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This research examines the link between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese soft power narratives concerning the Philippines. China uses the BRI and soft power narratives to entice countries to enter a closer relationship with Beijing. The lure of the BRI represents an opportunity for the Philippines to reinvigorate neglected infrastructure and facilitate trade. Despite distrust of China in the Philippines, prospects of economic growth and quality of life improvements are gaining ground compared to the American narrative of freedom and democracy. Chinese inroads in the Philippines through the BRI place future US strategic access at risk. To counter China's narrative the US must shift course and highlight the economic benefits of a close alignment with the US. Through increased military engagement and economic development the US can better compete with China's economic narrative and development. These efforts will ensure US strategic access in the second island chain.

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Executive Summary

Title: The Carabao And The Dragon: Countering Chinese Smart Power in the Philippines

Author: Major Walter S. Palumbo, United States Air Force

Thesis: To remain competitive in the Philippines the US should focus on the economic benefit of close ties between Washington D.C. and Manila. Otherwise, China's soft power and Belt and Road Initiative present a more attractive avenue for cooperation for the Philippine government.

Discussion: This research examines the link between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese soft power narratives concerning the Philippines. China uses the BRI and soft power narratives to entice countries to enter a closer relationship with Beijing. The lure of the BRI represents an opportunity for the Philippines to reinvigorate neglected infrastructure and facilitate trade. Despite distrust of China in the Philippines, prospects of economic growth and quality of life improvements are gaining ground compared to the American narrative of freedom and democracy. Chinese inroads in the Philippines through the BRI place future US strategic access at risk. To counter China's narrative the US must shift course and highlight the economic benefits of a close alignment with the US. Through increased military engagement and economic development, the US can better compete with China's economic narrative and development. These efforts will ensure US strategic access in the second island chain.

Conclusion: While the US currently enjoys a lead in public opinion, changing trade balances and China's use of smart power are beginning to tip the scale in favor of China. When economic measures are considered China is approaching parity in public opinion. To retain strategic access in the Philippines the US should shift its narrative from one that is primarily security and rules-based focused to one that emphasizes the economic benefit of close ties between the US and the Philippines. A failure to focus on economics as the primary issue for competition in the Philippines could result in limited future access in the second island chain.

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This paper discusses the role that soft power and the Belt and Road Initiative play in the geopolitical alignment of the Philippines. My hope is that this effort will encourage readers to deepen their understanding of soft power and its crucial role in shaping perceptions. I chose this topic to broaden my knowledge of the geopolitical environment in the Philippines. The case study of Djibouti was informed by my deployments there. Additionally, as a pilot several of the airfields I have transited have been the recipients of Chinese investment. This observation stuck with me and I wanted to further explore the expansion of Chinese global infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative.

I am profoundly grateful to my wife Cassandra and children, Marianna and William, for their support and patience as I worked on this paper. Additionally, I would like to thank my Masters of Military Science mentor, Dr. Brandon Valeriano, as well as my second reader Dr. Carla Martinez Machain, for their guidance and encouragement throughout this process.

Introduction

China's use of smart power in the Philippines threatens U.S. strategic access in the Philippines and South Pacific. The BRI seeks to link China with Europe and Asia in the 21st century utilizing a transportation and communication network. China uses the BRI and soft power narratives to create strategic bids for access and influence with neighboring countries like the Philippines. These aspects combined represent smart power as defined by Joseph Nye. The lure of the BRI represents an opportunity for the Philippines to reinvigorate their neglected infrastructure and bolster transportation networks.

Despite distrust of China in the Philippines, prospects of economic growth and quality of life improvements are shaping perceptions in the Philippines that China does not constitute a threat, and its interests are primarily economic. Chinese inroads in the Philippines utilizing soft power place future American strategic access at risk. The case study of Djibouti represents an example of the future of the Philippines if the Chinese inroads remain unchecked. To counter this narrative the United States must shift course and highlight the economic benefits of being aligned more closely with the US than China. Through increased military to military engagement, and economic development the US can bring increased focus on the benefits, opportunities, and quality of life increases that the Philippines stands to gain from a closer relationship with the United States.

Increased Chinese inroads to the Philippines challenge future US strategic access in the second island chain. The foreign policy environment between China and the Philippines has improved since the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte followed through on his campaign

promise to seek closer relations with China.¹ In a speech in China that year he announced his separation from the US.² Additionally, Duterte terminated joint military training exercises with the US. This departure of the US military erodes not only military power but also US soft power. This vacuum provides the opportunity for increased Chinese influence in the Philippines. China has already gained a foothold through telecommunications networks within the Philippines, which help serve as a platform to propagate their soft power narrative of a peaceful rise and economic prosperity. This is possible by providing a tangible benefit in the form of fast and reliable communication networks to Philippine citizens which is then associated with China, thus increasing China's soft power. Additionally, the BRI provides China with increased economic power to address the badly neglected infrastructure in the Philippines. To remain competitive the US should focus on the economic benefit of close US-Philippine relations.

