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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the dark green background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX *Foreword*

- 1 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China in 2023: Stimulating Economic Recovery along with Patriotic Education*
- 23 GIULIA SCIORATI, *China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy*
- 39 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization*
- 65 GIULIO PUGLIESE & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps*
- 125 THAN KIŪ, *Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province*
- 145 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign*
- 167 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership*
- 187 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics*
- 203 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2020-2023: Covid Pandemic Recovery, Unprecedented Leadership Turnover, and Continued Multilateralism*
- 217 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy*
- 235 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta*
- 259 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension*
- 301 IAN HALL, *India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?*
- 323 MATTEO MIELE, *Nepal 2020-2023: From the Institutional Crisis to New Political Paths*
- 339 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty*
- 353 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation*
- 389 GIORGIA PERLETTA, *Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations*
- Special articles*
- 407 ENRICO FARDELLA, *When history rhymes: China's relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine*
- 433 DAVID SCOTT, *The return of the 'Indo-Pacific'*
- 451 *Reviews*
- 479 *Appendix*

THE PHILIPPINES 2022-2023: A TURBULENT START FOR THE NEW ERA
OF MARCOS LEADERSHIP

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This article provides a two-year analysis of events spanning the country's leadership transition from the 2022 national elections to the initial year of the new administration. The electoral triumph of Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio's UniTeam alliance marked the resurgence of the Marcos family and the continuation of the Duterte family's grip on national politics. The alliance's overwhelming victory led to the emergence of a supermajority bloc in Congress and the occupation of key leadership positions by their kins and allies. However, Marcos Jr.'s presidency was immediately confronted by challenges posed by post-pandemic recovery, geopolitical complexities, and unpopular policy decisions. The manner in which the Marcos Jr. presidency confronted such challenges caused a significant decline in its popularity. This article explores the dynamics of the UniTeam alliance between Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio, formed out of the absence of a continuity candidate from the then-ruling party, and sought to consolidate dominant political forces and mobilize broad electoral support for their joint victory. The lack of genuine programmatic unity in their alliance proved detrimental as Marcos Jr.'s sudden policy deviations led to internal conflicts, exposing the fragile nature of this purportedly formidable alliance. Marcos Jr.'s departure from Duterte's pro-China foreign policy in favour of the United States, his admission of abuses in Duterte's war on drugs and abandonment of his predecessor's illiberal tactics, and his adoption of a softer approach to the communist insurgents with the revival of the peace talks substantially overturned Duterte's legacy. The tensions within the winning coalition revealed cracks and resulted in power struggles within the legislature's supermajority bloc. These key developments one year into the Marcos Jr. administration contribute to the growing volatility in the Philippine political landscape.

KEYWORDS – Philippines; presidential elections; Marcos Jr.; Duterte; UniTeam.

1. Introduction

The Philippines witnessed significant changes in 2022 and 2023 with the highly anticipated national elections and the inaugural year of a new administration. As Rodrigo Duterte's presidential term came to an end, his

political strategy aimed at securing his populist legacy and the continuation of his economic, political, and foreign policies. Reaching these goals was made difficult by the absence of a clear continuity candidate within Duterte's internally fragmented dominant political party. The ensuing vacuum paved the way for political manoeuvring and the formation of shadow alliances, culminating in the overwhelming electoral victory of a tenuous political coalition, which brought the once-overthrown Marcos family back to power.

The article consists of two main parts, the first of which delves into the aftermath of the 2022 national elections. The proclamation of Ferdinand «Bongbong» Romualdez Marcos Jr. and Sara Zimmermann Duterte-Carpio as the president and vice president symbolized a dynastic political victory, drawing support from their respective strongholds in the northern and southern regions of the Philippines. This further translated into the control of both the executive and legislative branches, with critical posts occupied by allies and family members, forming yet another supermajority bloc. Marcos Jr. leveraged this massive support from the legislature to advance his national development plans. Nevertheless, his first year in office grappled with challenges from the lingering effects of the pandemic and pressing geopolitical concerns. His unpopular policy decisions in addressing inflation and supply shortages, along with frequent foreign travels and resignations from political appointees, resulted in the decline of public confidence, as shown by the significant drop in the new President's approval ratings.

The second part of the article examines the political dynamics of the *UniTeam* alliance and its implications for the Marcos Jr. administration. Established out of the internal strife within former President Duterte's dominant political party, the alliance of convenience between Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio materialized as a strategy to secure victory in the 2022 national elections. However, an unforeseen shift occurred as Marcos Jr. deviated from Duterte's established policies on foreign relations, human rights, and anti-insurgency campaigns. This departure from Duterte's legacy caused cracks within the supermajority bloc and led to power struggles within the *UniTeam*. The legislature became a battleground riddled with alleged leadership coups, the sudden demotion of a top official, and impeachment rumours. This was accompanied by scrutinizing the vice president's confidential funds in budget deliberations, a slew of resignations from Duterte's political party, and rumours of destabilization plots against the Marcos Jr. administration.

