ibid.
\(^{\text{42}}\)Ibid.
\(^{\text{43}}\)Ibid.
investment diversions as some multinational companies based in China have opted to move their operations to the Philippines. Against this backdrop, it is important to correct notions that there is nothing happening with Chinese investments in the Philippines. Various BRI projects have already commenced and resumed construction such as the two-China funded bridges (Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge and Binondo-Intramuros Bridge) in Metro Manila, Chico River Pump Irrigation Project, and the Philippine-Sino Center for Agricultural Technology-Technical Cooperation Program Phase III, among others. Both countries have also agreed to establish a “fast track” lane and a “green channel” to guarantee the steady flow of goods and stability of industrial and supply chains between the Philippines and China. According to Chinese data, Chinese direct investments into the Philippines increased by 82.5% ($18.25 million) in the first five months of 2020 year-on-year, and newly signed projects reached $3.11 billion, a 29.5 increase year-on-year. As COVID-19 laid bare the weaknesses of the Philippines’ digital infrastructure, China intends to deepen cooperation with the Philippines in e-commerce, big data, 5G, artificial intelligence and cloud computing.

3.5.2 Bilateral Cooperation During COVID-19

When Wuhan was still reeling from COVID-19 in February 2020, the Philippines is among those that rendered early assistance by donating surgical face masks, protection suits, medical gloves, sanitation products and goggles. A month later, when COVID-19 spilled over to the Philippines, China reciprocated by donating thousands of test kits and other medical supplies which marked China’s “face mask” diplomacy in the Philippines. These contributions of China and its international community work have been construed to be within the ambit of the “Health Silk Road”. After giving an initial donation, the Chinese government proceeded to donate multiple batches of medical supplies amounting to millions of masks (surgical and N95) and hundreds of thousands of test kits, face shields, thermometers, medical goggles, gloves, ventilators, and PPEs. The Chinese government even dispatched a group of medical experts (12 doctors and nurses) to the Philippines in March 2020 to provide advise to Philippine health officials. Among their recommendations were on contamination avoidance in hospitals, the expansion of the number of quarantine sites, and the improvement of testing and contact tracing capabilities. They even went so far as to say that the Philippines “can fail” in its war on COVID-19 if limitations on resources are not addressed. Besides from China’s chartered “goodwill flights” to deliver medical supplies to the Philippines, the Philippine government dispatched the Philippine Air Force and Philippine Navy to transport PPEs procured from China. The