This research begins by defining the concept of soft power and introducing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Next is an examination of the current literature surrounding the discussions of soft power, the BRI, and emerging research on the economic benefits of military deployments to host nations. The research then highlights Djibouti as a problem-framing example of how US strategic access is placed at risk by Chinese incursions utilizing their narrative of increased economic opportunity. It then explores China's use of soft power and examines common themes in Chinese soft power narratives. Next, the research explores China's use of the BRI and its potential future impact on the Philippines. China's soft and hard power couple to create a compelling narrative of increased economic opportunity. Philippine foreign policy and trade are then examined between both China and the US. Additionally, the Philippine

¹ Bruno Hendler, "Duterte's Pivot to China, and Prospects for Settling the South China Sea Disputes." *Contexto International* 40, no. 2 (May 2018), 326.

² Alfred McCoy, "A Rupture in Philippine US Relations: Geopolitical Implications." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 4 (November 2016), 1049.

public opinion towards both China and the US is explored. Then potential US responses are explored which include increased military partnerships, direct investment, and human capital projects. The research concludes with recommendations to counter the rising Chinese influence in the Philippines to ensure US strategic access.

Defining the Concepts

Soft Power

Soft power is an international relations term defined by Joseph Nye as “the ability to affect others through the cooperative means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes³” Soft power differs from hard power in that it seeks to concentrate on the ability to persuade and attract rather than coerce.

A benefit of soft power, to a nation seeking to increase access and influence while avoiding conflict, is that it uses intangible factors to charm rather than threaten.⁴ Some examples of soft power are image, narrative, and reputation. Some manifestations of these include a nation’s culture, language, political values, and foreign aid. Ying Fan’s research builds upon Nye’s work and examines the sources of soft power. His research concludes that soft power relies heavily on culture for context. Therefore, while China and the US both employ soft power there will be nuance based on cultural differences. To draw a parallel to the business world soft power can be compared to branding. The successful use of soft power is dependent on trust, credibility, and reputation.⁵ Ultimately soft power is about changing the preferences of an audience without utilizing coercion or direct payments.

³ Nye, Joseph S. *The Future of Power*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

⁴ Beston Arif, “The Role of Soft Power in China’s Foreign Policy in the 21st Century.” *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies* 3, no.3 (March 2017), 96.

⁵ Audry Dugue-Nevers, “China and Soft Power: Building Relations and Cooperation.” *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relationships* 3, no.1 (April 2017), 96.

The US utilization of soft power has played a major role in the construct of the current world order. The Marshall Plan which rebuilt Europe following WWII allowed for increased exports of American goods and culture, which furthered US soft power in the free world. Additionally, values such as liberal democracy and narratives portrayed by Hollywood and the music industry have shaped soft power in the decades of US hegemony. The Department of State utilizes development, foreign aid, and cultural exchanges to exercise soft power.⁶ While historically associated with the US, soft power is increasingly utilized globally.

China has taken note of the effectiveness of soft power and has increasingly incorporated its use into its foreign policy. Dugue-Nevers research highlights how China is utilizing soft power to alter its image from a military threat to an ascendant economic power. Additionally, the work of Beston Arif concludes that China's desire to become a more powerful leader rests with investment in soft power. Soft power is no longer wielded by the US alone, and China is actively seeking to utilize soft power for its geopolitical goals. More recently, Nye defined the combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction as "smart power".⁷ China already employs this synthesis of different forms of power into smart power. Exploring the economic power of the BRI yields a better understanding of the concept of smart power.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese initiative aimed at enhancing regional connectivity, expanding market access, and increasing infrastructure investments in developing nations, driven by the Chinese Communist Parties' plan to build a greater physical trade network and increase its geopolitical influence. The BRI represents a revival of the ancient Silk Road

⁶ Kim Myunghee, "Evaluating US Soft Power in Asia: Military, Economic and Sociopolitical Relationships between Asia and the United States." *Contemporary Politics* 15, no. 3 (September 2009), 338.

⁷ Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004

which linked Europe to Asia. Beginning in 2013 the BRI has become the heart of China's foreign policy. This expansive project seeks to link China with Europe and Asia in the 21st century utilizing a network of roads, pipelines, sea lanes, and communications networks. The infrastructure development to facilitate the flow of commerce is a critical aspect of the BRI and represents a form of economic power. Sun Degang's research explores how China seeks to re-globalize and degrade US hegemony through the BRI. The realization of this goal would place China at the center of a new economic order, which will also increase its military access and power.

One example of the BRI increasing China's economic power and enabling military goals is China's majority stake in the Greek port of Piraeus. China now controls the fastest growing port in Europe, which has also hosted Chinese warships in addition to commercial shipping following the acquisition.⁸ This pattern of Chinese naval deployments is also seen in Sri Lanka and Pakistan following Chinese control of ports.⁹ While these examples represent commercial ports, they could easily transform into military infrastructure. Through economic influence, China can control critical infrastructure for trade and develop a support network for military power projection.

More recently China has been looking to the Pacific to bolster the maritime component of the BRI. This would see key infrastructure development in neighboring nations in the South China Sea area. The goal is to expand Chinese influence among Southeast Asian nations¹⁰. This expanded component of the BRI makes the Philippines a target for future BRI investment. The

⁸ Joanna Kakissis, "Chinese Firm Now Holds Stakes in Over a Dozen European Ports," *National Public Radio*, October 9, 2018.

⁹Kakissis, *Chinese Firm Now Holds Stakes*.