The article's conclusion recalls the key events that defined Marcos Jr.'s initial year, notably his policy divergence from Duterte and the power struggle that ensued within his governing coalition. It also reflects on his attempt to restore his family name and establish a new era of Marcos leadership, an endeavour whose intended societal outcomes remain unrealized, driving the new administration's initial year into an area of turbulence.

2. *Marcos-Duterte Return to Power, Redemption, and Challenges*

2.1. *Dynastic Consolidation Post-2022 Elections*

The 2022 national elections can be characterized as a dynastic political victory, particularly for two families committed to vindicating and perpetuating their political legacies – the Marcoses and Dutertes. Ferdinand «Bongbong» Marcos Jr. and Sara Zimmerman Duterte-Carpio secured the absolute majority of votes in the presidential and vice-presidential contests, averaging almost 60% [Buan 2022, 10 May]. Following their landslide victory, members of their respective clans obtained coveted national and local government positions. Marcos Jr.'s eldest son, Ferdinand Alexander «Sandro» Marcos, his cousins Angelo Marcos Barba and Martin Romualdez, along with Romualdez's wife, Yedda Romualdez, were elected to the House of Representatives. They joined the new President's sister, Senator Imee Marcos, in the legislative arena. The Marcos family further solidified its presence in the northern Philippines, with Marcos Jr.'s nephew, Matthew Marcos Manotoc, re-elected as governor of Ilocos Norte and his cousin-in-law and wife of former president Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s nephew, Cecilia Araneta Marcos, as vice governor [GMA News 2022, 11 May]. The Duterte family maintained its political stronghold in the south, with Sebastian «Baste» Zimmerman Duterte becoming mayor and Paolo «Pulong» Zimmerman Duterte being re-elected as the 1st district representative of Davao City.

The electoral outcome holds historical significance on two fronts. In a country that utilizes the plurality system or first-past-the-post system for the election of top executives, winning by attaining the absolute majority vote is a quite rare occurrence [Wong 2022, 7 February]. Unprecedentedly, both Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio managed to secure the absolute majority of the votes, rendering their victory indisputable and, by extension, legitimate.

Another pivotal aspect of Marcos Jr.'s presidential win is the controversial history associated with his family. He is the son of Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. whose authoritarian regime imposed martial law and precipitated economic collapse through a debt-driven growth strategy, allegedly plundered the public coffers, and perpetrated widespread human rights abuses [Manapat 1991; Chaikin & Sharman 2009]. Among the authoritarian regime's notable human rights violations included the curtailment of freedom of speech and assembly, enforced disappearances, mass arrests, and tortures of accused dissidents [Coronel 2022]. The overthrow of Marcos Sr.'s dictatorial and kleptocratic rule in 1986, through the EDSA People Power Revolution, resulted in his exile to Hawaii and the installation of Corazon Aquino as president.¹ Marcos Jr.'s election to the presidency, co-

1. EDSA is an acronym standing for «Epifanio de los Santos Avenue», a limited-access circumferential highway around Manila, where Camp Crame, headquarters of the Philippine National Police, and Camp Aguinaldo, headquarters of the Armed

inciding with the 50th anniversary of his father's martial law declaration, fuelled observations about the resurgence of nostalgia for strongman rule [Pitlo 2022, 10 May].

Political scholars and analysts have proposed multiple explanations for the high voter turnout that characterized the 2022 elections. One of them emphasized a younger voting demographic joined to a weakened national history education, challenging the prevailing «never forget» anti-martial law slogan and rendering a substantial portion of the electorate susceptible to the narrative presented by Marcos Jr. during his campaign [*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2022, 9 February; de Guzman 2022, 10 May].

A comprehensive study on the 2022 elections identified three primary reasons for voting in favour of Marcos Jr.: support for former President Rodrigo Duterte; nostalgia for martial law; and ethnolinguistic identity, particularly in areas where the influence traditionally held by the Marcoses and Dutertes was stronger [Dulay *et al.* 2023]. Another contributing factor was the strategic use of Marcos mythmaking [Arguelles 2022], involving the construction of a political narrative resonating with the Marcos loyalists, fostering authoritarian nostalgia, and perpetuating and spreading historical misrepresentations already prevailing through generations of dynastic rule in regional strongholds. This narrative gained traction through online platforms, social media, and other disinformation networks [Claudio 2022, 15 May; Devlin 2022, 7 May]. Local government also proved to be a strong source of support for Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio, with endorsements from governors and local government executives, often hailing from influential political clans in vote-rich provinces [Quismorio 2022, 11 April].