44 Crismundo (2020).
45 Huang (2020).
46“China and International Community Work: Together to Build Health Silk Road”, National Development and Reform Commission, People’s Republic of China, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease_8232/202004/t20200410_1225524.html.
Chinese government had additionally donated thousands of kilos of rice to around 500,000 families. The Philippines not only received help from the Chinese Central Government but also from various local governments and private corporations and institutions. The Chinese Embassy, for its part, have donated more than 200,000 “Friendship Bags” which contained food and daily necessities to bus and jeepney drivers in Metro Manila.\footnote{Full Text: Written Interview with Manila Times by H.E. Amb. Huang Xilian (2020).} Chinese Consulates across the Philippines, on the other hand, gave an ambulance and medical supplies to Philippine provinces and such as Central Visayas, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union, Pangasinan, Benguet, Baguio City, Cagayan, Isabela, Quirino, and Santiago City. In distributing medical supplies, the Chinese Embassy had worked with the Mammoth Foundation, the Philippine Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Philippine Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce, and the Davao Fil-Chinese Multi-Sectoral Association Inc. On top of this, Chinese military diplomacy was demonstrated, particularly when the Chinese Ministry of Defense in May 2020 sent medical supplies worth $14 million to the Philippine Department of National Defense (DND). Defense Secretary Lorenzana in the same month also held phone talks with his Chinese counterpart, State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, where epidemic prevention and control, and maintenance of peace and stability in the SCS were discussed. In parallel, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security gave 30,000 “pandemic prevention materials” such as N95 masks and goggles to the PNP. “Sister city diplomacy” was felt when Chinese cities/provinces such as Fujian, Hainan, Nanning, Shandong, Guangzhou, Zhoushan, and Shenyang donated medical supplies to their counterparts cities/provinces of Ilocos Norte, Manila, Cebu, Imus, Davao, and Quezon. Corporate and people-to-people diplomacy was likewise on display when Jack Ma through the Jack Ma Foundation (in partnership with the Manny Pacquiao Foundation) donated 50,000 test kits. Chinese companies such as TikTok, Bank of China (BOC), Vivo and 51 Talk handed out financial assistance, face masks, and smartphones (for frontliners). The renowned Chinese company Huawei was able to release free COVID-19 diagnosis technology for hospitals in Baguio and Negros province. Other private Chinese companies that have been reported by Chinese media that made contributions were Alibaba Foundation, China Energy Engineering Corporation, China Geo-Engineering Corporation, China Information Communication Technology Group, China Railway Design Corporation, China Road and Bridge Corporation, China State Construction Engineering Corporation, China Telecom, Panhua Group, Power Construction Corporation of China, Qingjian Group, State Grid Corporation of China, and Zhejiang Dahua Technology. Political cooperation was also able to push through under the banner of the BRI amidst the pandemic. In fact, the first meeting of China–Philippines Political Parties Belt and Road Consultation Mechanism was held virtually in June 2020. It was presided by the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the CPC and was attended by representatives of the Philippines’ PDP-Laban and Nacionalista political parties. Party-to-Party diplomacy was also noticeable in the CPC sending face masks to the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats party which was received by House Majority Leader Martin Romualdez. China’s “vaccine diplomacy” had comparably gained
prominence as in June 2020, President Duterte had a phone call with President Xi where the latter assured the former that the Philippines will be a “priority recipient” of COVID-19 vaccine and that Chinese priority infrastructure projects in the Philippines will be completed. The Philippines had been invited to participate in the vaccine clinical trials of the Chinese Academy of Science (Guangzhou Institute of Health), SinoPharm (Wuhan Institute of Biological Products), and Sinovac Biotech. In this regard, the DOH had identified five hospitals for Sinovac Biotech’s vaccine Phase 3 clinical trials. On a related note, the Philippines’ Food and Drug Authority (FDA) had recognized the traditional Chinese medicine “Lianhua Qingwen” as a therapeutic drug for treating COVID-19 patients. In May 2020, the molecular and diagnostic pathology lab by the Chinese company BGI Huo–Yan, which can test 3,000 samples daily, had been formally inaugurated in Pampanga province. And in the 45th Anniversary of Philippines–China diplomatic relations in June 2020, which coincided with the Filipino-Chinese Friendship Day, Sino-Philippine bilateral ties was hailed by the Philippine government to be in a “renaissance.” In commemoration of the diplomatic ties, President Duterte wrote a letter to President Xi stating the need to strengthen non-traditional security cooperation and foster closer bilateral ties.

Multilaterally and indirectly, Manila and Beijing had already areas of cooperation (e.g., public health, digital technology, border control coordination) as early as February 2020 when China convened the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) in Vientiane, Laos. This was followed through by a series of online meetings with China: ASEAN-China health experts video conference (March 2020); Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 (which established the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund) (April 2020); ASEAN-China Economic Ministers’ Joint Statement on Combating the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Enhancing ACFTA Cooperation (May 2020); and the 26th ASEAN-China Senior Officials’ Consultation (ACSOC) (July 2020).

3.6 Geopolitics of Sino–Philippine Relations Amid COVID-19

While COVID-19 offered opportunities for further cooperation between the Philippines and China, it also presented some challenges. In spite of China’s positive gestures of mask diplomacy, the Philippine public continues to be skeptical of China’s efforts which makes its assistance seem unappreciated. It is important to note that even before COVID-19, China was already unpopular in the Philippines. What COVID-19 did was that it integrated and galvanized the interaction between the previous (i.e., critical international media coverage of China, illegal drugs, misbehaving Chinese nationals, fake and low quality [shanzhai/山寨] goods) and present sources of China’s negative image in the Philippines, namely: (1) China as the known source of COVID-19; (2) security developments in the SCS; and (3) Philippine
Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOS). All these are correlated and affect President Duterte’s political position and the legitimacy of his China policy.

