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The Philippines and the World: which country do Filipinos trust more and why

Abstract

Agreements between and among countries have been going on for centuries for the purpose of trade, security, employment, and peace among others, however, changes on these agreements do happen, for instance, when a new President gets elected and see a different direction for his/her country. When President Rodrigo Duterte became President of the Philippines in 2016, he have made it clear that he doesn't trust the United States of America, while expressing preference in working with China, in fact, in his 6 year term, he has never step foot on the country for an official visit, however, a new perspective was introduced when Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was elected as President in 2022. President Marcos Jr.'s vision is clear to involve a strong relationship with the United States of America, as well as with China and other countries, whereas, in his interviews, he has kept on reiterating that one of his visions for the Philippines is to be "A friend to all, and an enemy to none". Clearly, these are two Presidents with different perspectives on international relations and being very popular presidents; President Duterte leaving the office with a 69% trust rating, which is one of the highest in the history of the country, and President Marcos Jr. being the country's first majority president winning with 58.77% of votes since the enactment of the 1987 constitution, it is not a surprise if their perspectives have influenced how the people perceive these countries. Through a literature review, this study attempted to find out Filipinos' perception towards the two superpowers as allies of the Philippines in terms of trustworthiness. It is also the intention of this study to learn

about the reasons why Filipinos perceive the countries in such a way, resulting in conclusions to what factors influence their trust.

Keywords: International Relations, Philippines and the United States of America, Philippines and China, Filipinos' Perspective

Introduction

In terms of politics, economics, trade, cultural development, among others, the Philippines has never been alone. It is public knowledge that the country has been working with other countries to grow, sustain, and survive since people could remember. Historically speaking, the country has been colonized by other nations; Spain for 333 years, the United States of America for 48 years, and Japan for 3 years. As a sovereign country, the Philippines is fairly young, in fact, it is still a developing country that could be considered, hence, requires help from more established nations in many aspects. With these said, international relations is very critical to the future of the Philippines. The country has been on a rough ride in the past 6 years with Presidents that have different perspectives in terms of International relations, particularly towards one of its longest ally, the United States of America, and to one of its biggest investors, China. Former president Duterte expressed hate against the United States of America (Bernal and Yan, 2016), as a matter of fact, the former president not only said that on a public forum, but have also delivered the message through a speech in Beijing, China, together with his intention to strengthen ties with the Chinese (Parameswaran, 2016). Literatures suggest that it is literally China over USA in his mind, however, this seemed to have changed in his final years in office as he decided to restore the Visiting Forces Agreement with the USA that has allowed continuous sharing of military intelligence, sales of military arms, and other discussions in terms of

militarization (Jennings, 2021), nevertheless, the President would probably have remained to be pro-China than being pro-USA in the eyes of many. Meanwhile, when President Marcos Jr. was elected in May 2022 and took office in more than a month later, the course of the country seemed to have changed as it has been clearly expressed through interviews, speeches, and his actions that his administration will be reestablishing relationship with the USA (Gomez and Calupitan, 2022). President Marcos Jr. was even compared to former President Duterte on this aspect as he visits the USA to talk to potential investors (Robles, 2022), and meets with US President Biden during a UN Assembly (Strangio, 2022) in his first 100 days, while the former Philippines President in his first months in office has insulted the former US President Obama saying that he can go to hell (Northam, 2016) and US Ambassador to the Philippines back then calling him a gay son of a bitch (McKirdy, 2016). Apart from these, many have happened in the past years, some are still relevant till this day that has involved the Philippines, USA, and China. When COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic, incidence of Asian Hate in the USA has skyrocketed (Findling, et al. 2022), given that it is in Asia, specifically in China where this global health emergency originated (Gover, et al. 2020). However, though it is from China, Filipinos were also affected by it. Suñga et al. (2022) explains that Filipinos who are living in the USA and those Americans with Filipino descent are also shown hatred by Americans. In fact, these hate crimes have influenced Filipinos' travel intentions to the country, including those who have not experienced such. Meanwhile, in 2013, the dispute between the Philippines and China in the West Philippines Sea made headlines when the Philippine government initiated international arbitration against China on its territorial dispute in a portion of the South China Sea, termed as the West Philippines Sea. This move has resulted in the decision to favor the Philippines' claim to own the territory in reference to the 2016 award under the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea and the decision by the arbitral tribunal (Lee-Brago, 2022). However, this was rejected and ignored by the people's republic of China (Phillips et al, 2016), which has resulted in continuous conflict in the area; Chinese Coast Guard harasses Filipino fishermen (Baraño, 2023) and shoos away even Filipino Journalists who attempt to document activities in the area (Strangio, 2021). The increase in the number of Chinese vessels has also been observed in the recent years, expanding the country's presence in the territory, and forcing Filipino fishermen to avoid certain areas (Gutierrez, 2022), in fact, the presence has significantly widened, around 3.6 million kilograms of fish was lost based on the estimation of a food security advocacy group in the Philippines.