Whether attributed to one or a combination of these factors, the overarching conclusion remains consistent – the return to power of the Marcos family and an opportunity for exoneration from Marcos Sr.'s and Rodrigo Duterte's political misdeeds. Marcos Jr. called for unity in his presidential campaign, and asked to be judged on the basis of his actions rather than his family history [Lema and Dela Cruz 2022, 11 May]. However, his pursuit of «unifying leadership» manifested as a consolidation of dynastic powers within the executive and legislative branches of government. His initial cabinet appointments included former department chiefs from the Marcos Sr., Arroyo, and Duterte administrations. He also appointed Duterte-Carpio as education secretary, raising concerns about potential historical distortion and whitewashing, particularly regarding the Marcos dictatorship and martial law. Martin Romualdez, a notable cousin of the new President, assumed the role of Speaker of the House of Representatives, while Sandro Marcos,

Forces of the Philippines, are located. These two bases were seized by opponents of former president Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s authoritarian regime in 1986, triggering the three days of peaceful demonstrations that led to the downfall of Marcos's dictatorship. These events went down in history as the EDSA People Power Revolution.

ected the 1st district representative of Ilocos Norte in 2022, was appointed House Senior Deputy Majority Leader. On her part, Imee Marcos, the new President's eldest sister and a member of the Senate, chaired four critical standing committees in the Senate: foreign relations, social justice, electoral reforms and people's participation, and cooperatives. With the lower house of Congress dominated by the Marcos family and their allies and the Senate featuring only a two-member minority bloc, it is arguable that Marcos Jr. has not only maintained but even surpassed the scale of former President Duterte's supermajority bloc [Gomez 2022, 13 May]. Marcos Jr.'s strategy of establishing supermajority blocs in both houses of Congress aimed to secure support for his priority legislations. Nonetheless, alliances based on patronage rather than programmatic unity or party lines prove to be structurally fragile when conflicting interests arise [Hutchcroft 2020].

2.2. *The Marcos Family's Revival and Quest for Redemption*

In what appears to be a «redemption arc», a series of initiatives and pivotal decisions concerning the Marcos family unfolded during the initial year of the new administration.

Within the first year of his presidency, Marcos Jr. introduced his «*Bagong Pilipinas*» (New Philippines) governance framework. This initiative, designed to herald a new era of national development, closely resembled his father's «*Bagong Lipunan*» (New Society) vision, which emphasized strengthening economic, financial, and trade agencies, promoting agricultural development, and fostering foreign investment [Teehankee 2023]. Aligning with his father's development agenda, Marcos Jr. prioritized agriculture, initially appointing himself as the head of the agricultural department. His objectives included ensuring food security, improving nutrition, enhancing food affordability for Filipinos, and mechanizing agriculture [Cariaso 2023, 24 July]. Plans were also underway to revive and enhance Marcos Sr.'s *Masagana 99* (Abundance 99) credit program, which was discontinued in 1984 due to a minimal number of farmer beneficiaries and adverse effects such as heavy debt burdens and rural bank closures [Corrales 2023, 2 June].

A key component of Marcos Jr.'s strategy for post-COVID-19 economic recovery involved attracting foreign direct investments (FDIs) and strengthening of state-private sector partnerships. Following his father's playbook, Marcos Jr. appointed technocrats and business executives to key economic positions. The constant association of the state with economic elites, however, raised concerns about a potential return to crony capitalism, reminiscent of Marcos Sr.'s intertwining of state and business interests.

Duterte-Carpio, in her role as education secretary, also took part in efforts to rehabilitate the Marcos family name. The Department of Education (DepEd) faced scrutiny during the budget hearing because it had issued a memorandum directing the alteration of «*Diktadurang Marcos*» (Marcos

Dictatorship) to «*Diktadura*» (Dictatorship) in the new curriculum. Critics argued that this move omitted accountability and bordered on state-sponsored disinformation despite DepEd's justification of thematic generalization. [Abad 2023, 28 September].

Two significant court decisions were also issued in the first year of Marcos Jr.'s presidency, addressing allegations of ill-gotten wealth and corruption during his father's dictatorial rule. The first was related to the contentious coco levy fund, amassed from taxes imposed on coconut farmers by Marcos Sr. and his associates from 1971 to 1983. This fund, totalling PHP 9.8 billion (USD 175.6 million), was intended to develop the coconut industry. However, the fund was reportedly misappropriated for businesses owned by Marcos's cronies. Following the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship, then President Aquino established the Philippine Commission on Good Governance (PCGG), mandated to seize ill-gotten wealth acquired by the Marcos family and their associates. A month into Marcos Jr.'s presidency, the *Sandiganbayan*, namely the Philippines' special anti-graft court, upheld the dismissal of a forfeiture case against three firms created from the coco levy fund, citing the PCGG's failure to present meritorious arguments and complete pretrial work since its inception in 1987 [Marcelo 2023, 3 August]. Moreover, Marcos Jr.'s predecessor, former President Duterte, signed Executive Order No. 172, releasing funds through Republic Act No. 11524 for the intended purpose of coconut industry development, raising concerns about potential misuse under the current administration [DA Press Office 2022]. Another historically significant ruling involved the Supreme Court's dismissal of a case concerning the allegedly ill-gotten wealth of the Marcoses, valued at PHP 1.05 billion. The Supreme Court confirmed a Sandiganbayan decision, taken in September 2019, dismissing the complaint against the Marcoses for insufficient evidence [Chi 2023, 19 July].