¹⁰ Renato Cruz de Castro. "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Duterte Administration's Appeasement Policy: Examining the Connection Between the Two National Strategies." *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 36, no.3 (September 2019), 212.

economic power of this project can sway influence in favor of China. This link between soft power and hard infrastructure is a key concept of Aaron Rabena's research. Furthermore, successful BRI projects in other countries buttress China's soft power and improves their perception abroad. The magnetism of Chinese smart power can already be seen in Greece and Pakistan which both represent key strategic terrain for the US.

Methodology

This essay is a case study analysis of Chinese smart power in the Philippines. This research utilizes the framework of soft power and the BRI as the impetus for Chinese smart power in the Philippines. While China's use of smart power affects Southeast Asia as a whole, the Philippines represents a best-fit case study due to the deep historical ties between the Philippines and the US. This case study employs variables of theoretical interest for the purpose of explanation. The independent variables in this research are smart power and economics. The dependent variable is the geopolitical alignment of the Philippines. This essay intends to inform policymakers on how to counter Chinese intervention in the Philippines. The essay argues that economic factors play a central role, more so than other soft power narratives such as freedom and security. The emphasis of the economic narrative represents an under-looked issue in the broader discussion of smart power.

Following Levy's typology, Djibouti serves as an illustrative case study. Illustrative case studies give the reader a sense of the theoretical argument by highlighting a concrete example of its application.¹¹ The case lends itself to analysis due to the similarity of Chinese investment, and its desired effects for Beijing. That is not to say that Djibouti is the same as the Philippines since Djibouti is not a democracy and it hosts a Chinese military installation. Rather, it means

¹¹ Jack Levy, "Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 1 (February 2008), 6.

that they are alike in specific ways relevant to this research project. The examination of Djibouti provides the reader an understanding of how Chinese economic power can translate into key strategic terrain for the Chinese military. This study also illustrates the risk to the long-term viability of US interests given the proximity of Chinese-controlled infrastructure.

Djibouti: What Could Go Wrong?

Djibouti serves as an example of problem framing to demonstrate how China forges inroads that places US strategic access at risk. If the US concedes the economic narrative to China, the Philippines could eventually become a host to a permanent Chinese military presence. A key distinction is that Djibouti hosts a Chinese military base. However, potential BRI projects in key infrastructure such as ports and airports could easily be converted to support use by China's military as evidenced in Greece and Pakistan.

In 2017 China opened its first overseas base in the East African country of Djibouti, less than 10 miles away from the major US base at Camp Lemonnier. The proximity of a Chinese base to a major US base poses an increased risk of surveillance at the operational level and casts doubt about the long-term viability of the base at the strategic level.¹² This proximity provides China with a front-row seat to US operations in the area. Additionally, it makes US forces more vulnerable to Chinese intelligence collections.

From an economic standpoint, Djibouti benefits from Chinese investment, which is double the amount of US investment.¹³ China is providing a greater economic incentive for increased cooperation compared to the US. This high level of economic dependence is

¹² Jacobs, Perlez, "U.S. Weary of Its New Neighbor In Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base", *New York Times*, February 25 2017.

¹³ Bearak, Max. "In strategic Djibouti, a microcosm of China's growing foothold in Africa", *Washington Post*, December 30 2019.

demonstrated by the fact that Chinese debt accounts for 71% of Djibouti's GDP.¹⁴ The IMF cautioned Djibouti of Chinese debt trap tactics; despite these warnings, the fact remains that infrastructure investments are desperately needed. President Guelleh noted their concerns, however noting nothing was offered in exchange by the IMF.¹⁵ In cases where increased Chinese access and influence would clearly erode US advantage, the United States will have to offer more than warnings or soft power narratives to counter the Chinese bids.

Despite the potential danger associated with a close relationship with China Djibouti is desperately seeking to upgrade its infrastructure to develop the country and raise the quality of life for its citizens and rent-seeking for elites. Here the Chinese smart power is winning out to US soft power narratives of freedom, democracy, and human rights. The Chinese base in Djibouti provides them with a launching pad to several key shipping lanes. Additionally, the base bolsters their image at home and abroad, while impacting US strategic access in the region, which further bolsters China's soft power. The case study of Djibouti helps to frame the challenges of US strategic access if China can establish ports through BRI investment in the Philippines.

China's Use of Power

Soft Power

China increasingly relies on soft power to shape attitudes and behaviors globally. The idea of soft power is that it occurs not through coercion or payments, but by changing people's preferences. A greater reliance on soft power seeks to soften the sharp edges of Chinese foreign

¹⁴ Bearak, "In strategic Djibouti", *Washington Post*, December 30 2019.

¹⁵ Olivia Shen, "China's Base in Djibouti Who's Got the Power?" In *Power*, edited by Golley Jane, Jaivin Linda, Farrelly Paul J., and Strange Sharon, 205-10. Acton ACT, Australia: ANU Press, 2019, 208.

policy and make China appear less threatening. China utilizes soft power to distance itself from a threatening image and be viewed as a leading manufacturer and economic power on a peaceful rise. China's desired outcome is to capitalize on dominance in trade and expand their cultural exports in addition to durable goods.