With these events in the past and the present, it is relevant to study what Filipinos think of these two countries, motivating the researcher to conduct this study. Lebow (2013) explains that trust is the central concept in international relations as it is a major concern whether countries of interest will really be good allies or not. Additionally, trust of the people is also as important as the trust of the government towards the country of subject; the decisions of political leaders affect how they are perceived by their people (Birch and Allen, 2014), and in a democracy, this is critical as this could also influence their political candidates preferences. Focusing on the people, literatures suggest Filipinos trust the USA more than China; according to the article by Mercado (2022), the USA has recorded a 89% trust rating from Filipinos, whereas, 31% of Filipinos said that "a great deal of trust" must be given by the Philippines to the US, while 58% said that the Philippines should give the country a "fair amount of trust.", while only 33% thinks about China as trustworthy. This is consistent with the distrust rating, whereas, 67% of Filipinos expressed distrust towards China as 36% said that the Philippines should give "not too much trust" on the country, while 31% thinks that "no trust at all" must be given. The

same was presented by Poushter and Bishop (2017) showing 78% of Filipinos have a positive perspective towards the USA, while only 55% sees China the same way. However, these numbers indicate decreasing trust towards the USA and increasing trust on China, as the gaps continue to narrow over time, whereas, in 2015, it was 92% of Filipinos who have expressed positive sentiment towards the USA. Nevertheless, come 2020, the trust on China has dropped to bad from poor, while it has remained good for the USA (Tomacruz, 2020).

It has been established that Americans are seen by Filipinos as ally more than the Chinese, however, there is dearth of information on why this has been the case, which could help researchers, educators, and scholars to understand what specific factors have influenced or could influence trust or perspective towards which country can be trusted as an ally, hence, a research gap this study has attempted to fill in.

Methodology

This study is guided by a descriptive research design and has employed a qualitative research approach. 15 randomly selected Filipinos living from different parts of the country were interviewed and asked to answer a common question "Which country do they trust more as an ally for the Philippines, USA or China, and why?". The process took 1 month and has required the researcher to reach out to 47 Filipinos to achieve the target of 15 responses. To analyze the responses, thematic analysis was performed, resulting in factors that influence trust on countries as allies. Meanwhile, to establish information as to which country between China and the United States of America is trusted more by Filipinos, a literature review has been conducted.

Results and Discussion

The country that is trusted more by Filipinos between the USA and China

In a survey commissioned by Stratbase Albert del Rosario Institute and conducted by the Pulse Asia Research Inc. based in the Philippines in the second quarter of 2018, the United States of America ranks first in the list of most trusted countries by Filipinos, followed by Japan, Australia, China, South Korea, Russia, United Kingdom, Vietnam, and India. Though China placed 4th, it is obvious that the USA is way more trusted by respondents with an overwhelming gap of 57% on their scores, whereas, 74% of them see the USA as trustworthy, while only 17% perceive China in the same manner (Esmaguél, 2018). A couple of months later in the same year, a survey on the same topic was conducted by another reputable research organization in the Philippines called Social Weather Stations and has revealed the United States of America has remained to be the most trustworthy country among Filipinos, while China has recorded a neutral score, which means Filipino neither trust or distrust the country (Aguinaldo, 2019). These results are despite the actions of President Duterte leaning towards working with China than the United States of America. The same has been the case on the survey conducted in the third quarter of 2019 by the same institution, Social Weather Stations as presented by Santos (2019), whereas, out of 1,800 adult Filipinos, 1404 believe that the relationship between the Philippines and the United States of America is more important than its ties with China, while only 216 said otherwise, showing a more positive perceptio towards the USA than China. Come 2020, the United States of America remained on top, while China dropping to the bottom of the list (CNN Philippines, 2020). Meanwhile, in the latest survey by Pulse Asia Research Inc., it showed that majority or 84% of Filipinos want the Philippines government to work with the United States of

America, particularly in boosting the country's military capability, while only 20% expressed interest on strengthening ties with the people's republic of China (Rocamora, 2023).