2.3. *Challenges Confronted in the First Year of Administration*

Among the many challenges confronting the new presidency, particularly important were a significantly volatile economy and pressing issues in agriculture, despite the latter being the administration's top priority. The country's average inflation rate from January to November 2023 stood at 6.2%, surpassing the 2-4% target set by the administration [Rivas 2023, 5 December]. Although the rate gradually decreased, it remained elevated due to the lingering effects of *El Niño* and geopolitical conditions. Agricultural challenges – including shortages, price hikes, alleged importation irregularities, and hoarding cases – marred Marcos Jr.'s inaugural year. Criticized by farmer groups for the new government importation plans, an unreasonable price ceiling, and failure to address inflationary prices, Marcos Jr. eventually stepped down as agriculture secretary on 3 November 2023, appointing fishing tycoon Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. as his successor [Mangaluz 2023, 3 November].

The Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF), Marcos Jr.'s sovereign wealth fund flagship program, faced scrutiny on multiple fronts. The Maharlika Investment Fund Act of 2023 aimed to foster socioeconomic and accelerated infrastructural development. However, critics questioned its unclear objectives, unproven effectiveness, feasibility, and potential impact on the country's financial stability and post-pandemic recovery [Romero 2023]. Despite such criticisms, the administration pushed forward with the MIF, facilitated by the overwhelming approval of the supermajority bloc in the legislature [Tamayo *et al.* 2023, 1 June].

Marcos Jr. also faced criticism because of the frequency and cost of his overseas trips, designed to attract foreign direct investments and support for the MIF. The number of trips nearly doubled from 6 in 2022 to 11 in 2023, covering 9 countries. Moreover, his travel fund increased significantly from PHP 403 million (USD 7.2 million) in 2022 to PHP 1.408 billion (USD 25.2 million) in 2024 [Manahan 2023, 16 August; Laqui 2023, 27 December]. These foreign trips were perceived as expensive junkets, despite government explanations that they had resulted in PHP 4 trillion (USD 71.6 billion) worth of investment pledges – many of which, nonetheless, had yet to materialize at the end of the period under review [de Leon 2023, 27 December].

In the first year, the above-listed problems took a toll on the Marcos Jr. administration, leading to the resignation and replacement of several key administration officials [Corrales 2022, 5 October] and a significant drop in approval ratings for both Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio. In a survey conducted by Pulse Asia for Q3 2023, Marcos Jr.'s approval rating dropped to 65% from 80% in the previous quarter. Duterte-Carpio's approval rating also decreased by 11% to a total of 73% [de Leon 2023, 2 October].

3. *Premature Cracks and Power Struggle in the UniTeam*

3.1. *The Making of the UniTeam: Party Politics, an Alliance of Convenience, and Political Opportunism*

The political turmoil that ensued less than a year after Marcos Jr. assumed the presidency can be traced to the flaws that had existed since the formation of his unforeseen coalition Duterte-Carpio, which resulted in the *UniTeam* alliance's overwhelming victory in the 2022 national elections. The same factors that resulted in the formation of arguably the most formidable presidential tandem the Philippines had ever seen in its post-EDSA period brought about the premature unravelling of the *UniTeam* alliance. They were weak party politics, an alliance of convenience, and political opportunism.

Marcos Jr.'s historic majoritarian victory cannot solely be attributed to his own political machinations. Several months prior to the general elections, the internal strife that plagued the then-ruling *PDP-Laban* resulted

in Marcos Jr.'s triumphant return to power, as the party then in power was deprived of a standard-bearer who could ride on former President Duterte's substantial popularity. The *PDP-Laban*, chaired by Duterte, was divided into two factions: one led by Duterte-loyal party officials and the other by members who supported Senator Manny Pacquiao's presidential ambitions [Manahan 2022, 22 March]. This pre-election development was not entirely new in the Philippines, where intra-party factionalism is a recurrent consequence of its weak political party system [Teehankee 2020]. Duterte initially planned his daughter's presidential run paired with his former aide, Senator Bong Go, who filed his certificate of candidacy for vice president [Ferrerias 2021, 3 October]. The strife ultimately prompted Pacquiao to run under the PROMDI (Progressive Movement for the Devolution of Initiatives) Party, while Duterte-Carpio distanced herself from her father's fragmented party.

