Andrea Chloe Wong

The Philippines’ relations with China have recently experienced turbulence, with the occurrence of various controversies and disputes. The issues behind development projects have cast doubts on the integrity of Chinese investments and revealed the venality of Philippine institutions. Moreover, the fiery and contentious maritime row between the two countries has led to the deterioration of bilateral ties. These long-standing hostilities have brought diplomatic relations to their lowest point since they were established in June 1975.

However, with the current administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, bilateral relations have taken a dramatic turn – from a hostile mood to a more amiable outlook. In his state visit to China in October 2016, Duterte declared the Philippines’ “realignment” with China, after five years without any high-level exchanges between the two governments. Departing from his predecessor’s uncompromising stance, Duterte opted to downplay security issues in favour of reviving political relations and pursuing economic ties with China.

During the administration of President Benigno Aquino III (2011–2016), bilateral relations were dominated by maritime disputes. Since 2012, China has seized and taken effective control of Scarborough Shoal, which is situated within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The situation has been further aggravated by unlawful establishment of infrastructures in the area and an illegal ban on Filipino fishermen’s access to its fishing grounds. Bilateral ties took a downturn when the Aquino administration filed an arbitration case against China in 2013, under the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). In 2016, the UN Arbitral Tribunal decided that “the Philippines has exclusive sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea (part of the South China Sea) and that China’s ‘nine-dash line’ based on its historic rights is invalid”.

Given its political and security issues, the Philippines has faced difficulties in its economic relations with China. At the height of the territorial disputes, it faced stricter implementation of trade rules and commercial regulations by Chinese authorities. This was evident when China imposed stringent food and safety standards and requirements in 2012 that led to the ban on banana imports from the Philippines. The ban was enforced after Chinese
In the long term, it is imperative that the Philippines accommodate yet vigilant in its relations with China under its still-ambiguous, yet-to-be-operationalized “independent foreign policy”.

The Philippines also gained positive momentum in renewing political and security ties with China. Despite the favourable arbitration ruling, because of its weak naval capabilities the Philippines cannot enforce its maritime rights and challenge the Chinese Coast Guard barricading in the Scarborough Shoal. It was not until Duterte’s state visit to China that Filipino fishermen were able to return to the area and resume their fishing activities after four years of Chinese prohibition. Moreover, high-level bilateral dialogue regarding maritime disputes has resumed following Duterte’s participation in the BRI Summit in Beijing last May.

The warming up of bilateral ties after years of frosty relations can be attributed to Duterte’s pragmatic policy. Evidently, he departed from the Aquino administration’s defiance against Chinese assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea. And instead, Duterte opted to cooperate with China in managing tensions in the area by not taking any military action after the court’s ruling, while amassing various economic concessions in the process. He considered that focusing more on the trade and economic aspects of the Philippines’ relations with China would ultimately benefit the Filipino people more than insisting on national maritime claims that it cannot impose. This may appear to be a very opportunistic economic tactic, and it may almost seem that the Philippines is forsaking its maritime security; but Duterte’s foreign policy adjustments have a logical basis that reflects his calculating and business-like approach.

Moreover, the Duterte administration highlights an “independent foreign policy” that seeks to move the Philippines away from its dependence on the United States. While the United States is its long-standing ally, the Philippines under Duterte is pushing to deepen relations with other, equally important partners such as Japan. It also seeks to strengthen relations with non-democratic countries that hold divergent political values, such as Russia. Although the Philippines is a long-standing democracy, its increasing interaction with Russia reflects Duterte’s pragmatic foreign policy and accommodating posture, which emphasizes concrete bilateral dealings rather than ideological engagements. The Philippines also strives to steer clear of big power rivalries and seeks to cooperate with various countries that will potentially bring in economic benefits, regardless of any looming political issues.

While the Chinese government has welcomed this positive breakthrough in bilateral relations, public opinion in the Philippines is divided on whether or not this was a sound move by the Duterte administration. But the general perception is that Duterte’s accommodating policy towards China has temporarily de-escalated maritime tensions and enhanced trade ties. As a small power, the Philippines considers this a welcome step towards a more peaceful neighbourhood for its economic development.

In the long term, it is imperative that the Philippines be accommodating yet vigilant in its relations with China under its still-ambiguous, yet-to-be-operationalized “independent foreign policy”. Given the shift in its foreign policy, the challenge for the Philippines under Duterte is to be consistently cautious in its policy implementation. Foreign policy must be supervised by established institutions in order to put a check on decisions based on personal impulses, which have been the trademark of the Duterte administration so far.

Andrea Chloe Wong is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. She is also a non-resident WSD Handa Fellow of the Pacific Forum CSIS. She previously served as a Senior Foreign Affairs Research Specialist at the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute, Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines. You may reach her at chloe.wong@pg.canterbury.ac.nz.

RISE is T.wai’s quarterly focused on current Southeast Asian affairs; the only Italian journal entirely devoted to the region.