First, COVID-19 exacerbated unfavorable Philippine views of China. When COVID-19 was believed to have stemmed from the consumption of bats and wild animals in Wuhan, the prevailing reaction of Filipinos on social media was “displeasure of Chinese dietary practices and contempt for illegal wildlife trading”.\(^{48}\) Moreover, COVID-19—because of alleged mismanagement of the outbreak and export of defective medical supplies to regions such as Europe—became an added subject for negative international media coverage on China which were previously mostly about “debt trap” and “China threat”. According to an SWS Survey in July, 3 in 5 or 61\% of Filipinos believe that China concealed information on the severity of COVID-19 during the early stages of its outbreak in Wuhan.\(^{49}\) There were also notable many Filipinos online who were sympathetic with the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, the COVID-19 whistleblower. The SWS survey further revealed that 77\% of Filipinos believe that China should be held accountable for its failure to release timely information on COVID-19. Others think that China is culpable for the generation and spread of the virus.\(^{50}\) A Philippine Senator even called on China to pay for the Philippines’ COVID-19 expenses and pointed out irregularities in the purchase, cost and quality of Chinese PPEs.\(^{51}\) Alongside this is Vice President Robredo’s calling out of the Duterte government for buying PPEs from China. Compounding these were seizures by the Bureau of Customs in July 2020 of smuggled fake PPEs and medical supplies/equipment from China, again rekindling the *shanzhai* image of Chinese goods to many Filipinos. These were followed by incidents of so-called “VIP [Very Important Persons] testing” where incoming Chinese nationals were said to have been prioritized to be tested over returning OFWs.\(^{52}\) Pertinently, it is important to bear in mind that the Philippines is among the countries that drafted a Resolution at the WHO in calling for an independent probe on the WHO’s handling of COVID-19. When Chinese nationals in the Philippines tested positive for COVID-19 in February 2020, “there was public uproar and frustration over the Philippine government’s failure to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the country”.\(^{53}\) The public blamed President Duterte for being indecisive in issuing a travel ban from China, allegedly giving more importance to diplomatic ties with China over the health of Filipinos.\(^{54}\) And as the situation worsened:

> public discourse in the Philippines teetered between racial prejudices against Chinese people [Anti-Chinese sentiment], and compassion for the public health crisis that China was struggling with. The Filipino-Chinese community, through the Federation of Filipino-Chinese

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\(^{48}\) Aaron Jed Rabena, “The Implications of COVID-19”.

\(^{49}\) Punzalan (2020).

\(^{50}\) Contreras (2020).

\(^{51}\) *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (2020).

\(^{52}\) Gotinga and Tomacruz (2020).

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
At the same time, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) have issued “Operatio Imperata” or “obligatory prayers” for those suffering from COVID-19 during the height of the outbreak in Wuhan. There were also Filipinos who had expressed admiration for China in building large-scale makeshift hospitals in Wuhan which only took 10 days.

Second, from March to July 2020, during the Philippines’ struggle with the pandemic, there were certain developments in the SCS involving China that surprised Manila: the activation of new research stations on Fiery Cross and Subi reefs (March 23, 2020); the Vietnamese boat-sinking incident (April 3, 2020); the establishment of new administrative districts in the Paracels and Spratlys (April 18, 2020); the naming of 80 geographic features and setting-up of mental health service stations (April 20, 2020); report of a Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ship pointing its gun control radar at a Philippine Navy vessel (April 23, 2020); the imposition of a fishing ban (May 1, 2020); and military exercises in the Paracels (July 1–5, 2020). While it is true that China has been doing these activities even before COVID-19, the key difference is that such actions took place in the middle of a pandemic which created a perception of strategic opportunism. A Filipino scholar has argued that as China is engaged with medical diplomacy with the Philippines, it is also maximizing its security interests in the SCS which he calls “China’s two-pronged games against the Philippines”. As a result of the developments in the SCS, Manila responded by: publishing a statement of solidarity with Vietnam, filing diplomatic protests (on the creation of research stations and administrative districts, and the pointing of gun control radar) against China, cancelling the suspension of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US, and issuing strong statements such as calling China’s military exercises “highly provocative” and will be dealt with “hardest response” should the same spillover to Philippine-claimed waters. Thus, on the 4th anniversary of the Arbitral Tribunal Award on the SCS on July 12, 2020 the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) issued a statement calling on China to comply with the ruling, of which China unsurprisingly flatly rejected. Due to the incidents in the SCS, China’s other actions in the Philippines were tainted with malice. For instance, the goodwill music video sponsored by the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines titled “Iisang Dagat” (One Sea) released in April 2020 which highlights Philippines–China cooperation on COVID-19 ended up as a public relations fiasco. A palpable indicator of the public backlash is the number of dislikes (19,000) and likes (200) that it got on Youtube. While the lyrics and melody of the video were good—and the intent of the video benign which is likely a response to the video song dedicated by OFWs in Wuhan in February 2020 in support of Wuhan’s fight against COVID-19—there were nevertheless major problems.