Before the official certificate of candidacy filing for the 2022 national elections, pre-election surveys consistently positioned Duterte-Carpio as the frontrunner. She continued to lead Marcos Jr. by 5% in September 2021 ['September 2021 Nationwide' 2021]. However, Duterte's daughter defied popular expectations. She ultimately decided to run for vice president after joining *Lakas-CMD*, the political party of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, as Marcos Jr. remained steadfast in his presidential ambition. The establishment of the *UniTeam* formalized the alliance of two of the most dominant Filipino political clans, which had occupied the Malacañang Palace in distinct periods: the Marcoses from 1965 to 1986 and the Dutertes from 2016 to 2022. Their partnership was viable, albeit unexpected, given that former President Duterte was openly critical of Marcos Jr.'s leadership capabilities [Buan 2021, 19 November].

With no prior record of substantive political collaboration between Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio, the *UniTeam* was thus evidently formed as an alliance of convenience aimed primarily at capturing the Philippines' highest political positions by consolidating dominant political forces. Except for former President Noyonoy Aquino's Liberal Party, the *UniTeam* consisted of four major political parties led by influential families, which had held the Philippines' top political seat from the Marcos dictatorship to the post-EDSA period: Marcos Jr.'s *Partido Federal ng Pilipinas*, Arroyo's *Lakas-CMD*, Duterte-Carpio's *Hugpong ng Pagbabago*, and former President Joseph «Erap» Estrada's *Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino*. These forces strategically merged to share the post-elections political spoils – Marcos Jr. secured his family's revival; Duterte-Carpio maintained the Dutertes' grip on national politics; Arroyo, who once aspired to reclaim the speakership under Marcos Jr., flexed her sustained political muscles by serving as the vital powerbroker behind the *UniTeam*; and, former presidential son Jinggoy Estrada returned to the Senate after being released on bail from graft charges.

Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio's partnership was clearly an opportunistic manoeuvre amid a fiercely contested presidential and vice-presidential

race. Duterte-Carpio averted clashing with Marcos Jr. by settling to run for vice president. Joining forces prevented other formidable presidential contenders, including former Vice President Leni Robredo and former Manila Mayor Isko Moreno, from gaining ground. The ethnolinguistic roots of the leaders of the alliance, which consistently emerge as a significant element in mobilizing votes in Philippine politics [Teehankee 2010], greatly contributed to the outcome of the 2022 presidential elections. The President, who hails from Luzon's Ilocos Norte province, inherited the Vice President's electoral strongholds in the Visayas and Mindanao. On the other hand, the Davao native Duterte-Carpio benefitted from Marcos Jr.'s popularity in the vote-rich provinces of Luzon and the National Capital Region (NCR).

The partnership also capitalized on the country's preference for a personality-based rather than a program-based electoral campaign. Amid the intense partisan divide wreaking havoc on Philippine society – intensified by the Marcos family's revival and Duterte's divisive leadership – Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio adopted a simplistic yet vague «unity» campaign slogan, hence the name *UniTeam* for their alliance. While such a message resonated with millions of Filipinos and propelled them to the country's top political seats, the *UniTeam* alliance, founded on electoral expediency and political opportunism, soon revealed cracks in the early years of the Marcos Jr. administration due to policy divergence and power-sharing disputes.

3.2. *Policy Divergence and Overturning Duterte's Legacies*

Considering how the *UniTeam* was constituted, Marcos Jr. was widely expected not to reverse most of Duterte's controversial governance agendas. However, in the first year of his presidency, the Philippines saw varying degrees of reversals in at least three policy areas that defined the Duterte administration: (1) China-centric foreign policy; (2) deteriorating human rights situation and withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC); (3) and repressive anti-communist campaign.

One of Duterte's defining policy legacies that Marcos Jr. was assumed to follow was the pivot to China, as both his parents played a role in normalizing diplomatic ties with China in the 1970s. Marcos Jr. also held multiple meetings with the Chinese ambassador before the beginning of his term. However, Marcos Jr. immediately shifted away from Duterte's foreign policy as the Philippines revitalized its ties with the US amid the increasing tension in the West Philippine Sea.

Various factors influenced Marcos Jr.'s departure from Duterte's pro-China stance. Much of China's promised investments and infrastructure projects did not materialize during his predecessor's term [Lee 2020, 7 September]. Moreover, Duterte's appeasement did not stop China's maritime incursion in the West Philippine Sea and its constant harassment of Filipino fishermen, sparking an increasingly stronger anti-China sentiment from the Filipinos [Tomacruz 2020, 21 July]. Contrary to his predecessor,

Marcos Jr. embraced the US while performing a delicate balancing act with China. In an apparent attempt to deter China's aggression, his administration announced the addition of four Philippine military bases accessible to US forces via the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in April 2023 [Limpot 2023, 22 March]. During Marcos Jr.'s visit to the White House the following month, US President Joe Biden assured him of the US «ironclad» commitment to defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack, as guaranteed in the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty [Gardner 2023, 2 May].