This outlook is reinforced through messaging referring to Chinese exercises of power as "smile diplomacy" and their ascendancy as a "peaceful rise".¹⁶ Furthermore, China seeks to develop the ability to propagate its soft power message globally, notably through increased media and communications infrastructure. A leading Chinese soft power narrative's goal is to "enhance China's discourse power, to tell the China story properly".¹⁷ This trend of gaining increased market share in global networks serves as a mechanism to further propagate China's soft power narrative. This realization is noted in Xi Jinping's 2014 announcement that China can foster soft power through expansion in presence within global communication.¹⁸ China has gained an increased foothold in the Philippine domestic mobile networks by companies such as Huawei, Xiaomi, Oppo, and Vivo.¹⁹ Increased access in the Philippine domestic market provides additional avenues for China to deliver its soft power message. Furthermore, this provides an inroad for China to be perceived as offering a valuable service and providing value to the average Philippine citizen and increasing their quality of life.

BRI

The BRI represents an outgrowth of China's use of soft and smart power. For developing nations such as the Philippines, the BRI represents an opportunity to realize infrastructure

¹⁶ Dugue-Nevers, *China and Soft Power*, 91.

¹⁷ Lutgard Lams, "Examining Strategic Narratives in Chinese Official Discourse Under Xi Jinping." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23, no.3 (September 2018), 395.

¹⁸ Arif, *The Role of Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy*, 97.

¹⁹ Aaron Rabena, "The Complex Interdependence of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines." *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no.3 (September 2018), 692.

development and increased connectivity to global markets. Additionally, the BRI's focus on infrastructure development makes China appear less threatening and helps to reinforce their soft power narrative of a peaceful rise. The BRI is a manifestation of Chinese ambitions to affect major disruptions in the current global order and to place China in a more advantageous strategic position. Furthermore, the BRI allows China to re-globalize and reduce US hegemony²⁰. Given the hegemonic status of the US, any increase in power by China is an encroachment on U.S. influence. The BRI is as an attempt by China to grow its sphere of influence by linking both hard and soft infrastructure.²¹ The Philippines is already linked to China through an expansion of their telecommunications networks. The maritime component of the BRI could bring even closer bonds between Beijing and Manila.

The maritime component of the BRI seeks to include Southeast Asian nations to advance China's ambition in the South China Sea. China has already invested in two-thirds of the world's largest container ports. This represents a cause for alarm for the US and host nations, considering these ports represent touchpoints for 42.6% of global imports and exports.²² The staggering amount of investment and influence presents neighboring nations with a major dilemma. China is presenting the world with an alternative economic order.²³ This new economic order would see China as the dominant player in global commerce. Developing nations are faced with the choice of joining in the BRI or missing out on potential gains in global commerce. This dilemma is especially true for the Philippines which is in desperate need of infrastructure development. Failure to align with China could threaten the Philippines' access to almost half of the world's major seaports.

²⁰Sun Degang, "China's Seaport Diplomacy: Theories and Practice." *China Economist* 13, no.6 (November 2018), 42.

²¹ Rabena, *The Complex Interdependence of China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 685.

²² Degang, *China's Seaport Diplomacy*, 42.

²³ Lams, *Examining Strategic Narratives in Chinese Official Discourse*, 407.

Before 2016 the Philippines was excluded as a potential site for the BRI due to an ongoing dispute over territory claimed by both countries in the South China Sea.²⁴ In July of 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines claims. Despite this favorable ruling, the Philippine government viewed its prospects of enforcement as minimal and instead began to look towards the economic benefit of adopting a less adversarial stance towards China.²⁵ Following the June 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte, he directed a foreign policy shift in favor of China and announced his separation from the US. Due to increased cooperation with China, the Philippines is now being considered an investment location for BRI infrastructure development. During President Duterte's first visit to Beijing, China pledged \$24 billion in total investment with \$7.34 billion earmarked for infrastructure and BRI flagship projects.²⁶ These projects include two major bridges in the Manila metropolitan area in addition to improvements to two railroads. Participation in the BRI will lead to greater access to the "red market" and makes Manila a more attractive target for Chinese investment.²⁷ Furthermore, the infrastructure developments will ease the transport of goods and reduce the cost of conducting business within the Philippines.

Overall, the BRI places a high emphasis on improving people's livelihood through increased economic opportunities. This quality-of-life improvement proves a more compelling narrative than protecting democracy.²⁸ Economic prosperity as a narrative carries more weight than liberal US ideals of freedom and democracy. These same pressures correlate with the case

²⁴ De Castro, *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, 212.

²⁵ De Castro, "The Philippines and the Maritime Security Order in Southeast Asia: The Risks of an Appeasement Policy on an Expansionist China." *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations* 5, no.3 (December 2019), 1057.

²⁶ Rabena, *The Complex Interdependence of China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 690.

²⁷ Rabena, *The Complex Interdependence of China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 689.

²⁸ Degang, *China's Seaport Diplomacy*, 41.

study of Djibouti. This closer relationship with Beijing threatens US access in the second island chain.