55Ibid.
56Ibid.
57De Castro (2020).
First, the title of the music video was easily associated with the maritime disputes in the SCS. Moreover, the release of the video coincided with incidents in the SCS wherein two days before its release, reports of the gun-pointing incident surfaced and China created new administrative districts. Second, the music video contained considerable emphasis on gratitude to China which many Filipinos resented. As one Filipino scholar framed it, “The music in the video was composed by the Chinese ambassador. It is produced by the Chinese Embassy. Thus, it is nothing but a self-congratulatory form of propaganda.” In fact, Filipino artists on the video were tagged as “traitors” on social media. It is in this context that a Philippine government radio program called “Wow China” which is in partnership with China Radio International (CRI) caught the ire of the public. Likewise, when AFP Chief of Staff Gen. Felimon Santos Jr. wrote a letter to the Chinese Ambassador asking for a traditional Chinese medicine, as he was infected with COVID-19, his actions were called “treason” and that of “desperation.”

Third, POGOs give China a very bad name in the Philippines because of its association with a range of illegal activities such as kidnapping, human trafficking, cyber fraud, bribery, prostitution, and tax evasion, among others. In this respect, it is important to highlight a common misconception that POGOs are a Chinese-government backed strategy aimed to infiltrate the Philippines. This is false because the Chinese government itself has repeatedly asked the Duterte government to ban POGOs as it is illegal in China; however, the Duterte government refuses to do so because of the economic gains that it could yield for the Philippines. POGOs during COVID-19 became front and center of the Philippine political landscape because during ECQ, there were illegally operating POGOs and workers that were discovered. Aside from this, the government found out about existing illegal clinics/makeshift hospitals and an underground pharmacy, which include Chinese doctors, dedicated exclusively to Chinese nationals who mostly work for POGOs. Even in areas outside Metro Manila such as Pampanga, where 490 Chinese POGO workers and tenants tested positive for COVID-19, there were illegal medical facilities and a warehouse that supplies medicines to an underground Chinese hospital. Most surprisingly, during ECQ, it was exposed that most licensed POGOs have unpaid taxes. This is why when the government expressed that in reopening the economy POGOs should be included, there was a fierce debate and massive outcry from the public. No less than Vice President Robredo questioned why POGOs are getting special treatment over the resumption of Filipino businesses and industries. A Filipino senator added that allowing POGOs as a “non-essential industry” to continue operations would lead to the worsening of the POGO situation. This implies that, as with the orientation of many other Filipinos, Chinese nationals are carriers of COVID-19 and that POGOs are hubs of COVID-19 carriers. There were even reports that racism prompted some POGO firms to finally leave the Philippines. Exacerbating the social problems presented

58 Palatino (2020).
59 Contreras (2020).
60 CNN Philippines Staff (2020).
61 Domingo (2020).
Table 3.1 A Tale of Two Philippine China Policies

|                | Diplomatic protests | Rebuke of Chinese behavior | Explicit alignment with US security policy | Absence of communication at highest levels | Confrontational attitude in multilateral bodies | Presence of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy vs. Philippines |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Benigno Aquino | ✓                   | ✓                           | ✓                                         | ✓                                        | ✓                                               | ✓                                                     |
| Duterte        | ✓                   | ✓                           | X                                         | X                                        | X                                               | X                                                     |

by POGOs are occurrences of misbehaving Chinese nationals\(^{62}\) which contributes to the build-up of a sociocultural barrier that indirectly impacts Philippines–China people-to-people ties, a major component of the BRI.