Aside from China's anticipated criticisms, Duterte and his allies emerged as the most vocal domestic critics of Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy shift. The former President asserted that if US forces were granted access to Philippine military bases, China could strike the country in case of an armed conflict with the US. He also advanced an unsubstantiated claim that such locations might be used to store US nuclear warheads. Senators Ronald «Bato» Dela Rosa and Robinhood Padilla, two of Duterte's staunchest allies in the Senate, also questioned the presence of US forces on the grounds of national sovereignty and self-reliance [Cupin 2023, 12 September].

The effects of Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy shift became more evident heading into his third year in office, as it prompted heightened geopolitical tensions with China, resulting in escalating maritime hostilities. The Philippines responded by reinforcing its defence capabilities and alliances, particularly with the United States and Japan. China's assertive stance in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) hindered joint exploration efforts in oil and natural gas reservoirs while also impeding Filipino vessels tasked with resupply missions. Complicating matters further was the discovery of a «gentlemen's agreement» between former President Duterte and Chinese President Xi Jinping. The purported agreement implied submission to Chinese dominance by maintaining the «status quo» in contested territories and refraining from constructing military installations in exchange for non-interference in resupply missions to the naval vessel BRP Sierra Madre, beached near the Second Thomas (Ayungin) Shoal [Tajima and Royandoyan 2024, 19 April].

Diplomatic tensions gradually turned into national security concerns with the entanglement of Chinese nationals in Philippine political and military affairs. Heightened scrutiny arose over the reported influx of Chinese students enrolled in a university in Cagayan province, an area with identified EDCA sites [Mendoza 2024, 17 April]. Concerns deepened with increasing instances of criminal activity following the arrests of Chinese fugitives using Filipino identities, the continued proliferation of illegal Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGOs), and human trafficking. Furthermore, the ongoing Senate inquiry into the dubious citizenship, identity, and activities of the incumbent town mayor in Tarlac province, allegedly

involved in a sophisticated POGO network operating within her jurisdiction, unveiled suspicious surveillance and hacking activities along with intricately constructed underground tunnels within the property [Ombay 2024, 7 May]. These developments, along with calls for the expulsion of Chinese diplomats over wiretapping and misinformation charges involving unofficial communications [Cupin 2024, 10 May], fuelled speculations of China's infiltration of domestic affairs, thereby compromising national security and encroaching upon Philippine sovereignty.

Another source of policy friction was the issue of human rights rooted in the Duterte administration's infamous war on drugs. Both Marcos Jr. and Duterte have faced severe allegations of human rights violations, with the former ignoring conversations on the atrocities committed during his father's dictatorship. Nonetheless, Marcos Jr. was evidently aware of the political repercussions of sustaining Duterte's illiberal tactics, given that his family's redemption also hinges on denying the excesses of the martial law regime. In an apparent swipe at his predecessor's flagship policy, Marcos Jr. admitted the «abuses» that occurred during the war on drugs [Gregorio 2023, 5 May]. He made this remark while attending a forum in the US, the country that gained most of Duterte's indignation for frequently calling out his violent anti-narcotics campaign.

Former Senator Leila De Lima's release from detention was by far the most significant development on this issue. Arguably the staunchest critic of Duterte's war on drugs, the former justice secretary-turned-senator was imprisoned in 2017 for her alleged involvement in drug trafficking within the country's national penitentiary. She has been cleared of two of the three drug charges brought against her by the previous administration, and in November 2023, bail was granted for her remaining case. Her successive court victories occurred concurrently with the subsequent retraction of testimony from over a dozen witnesses. Star witness Rafael Ragos also named Duterte's former Justice Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre and other high-ranking officials as among those who pressured him to testify against De Lima [Buan 2023, 21 November]. After her release, the court also received a letter from 7 witnesses claiming that their «forced participation» in her case was due to «unimaginable threats» to their lives [Hicap 2023, 22 November]. These developments further strengthen the notion that De Lima was a victim of political persecution for probing Duterte's war on drugs.

Marcos Jr.'s apparent departure from Duterte's illiberal tactics offered a favourable circumstance for De Lima's release. Since assuming office, the new President has not shown any inclination to subvert judicial independence. Marcos Jr. administration has subsequently gained from these developments, which are seen as an attempt to restore the Philippines' international image tarnished by Duterte's blatant disregard for the rule of law. A week after the court allowed De Lima to post bail, Marcos Jr.

also revealed that his administration is studying whether the Philippines should re-join the International Criminal Court [Mangaluz 2023, 24 November]. This might be seen as a further jab at Duterte, who steered the country's withdrawal from the Rome Statute in 2018.

Lastly, Marcos Jr. also reversed his predecessor's hard-line approach to the Philippines' decades-long communist insurgency by reviving the Government's peace talks with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). Duterte first issued a presidential proclamation in 2017 terminating the peace talks with the NDFP, and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, verbally ordered security forces to «finish off» communist rebels [Regencia 2021, 6 March]. Just after granting amnesty to some insurgents in November 2023, the Marcos Jr. administration agreed with the NDFP to revive the peace talks, which the president called an «optimistic step» towards peacefully ending the insurgency [Geducos 2023, 29 November].