Philippine Perspective

The United States and Philippine Relations

The US and the Philippines have a long and complicated history. The American presence in the Philippines dates to the Spanish-American War. After the defeat of Spain, the US gained the Philippines as a territorial possession in the 1898 Treaty of Paris. Following the acquisition of the Philippines, a brutal counterinsurgency took place.²⁹ This left a detrimental cultural memory of the US due to the heavy-handed nature of US soldiers waging the counterinsurgency. During WWII, the Philippines was recognized as key strategic terrain by both the US and Japan. The US liberated the islands from the Japanese in 1944 and granted the Philippines full independence in 1946.

During the Cold War, the US bases proved to be a major source of tension with the local populace. Several recurring incidents of shootings and sexual assaults came to characterize the American presence in the Philippines.³⁰ Increasing tensions led to outspoken demand to not renew military base leases. In 1993 the government of the Philippines voted to close permanent U.S. military bases located in the Philippines.³¹ Ten years later the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has since brought a US military presence back to the Philippines to assist the Philippine government in combating Islamic insurgents in the southern portion of the country.

China and Philippine Relations

²⁹ McCoy, *A Rupture In US Philippine Relations*, 1050.

³⁰ McCoy, *A Rupture In US Philippine Relations*, 1050.

³¹ Bruno Hendler, "Duterte's Pivot to China, and Prospects for Settling the South China Sea Disputes." *Contexto Interational* 40, no. 2 (May 2018), 333.

The history of Chinese and Philippine foreign relations is void of the baggage associated with an imperial legacy. Foreign relations were normalized between both nations in 1975, before this time China was viewed as a threat to the Philippines. This period of neutral relations was broken in 2010 when China began to take an expansionist role in the South China Sea, leading to a dispute over territory which both countries claimed. From 2011 to 2016 Philippine President Aquino applied a balancing strategy towards China and sought to expand the navy to counter the Chinese threat³². Despite a 2016 ruling in favor of the Philippines by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, China continues to ignore the ruling and expand its influence in the South China Sea. The policy of balancing against China was replaced by one of accommodation following the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016.

Duterte's stated primary goal is to develop closer economic and diplomatic relations with China while disassociating the Philippines from the US.³³ This rupture was highlighted by a speech Duterte gave in China where he stated, "I announce my separation from the United States both militarily and economically."³⁴ His stated displeasure with the US is partially due to deep-seated antagonism resulting from the long association with the US. Following his declared separation from the US Duterte looked increasingly towards China for cooperation. His relationship with China is primarily a transactional arrangement.³⁵ Duterte expects that concessions to China over territorial disputes will result in increased investment via the BRI. This in turn will help propel the Philippines to new economic heights. A chief driver of this concern is the perception that the Philippines have lagged their Southeast Asian neighbors due to

³² De Castro, *The Philippines and the Maritime Security Order*, 1046.

³³ De Castro, *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, 208.

³⁴ McCoy, *A Rupture in Philippine US Relations*, 1049.

³⁵ De Castro, *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, 220.

a lack of infrastructure.³⁶ The trend of economic prosperity is seen as the primary driver of Philippine foreign policy.

Philippine Public Opinion

Despite the economic promises that China offers many Philippine citizens remain distrustful of Beijing. In fact, by 2019, 81% of the Philippine population believe that the government cannot ignore the territorial dispute in the South China Sea.³⁷ Tensions in the South China Sea have continued to degrade Philippine perceptions of the Chinese government. Disapproval ratings of the Chinese government stood at 32% in 2010 and that sentiment was further highlighted by a disapproval rating of 65% by 2015.³⁸ Geopolitical conflict over the Spratley Islands during this time is a likely cause for the increased disapproval of China.

Further polling data conducted in 2019 reinforces this trend of the populace having a low approval rate of China. Pew research concluded that 25% of Filipinos harbor a somewhat unfavorable opinion and 30% have a very unfavorable opinion towards China.³⁹ This is in stark contrast to the US where public opinion in the Philippines towards the US remains high. Of note, Filipinos hold the US in higher regard than US citizens themselves. The US is viewed in a positive light by 80% of the populace while only 57% of Americans share a positive view of the US.⁴⁰ From a political perspective, the majority have either an unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of China. Despite this hesitancy when viewed through a political lens opinion of China is higher when viewed through pure economic terms.

³⁶ De Castro, *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, 219.

³⁷ De Castro, *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, 221.

³⁸ Chris Stewart. "Filipinos Give China's Leadership Low Approval" *Gallup*, 25 November 2015.

³⁹ "Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Topline," Spring 2019 Survey Data (Pew Research Center, 2020), 6. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/dataset/spring-2019-survey-data/>.

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center "2019 Global Attitudes Survey", 5.

From an economic standpoint, opinion is almost evenly distributed with 45% of Filipinos holding Chinese investment in a positive light while 49% view Chinese investment as a negative factor.⁴¹ This data indicates that while Filipinos remain skeptical of China as a whole, Philippine citizens are less skeptical of the implied economic benefit of closer ties with China. Perceptions of economic impact are near parity when compared to the US and China. Philippine citizens at a 28% rate consider the US as having a major economic impact while China is perceived by 26% as having a great deal of impact on the local economy. Additionally, opinion on the growth of the Chinese economy is split nearly 50/50 with 48% positive perception and 49% negative perception.⁴² Economic cooperation paints China in a more positive light and helps to round off the hard edges of Chinese foreign policy. Despite geopolitical misgivings about China, Filipinos are warming up to the idea that closer relations with China can bring positive changes to their individual quality of life. Economic trade represents a key vector to shape public opinion on quality of life and economic improvement.