Despite political disruptions arising from COVID-19 and critical Philippine views toward China, the Philippines’ China policy has not yet shifted to that of then President Benigno Aquino (Table 3.1). Because even if the Duterte government has filed diplomatic protests against China and rebuked Chinese behavior in the SCS, it still has not explicitly aligned with US security policy and has avoided to take a confrontational attitude vis-à-vis China in multilateral bodies. In fact, the Duterte government found no reason to ban the Chinese app TikTok—amidst a deteriorating China-US relations—and restricted the Philippine Navy from joining a proposed maritime exercise led by the US in the SCS. Also, there continues to be present official communication at the highest levels (heads of state and senior officials of foreign affairs and defense establishments) of Philippine and Chinese governments, and the Philippines’ thus for not witnessed China’s so-called “wolf warrior” diplomacy such as those that it has exhibited with the US, Australia, UK, or India. Interestingly, in June 2020, China even extended diplomatic support to the Philippines’ human rights situation by telling the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) to respect Philippine sovereignty.\(^{63}\) China being seen in a in a bad light or put on the spot in the Philippines is not all on China. There is also the “Duterte Factor” which causes public opinion towards China to be antipathetic and mistrustful. This is manifest in President Duterte’s periodic expression of special preference for China. A prominent case is his press briefings and public appearances during ECQ when he excessively expressed gratitude to China and President Xi for the assistance that was given the Philippines instead of thanking and assuring medical frontliners.\(^{64}\)

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\(^{62}\)Rivas (2020). On the case of a misbehaving Chinese national which trended on social media during lockdown, see Gabriel Pabico Lalu, “Chinese woman in scuffle with Makati traffic enforcers arrested,” Philippine Daily Inquirer, July 8, 2020, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1303437/enraged-chinese-national-arrested-in-makati-may-face-physical-injury-raps.

\(^{63}\)Garcia (2020).

\(^{64}\)Holmes and Hutchcroft (2020).
3.7 Conclusion

Even if the Philippines was the earliest in ASEAN to impose a lockdown, the outcome was unlike that in Wuhan due to structural (i.e., overwhelmed public health system) and agential (e.g., lack of crisis management leadership and policy missteps) factors. And while liberal democracies such as Taiwan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand were able to control their outbreaks, it is noticeable that they are all developed countries unlike the Philippines which has drawbacks unique to a developing country. On a positive note, the Philippines has arguably seen the greatest display of public-private partnership or the Philippine spirit of *Bayanihan* (teamwork) in recent history. However, it is also because of COVID-19 that the Philippine public developed negative perceptions of China for not only did COVID-19 originate in China, the first cases of infection and fatality of COVID-19 in the Philippines were Chinese nationals. And these coincided with tensions in the SCS and China-related domestic issues which further contributed to China’s unpopularity in the Philippines.

To chart a better trajectory for Philippines–China relations, both countries need to institutionalize cooperation in the Health Silk Road. COVID-19 revealed that there are only a few trained/qualified Philippine technical workers that can operate molecular medical facilities such as qPCR machines and medical technologists who have enough training in applied molecular biology and molecular medicine. COVID-19 also presents an opportunity for the Philippines’ National Academy of Science and Technology to engage its counterpart institution/s in China and other countries. As the term of President Duterte draws near, the following questions will most certainly be raised and needs to be addressed: (1) What could be done to reverse the tide of China’s unpopularity in the Philippines and ensure a forward-looking bilateral relations even in a post-Duterte government? (2) What had happened to the investment pledges President Xi made to President Duterte since 2016? (3) Has China refrained from interfering with Philippine maritime activities? and (4) Has China restrained its maritime operations in the SCS? For the Philippines, President Duterte needs to put into context his excessive praise of or special preference for China so as to avoid creating an image of subservience. He also needs to show toughness on tax evading and illegal POGOs, as he has said several times that POGOs are “clean.” China, on the other hand, needs to understand that like them the Philippines has its own domestic audience to consider and thus needs to show strong resolve in asserting national interests. China also has to improve its PR strategy in the Philippines and take into account the implications of its actions in the SCS on Philippine public opinion. Public opinion towards China greatly matters because it impacts both Philippine domestic and foreign policy. This is the reason why there is a default suspicion on Chinese projects (e.g., Fuga Island smart city project) and why President Duterte brought up the SCS Arbitral Award in his meeting with President Xi in 2019. Most significantly, China can accelerate the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine to help improve the overall situation in the Philippines. As for both countries, there is a need to fast-track the negotiations and implementation of investment pledges made by President Xi to

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65 Vallejo Jr. and Ong (2020).
President Duterte in 2016. Going forward, it is possible that “in the remaining period of President Duterte’s term, health and the economy are the themes that will shape Elections 2022” (Tiquia 2020).

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