In her first public rebuttal of Marcos Jr., Duterte-Carpio denounced the Philippine government's renewed negotiations with communist rebels, calling it «an agreement with the devil» [Servallos 2023, 5 December]. She also publicly opposed the President's amnesty measures. Instead, she appealed to continue the projects implemented by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), where she serves as co-vice chair. This Duterte-era task force was originally founded to provide a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the communist insurgency through infrastructure development, livelihood programs, social services, and financial and livelihood assistance to former rebels and their families but has gained notoriety for its red-tagging activities.² While Marcos Jr. refrained from responding to his vice president's remarks, Duterte-Carpio's public opposition to the new President's peace plan further fuelled speculations of the widening rift confronting the *UniTeam*.

3.3. *Supermajority, destabilization attempts, and consolidation in the House of Representatives*

The power struggle within the *UniTeam* mainly unfolded in the House of Representatives. In the Philippine political setting, wherein a deeply entrenched patronage system is an enduring feature, the legislature's composition always projects the extent of the president's political strength and influence. Given the lack of party loyalty and the absence of any institutional constraint on party-switching, it is a regular occurrence for Filipino politicians to join the winning presidential candidate's party after each election cycle to obtain access to patronage [Teehanke 2012]. This trend is typically witnessed in the country's lower house, wherein the ties between district

2. In the Philippines, red-tagging pertains to the act of labelling individuals or groups as members or supporters of the communist insurgency.

representatives and their constituents are mainly grounded on the constant distribution of patronage benefits [Kasuya 2009].³

As expected, being the Philippines' first post-EDSA majority president, Marcos Jr. swiftly commanded a supermajority in Congress at the start of his term. Veteran senator Juan Miguel Zubiri, who was part of the *UniTeam* 2022 senatorial slate, was elected Senate President, while Marcos Jr.'s first cousin, Martin Romualdez, was elected House Speaker. Explicitly endorsed by the President, Romualdez's overwhelming election – with 283 out of 315 votes (89.9%) – highlighted the consolidation of the country's dominant political forces behind the Marcos-Duterte coalition [Gregorio 2022, 25 July].

With numerous politicians jumping on the presidential bandwagon, the *UniTeam* appeared to be a formidable governing alliance until fractures surfaced just before Marcos Jr. completed his first year in office. They started to appear when Arroyo was demoted from her role as the House's Senior Deputy Speaker in May 2023, because she was suspected of planning a coup to grab the House leadership. She publicly dismissed the accusation as «needless politicking» [De Leon 2023, 19 May]. She admitted that she aspired to the House Speakership when Marcos Jr. won but soon relinquished her plan when the President favoured Romualdez. Just two days after Arroyo's demotion, Duterte-Carpio resigned as a member of the Romualdez-led *Lakas-CMD* in an apparent sign of protest.⁴ In response, Romualdez stated that the House was «in order» and, without naming anyone, said destabilization attempts against its leadership should be «nipped in the bud» [Porcalla 2023, 22 May].

The apparent rift became even more pronounced at the height of the congressional deliberations for the 2024 national budget. Duterte-Carpio requested PHP 650 million (USD 11.6 million) in confidential and intelligence funds (CIF) for the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and the Department of Education (DepEd). Such a request triggered widespread scrutiny since CIF is not subject to the Commission on Audit's (COA) rigorous auditing process, and the primary mandates of OVP and DepEd are not security related. Amid the public backlash, Duterte-Carpio branded the CIF critics as «enemies of the state» for «going against peace», which she explained was the reason for allocating such funds to her offices [Chi 2023, 5 October]. In October 2023, a small committee in the House in charge of appropriation amendments unanimously approved the realignment of the CIF of several civilian agencies, including the OVP and DepEd, to those in charge of national security affairs [Mantaring 2023, 10 October]. This move

3. Except for the 20% of seats allocated to party-list representatives, the Philippine House of Representatives follows a single-member district plurality election rule.

4. Romualdez was the President of *Lakas-CMD*, while Arroyo was its Chairman Emeritus. With Arroyo widely considered her political mentor, Duterte-Carpio joined *Lakas-CMD* in preparation for teaming up with Marcos Jr. for the 2022 presidential elections.

by the lower chamber drew the ire of former President Duterte, who publicly called the House the country's «most rotten institution» [Inocencio 2023, 6 November]. Suspecting Romualdez of politicking for a future presidential bid, Duterte also threatened to scrutinize how the House Speaker spent public funds if he decided to run for president [Antonio 2023, 11 October].