Philippine Trade

Trade balances and foreign direct investment factor heavily in the economic aspect. The US and the Philippines remain active trading partners. However, over the last decade, increased exports from China have displaced US exports. For example, from 2003 to 2016 Chinese exports to the Philippines rose from 10% to 45%. Subsequently, US exports to the Philippines experienced a decrease from 45% to 22% during this same timeframe.⁴³ This is indicative of closer economic ties with China, largely at the expense of the US. Presently the Philippines

⁴¹ Pew Research Center “2019 Global Attitudes Survey”, 41.

⁴² Pew Research Center “2019 Global Attitudes Survey”, 62.

⁴³ Hendler, *Duterte's Pivot to China*, 328.

benefits from a trade surplus with the US of \$4.1 billion in 2019.⁴⁴ Consequently, the increase of Chinese goods into the economy has led to a trade deficit with China. In 2016 this trade deficit reached approximately \$10 billion.⁴⁵ The US should emphasize this point that the Philippines enjoys a trade surplus with the US which helps to invigorate the domestic economy. This messaging is paramount since China is making inroads through the allure of economic prosperity.

Consequently, the Philippines trade deficit with China allows for cheap Chinese goods to flood the market. The US has a long history of trade with the Philippines and represents its third-largest trading partner.⁴⁶ The US should place increased emphasis on demonstrating the benefit of close economic ties with the Philippines. This is an area that the US currently enjoys a significant advantage and should continue to highlight in strategic communication. Polling data indicates that Filipinos believe that strong economic ties are more important with the US at 65% than China at 27%.⁴⁷ The Philippine trade surplus to the US represents a good example to demonstrate that ties with the US are beneficial not only in security but also for economic benefit. Additionally, public perception already favors strong ties with the US therefore added emphasis in this area should yield positive results.

US Response

Missed Opportunities

Changes in Filipino perception of China and alterations in the balance of trade represent an inflection point for the US. Through failure to acknowledge the economic reality of the

⁴⁴ Office of the United States Trade Representative, *Philippines*, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/philippines>

⁴⁵ Hendlar, *Duterte's Pivot to China*, 328.

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Philippines Bilateral Economic Relations*, <https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/philippines>

⁴⁷ Pew Research Center “2019 Global Attitudes Survey”, 46.

situation the U.S. is losing the chance to keep Southeast Asia multipolar⁴⁸. China's use of soft power messaging creates the perception that increased ties with China offer a better way of life for the average Philippine citizen. This can cast the US as a less attractive partner in the Philippines when compared to China. This economic power is coupled with Chinese messaging which reinforces its narrative with reassurances they do not wish to engage in offensive mercantilism.⁴⁹ Moving forward the US must demonstrate how close ties with Washington provide an economic benefit, to better compete with China's smart power.

It's the Economy, Stupid

These trends demonstrate that while the US is still viewed in a positive light by the Philippines the economic argument is becoming more applicable. Filipinos seem undeterred by suspicion of China when economics is the primary focus. This indicates that to counter China's soft power narrative and economic power a greater focus should be placed on the economic benefits of Philippine and US interdependence. A smart power approach should be taken by the US to reinforce its own economic and soft power narrative to secure strategic access in the Philippines. Emphasis cannot only focus on soft power or economic means, but it must encompass several lines of effort to retain strategic access. This approach will amend the current US soft power narrative which is primarily focused on security and place more emphasis on an economic narrative to better compete with China. The key lines of effort of this plan will be US military deployments, international trade, human capital investments, and targeted infrastructure development.

Military Deployments

⁴⁸ Walter Clemens, "China and World Order: Mutual Gain or Exploitation." *Asian Perspective* 43, 746.

⁴⁹ Lams, *Examining Strategic Narratives in Chinese Official Discourse*, 397.

Despite these increasing ties between the Philippines and China the U.S. still retains a foothold. Due to U.S. military assistance against the Abu-Sayyaf Islamic insurgency in Mindanao Duterte has adopted a more moderate approach to the U.S. government, despite the political rhetoric from Manila. Military assistance against Abu-Sayyaf and the ongoing war against drugs in the Philippines provides for increased avenues for strategic interdependence.

⁵⁰The avenue of military assistance is one key approach to provide an economic benefit and promote US soft power.

The military tie between the US and the Philippines represents an important partnership to strengthen the bond between both countries. The counterinsurgency against Abu-Sayyaf provides the US military with more deployment opportunities and increased interaction with the local populace. This relationship between interactions with US military personnel fosters the forging of higher opinions of the US populace, government, and military. Research indicates this positive relationship between military personnel interactions and the perception of the US at large.⁵¹ Interactions between the US military and the Philippine citizens help to shape a more favorable opinion. These conclusions are reinforced by additional polling which indicates that 51% of the population see US military involvement in the Asia Pacific region as making the area safer, with 12% against and 34% indifferent.⁵² However, negative interactions lead to more negative perceptions of the US. Therefore, cultural training and sensitivity is an important factor when utilizing military deployments for soft power purposes. These interactions can serve as a form of soft power, by conducting foreign policy by engagement with the local populace which

⁵⁰ Hendler, *Duterte's Pivot to China*, 329.