The former President's tirades against the House further pushed Marcos Jr.'s allies to consolidate behind Romualdez. The House members adopted House Resolution No. 1414, «upholding the integrity and honour» of the lower chamber and «expressing appreciation and solidarity» to the House Speaker [Quismorio 2023, 6 November]. Adopting the resolution also served as a loyalty check for Marcos Jr.'s allies, which Arroyo seemingly did not pass. She was one of the two deputy speakers who failed to sign the resolution, the other one being Davao City representative Isidro Ungab, one of the staunch supporters of the Vice President. Both Arroyo and Ungab were removed from their posts by the House members. Moreover, Senior Deputy Speaker Aurelio Gonzales, a top official in the House, also resigned from Duterte's *PDP-Laban*.

Duterte-Carpio ultimately retracted her request for PHP 650 million (USD 11.6 million) CIF in the proposed 2024 national budget in an apparent bid to save face amid the public backlash, her family's diminishing influence in Congress, and Marcos Jr.'s inaction in defending her from critics.

While the Vice President's move temporarily eased the political tension, the power struggle that prematurely erupted in the country's lower house exposed the cracks in the Marcos-Duterte governing coalition. In November 2023, rumours of a potential impeachment against Duterte-Carpio even circulated in Congress, which grabbed the national media's attention, causing Marcos Jr. to deny plans to oust the Vice President during an interview with reporters. At about the same time, an alleged destabilization plot also broke the headlines, prompting the Chief of Staff of Armed Forces to warn active military personnel against joining in any efforts to destabilize the Marcos Jr. administration.

It remains to be seen if the divisions within the *UniTeam* will further widen as the country gears up for the 2025 midterm elections, during which the Dutertes and their remaining allies might be forced to play the role of the opposition. Currently, this political fiasco revealed that while Romualdez presides over the House of Representatives, the loyalty of the country's dominant political forces stays with the President, despite occasional attacks from his predecessor, who previously commanded a supermajority in Congress during his term.

4. Conclusion

The Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio's *UniTeam* alliance for the 2022 presidential election brought expectations that the new administration would

advance Duterte's legacies. However, Marcos Jr.'s sudden reversal of his predecessor's controversial governance agendas became the defining narrative of his administration's initial year, which led to a subsequent power struggle within the winning coalition.

As argued in this article, there were three major areas in which Marcos Jr. facilitated a departure from the previous administration's policies: foreign relations, human rights, and anti-insurgency campaign. Duterte's appeasement of China at the US' expense, contempt for human rights, and hardline approach toward communist insurgents were largely explicable through the lens of the populist strongman leadership he established during his term. However, Marcos Jr.'s efforts to rebrand his family's brutal legacy and distance himself from Duterte's illiberal politics necessitated a departure from his predecessor's controversial governance agendas mentioned above, which could jeopardize his vision for a united Philippines and his family's quest for redemption. The most notable policy Marcos Jr. actively reversed upon assuming office was Duterte's widely unpopular pivot to China. Under the pretext of preserving the status quo, his predecessor had adopted a soft and accommodating stance toward China, causing the Philippines further to lose its grip over the West Philippine Sea and face various national security concerns over the alarming influx of Chinese nationals linked to suspicious activities. In response to the escalating maritime tensions, Marcos Jr. pivoted back to the US, drawing strong criticisms from Duterte himself.

As discontent among Duterte and his remaining allies grew over Marcos Jr.'s policy reboot, a schism also emerged among the *UniTeam's* key actors, notably between Romualdez and Duterte-Carpio. The subsequent power struggle that erupted in early 2023 led to the further consolidation of pro-Marcos forces at the expense of the Dutertes. Such developments would shape the Philippines' political landscape heading into the 2025 midterm elections – a de facto referendum on the Marcos Jr. presidency.

However, Marcos Jr. faced a much deeper leadership challenge beneath the apparent clash of the Philippines' most influential political clans. The results of the 2022 presidential elections may be perceived as a political reward for his family's protracted endeavour to reclaim the country's top political post. Nonetheless, complete redemption remains in limbo, as the ultimate judgment will depend on the outcomes and legacies the new Marcos regime will produce by 2028. The Marcos family's political resurgence was mainly fuelled by their supporters' convictions that the martial law's excesses were inconsequential to the country's future or that Marcos Sr.'s stint in Malacañang Palace⁵ was the country's «golden age». By embracing a new era of Marcos leadership, the majority of voters decided that Marcos Jr. could navigate the Philippines out of the many pressing problems

5. The Philippine President's official residence and workplace.

left behind by the COVID-19 pandemic and his predecessor's ineffective policies, such as the soaring prices of essential commodities, ballooning national debt, and troubled foreign relations. Nevertheless, despite dedicating his initial year in office to laying the groundwork for his «*Bagong Pilipinas*» (New Philippines) vision, significant socioeconomic changes that would improve the lives of ordinary Filipinos failed to materialize, driving Marcos Jr.'s administration toward an area of turbulence.

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