⁵¹ Allen Michael., Michael Flynn, Carla Martinez Machain, Andrew Stravers. "Understanding How Populations Perceive U.S. Troop Deployments." *Minerva Research Initiative* (blog), March 27, 2019, https://minerva.defense.gov/Owl-In-the-Olive-Tree/Owl_View/Article/1797784/understanding-how-populations-perceive-us-troop-deployments/

⁵² Pew Research Center "2019 Global Attitudes Survey", 42.

is also referred to as public diplomacy.⁵³ Which in turn helps to increase the American reputation, serving as a valuable tool to bolster US soft power.

An additional avenue to employ soft power with military deployments is the use of the US Navy hospital ships. The USNS Mercy deploys biannually to the Pacific as part of the mission PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP to support humanitarian missions. The USNS Mercy visited the Philippines in 2006, 2008, and 2012 providing key medical humanitarian aid in some of the most underserved localities.⁵⁴ Soft power is generated by gaining the gratitude and sympathy of the patients served in addition to their families. Humanitarian aid conducted by the military showcases a visible link between the US and quality of life.

While soft power and public opinion remain important considerations, to counter the Chinese narrative economic impact must be explored. Another key insight is the fact that US troop deployments are perceived as having an economic benefit as well. Roughly 59% of Filipinos perceived an economic benefit concerning US deployments in 2020 and 65% in 2019.⁵⁵ These positive economic impacts help bolster the overall view of the US. Furthermore, these economic benefits are felt throughout the socioeconomic scale. Elites are more likely to benefit from business deals or contracts with deployed military personnel, while those at the lower end of the scale are likely to benefit from service-related compensation or be the recipients of humanitarian aid.⁵⁶ Therefore, US deployments represent a two-fold approach to countering the

⁵³ Allen Michael., Michael Flynn, Carla Martinez Machain, Andrew Stravers. "Outside the wire: U.S. military deployments and public opinion in host states." *American Political Science Review* 114 no.2 (2020) 331.

⁵⁴ Larissa Forster, "The Soft Power Currencies of US Navy Hospital Ship Missions." *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no.4, 374.

⁵⁵ Allen Michael., Michael Flynn, Carla Martinez Machain, Andrew Stravers. "Understanding How Populations Perceive U.S. Troop Deployments." *Minerva Research Initiative* (blog), March 27, 2019, https://minerva.defense.gov/Owl-In-the-Olive-Tree/Owl_View/Article/1797784/understanding-how-populations-perceive-us-troop-deployments/

⁵⁶ Michael, et al., *Outside the Wire*, 337.

Chinese narrative. They shape public opinion of the US for the better while providing an economic incentive to the host nation.

Considering this information, the US should continue to support the counterinsurgency in Mindanao to not only actively combat terrorism but also serve as a foothold to help erode Chinese influence in the Philippines. Military to military engagement in this fight can also provide better training for Philippine forces and cultivate greater respect for human rights. These deployments demonstrate a tangible benefit to the Philippines and Rodrigo Duterte. Leveraging this foothold, the US should seek additional opportunities for military cooperation to further public diplomacy and economic activity within the Philippines. These opportunities should take the form of humanitarian assistance visits such as the USNS Mercy, or medical deployments to underserved areas. Additionally, Department of State led talks can advocate for bi-lateral training to help foster closer bonds between the US and Philippine military. These added inflection points can bolster US soft power in the Philippines.

Foreign Direct Investment

Foreign direct investment represents an added avenue to counter Chinese influence in the Philippines. Both the US and China actively invest in the Philippines. Chinese investment has been accelerating since 2008. During the second Arroyo administration Chinese investment represented \$3.3 billion, and during the Aquino administration investment represented \$1.9 billion. This decrease is largely a result of the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. With the adoption of Duterte's policy of accommodation, he garnered \$4.2 billion in Chinese investment after just over one year in office. Since Duterte has aligned himself closer to China the Philippines have received a significant amount of investment from China. The US accounted

for \$6.9 billion of foreign direct investment in the Philippines in 2019.⁵⁷ While the US commands a lead in investment China is rapidly gaining ground under Duterte's administration compared to past Philippine administrations. Here again, the US must draw attention to the fact that close relations with the US result not only in security cooperation but also in economic benefit. Investment in education represents a non-infrastructure path to economic prosperity.

Science, Technology, Research, and Innovation for Development (STRIDE)

Investment in education represents an alternative path to economic prosperity. An example is the STRIDE program conducted by USAID. This program awards research grants for Philippine universities to undertake collaborative research with US universities on disciplines that contribute to economic growth such as electronics, chemical industries, alternative industry, and information technology.⁵⁸ This program is a great example of a soft power tool to forge closer ties with the US. STRIDE provides critical education and collaboration to allow the Filipinos to chart their path, without being saddled with a large debt burden or lack of transparency as compared to BRI projects. The STRIDE program invests in human capital, which will serve the Philippines for decades to come. Educational programs like STRIDE provide Filipinos with the tools to accelerate high growth domestically. These efforts should be increased by seeking partnerships with American universities. Strategic messaging is reinforced with the human-interest stories of the successes of this program. This would create a powerful narrative that addresses the underlying economic concerns noted in the Philippines. The human element makes for more powerful storytelling than charts and investment figures. Human capital investments such as STRIDE help create cultural attraction to the US since it demonstrates long-

⁵⁷ Office of the United States Trade Representative, *Philippines*, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/philippines>

⁵⁸ US Embassy in the Philippines, *US Government Awards Science, Technology, and Innovation Grants to Filipino Scholars and Universities*, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/us-government-awards-science-technology-innovation-grants-filipino-scholars-universities/>

term concern for the people in a way a new bridge or port cannot. Programs like STRIDE help to reinforce US soft power.

Recommendations

Despite misgivings about China, their narrative of improved economic prosperity is gaining ground along with increased Chinese inroads into the Philippines. This shift towards China has been accelerated by the political policies of President Duterte. The US has narrative has primarily focused on a rules-based order and has ignored economic means in its strategic communication. The US should shift its strategic narrative to highlight the economic benefit of US cooperation over security. The overall goal is to counter a closer Philippine alignment with China that will place US strategic access in jeopardy.

To counter this incursion by China in the Philippines the US should shift the narrative to the economic benefits of close ties between Manila and Washington. The first way to accomplish this is by in the inroad proved by GWOT. US military deployments have a positive economic impact and serve as a valuable soft power tool. First, the US should seek to maximize deployed military personnel numbers in the Philippines, coupled with humanitarian aid missions. Second, the US government should focus its strategic communication with Southeast Asia to focus on the economic benefits over its current dominant narrative of security and a rules-based order. Key areas to highlight are the trade balance and foreign direct investment. Finally, the human element must be acknowledged. Investments in human capital such as STRIDE help contribute to economic growth for decades to come. Ultimately the human element is where the battle of narratives will either be won or lost, which will translate into assured access or increasingly contested access in the second island chain. These actions must be taken to counter Chinese action in the Philippines which seeks to limit US access and influence.

Alternatively, the US does not have to cede the narrative to China. The US could choose to compete in areas where it enjoys a competitive advantage. Examples of other areas that the US could compete in include the promotion of democracy, human rights, and security. However, the low emphasis on political rights and liberties results in limited accountability in Asia.⁵⁹ Therefore this approach may not be as effective. Additionally, US military power can bolster security in the region. Given the post-colonial tensions present in the US-Philippines relationship, caution must be taken with a military centric approach so that the American presence is not perceived as imperialistic, which could further erode US soft power in the Philippines and Southeast Asia as a whole. Therefore, the economic narrative should take priority.

To implement the first recommendation the US should leverage military to military partnerships formed through GWOT deployments to seek bi-lateral training opportunities. This will have the effect of greater engagement, economic impact, and public diplomacy. Additionally, the Department of State can work with their Philippine counterparts to seek avenues for humanitarian aid such as a deployment of the USNS Mercy. To implement the second point of an increased economic focus additional funding is required to avoid a say-do gap. Strategic messaging from the Department of State should tailor messaging to the Philippines to highlight FDI, and the balance of trade. Furthermore, the creation of tax incentives for non-governmental investment could encourage a greater inflow of dollars to the Philippines. The creation of scholarship opportunities within the Philippines and in the US represents a pathway of implementation for human capital investment. Participating universities should receive government grants for Filipino students. This human capital investment will

⁵⁹ Myunghee, *Evaluating US Soft Power in Asia*, 338.

provide help advance American soft power and provide an economic benefit for decades to come.

Conclusion

Chinese smart power is translating into increased footholds in the Philippines. Overall, the high emphasis on improving livelihood through increased economic opportunity characterizes Chinese smart power in the Philippines. The shift towards more friendly relations has accelerated under the administration of President Duterte, who is willing to forgo territorial disputes with China in exchange for reinvigorated Philippine infrastructure. Despite traditional suspicion of China Filipinos are more accepting of the idea that Chinese cooperation can bring quality of life benefits. This idea is coupled with the means to propagate the message of a peaceful rise of China by companies such as Huawei, which already have a market presence in the Philippines. Proposed BRI investments add an additional incentive and represent a way for the Philippines to recapitalize on their infrastructure leading to increased quality of life.

Currently, the US enjoys more favorable public opinion in the Philippines than China. However, when economic measures are considered China is making large gains in public opinion. While the US retains a lead in public opinion, changing trade balances are beginning to tip the scale in favor of China. This change is chiefly because of China's use of smart power. To retain strategic access in the Philippines the US should shift its narrative from one that is primarily security and rules-based focused to one that emphasizes the economic benefit of close ties between the US and the Philippines.

To better stress economics in the short term, the Department of State can focus on trade and FDI. In the medium term, the US military can leverage partnerships formed by the GWOT and seek increased bi-lateral training opportunities with the Philippine military. Additionally,

military to military engagement could also take the form of humanitarian support. Both efforts provide an additional avenue to impact the local economy, conduct public diplomacy, and ultimately reinforce US soft power in the Philippines. In the long term, scholarship opportunities with universities provide an investment in human capital. Increased educational opportunities expand upon efforts like STRIDE and help to strengthen US soft power while avoiding the opacity and debt traps of the BRI. A failure to focus on economics as the primary issue could result in limited future access in the second island chain.

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