Clearly, Filipinos perceive the United States of America as more trustworthy than China. It has reflected on series of surveys commissioned by reputable research organizations in the Philippines over the past few years. Though in some surveys, China's trust rating has improved, there are also surveys where its numbers gotten worse, indicating uncertainty in the minds of Filipinos whether they as a country should work with the Chinese in achieving both of their national and international interests or not, while for the United States of America, it has been very positive in all surveys, which translates to the confidence of Filipinos in working with Americans as their ally.

In regards to the what causes these perspectives, the researcher was able to find three groups of factors that affect Filipinos' perspectives towards a country as an ally for the Philippines in terms of trustworthiness, in reference to the participants' responses. These include factors that increase trust, factors that decrease trust, and factors that have made them choose the USA over China.

Factors that influence increased of trust

Themes	Respondents	Statements
Historical Relationship	Respondent 2	"Because this country colonized the Philippines, therefore has influenced our culture and has established a historical relationship with us"
	Respondent 8	"USA has a longer and more established political, economic, security, and cultural ties with the Philippines historically speaking, and this has remained strong till this day"
	Respondent 9	"Due to the historical alliance the Philippines has with the USA"

	Respondent 14	"We were colonized by the USA before, and we have adapted their culture over time"
Assistance extended in times of crisis	Respondent 3	"Americans are giving people and they have helped the Philippines towards its independence historically speaking. They have kept their promise to help the Philippines before, specifically with Douglas Macarthur who has returned after promising that he will"
	Respondent 4	"USA has given us democracy and helped us to achieve freedom from Spain"
	Respondent 6	"Because they have helped the Philippines in so many ways. Historically speaking, they have been there for us (e.g. financial support during times of crisis, security during wars)"
	Respondent 12	"During natural calamities, the US is always here to help"
Current political and security relationship	Respondent 10	"The Philippines and the USA has agreements that are still strongly observed till the current times"
	Respondent 9	"Our leaders have friendly relationship with their leaders"
	Respondent 8	"China seems to be an enemy, and security is much needed by the Philippines. I believe that USA will help us on this aspect"

Table 1. Themes that have emerged from the responses of participants as to why they trust the USA as an ally for the Philippines

Through the analysis performed, it was found that trust of people towards a country as an ally is influenced by the depth of historical relationship between the country and their home country, which has been the case for the USA and the Philippines since the late 19th century. Aside from this, the assistance extended by the country of subject in time of crisis could also indicate how people from one country perceive another country. This explains why Filipinos trust the USA, as the US government has always been with the Philippines in times of crisis, from the fight against Spain and Japan for independence, to natural calamities, and health

emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. The current political and security relationship between the countries also results in a positive perspective among people, which clearly the USA and the Philippines has with the recent visits of USA High Ranking Officials to the Philippines; Vice President Harris in November 2022 and Defense Secretary Austin III in February 2023, as well as the recently concluded trips of Philippines President Marcos Jr. to meet with investors from the USA and President Biden.

Factors the influence distrust towards China

Themes	Respondents	Statements
Issues concerning the country and the Philippines	Respondent 4	“China and the Philippines has territorial conflict that has affected many in the Philippines”
	Respondent 8	“China and the Philippines have growing economic ties but it has been strained by a territorial dispute.”
	Respondent 15	“The Chinese government continues to claim what is ours despite the decision of the UN favoring us”
Perceived Threat	Respondent 11	“China is willing to hurt Filipinos when decisions and actions do not favor them”
	Respondent 1	“China poses danger to Filipinos with incidences of harassment in territorial waters”
	Respondent 7	“..but China is more aggressive that causes harm or results in harassment..”
	Respondent 13	“The Chinese are more likely to go to war against us due to the current territorial conflict we have them, than to work with us”
Aggressiveness and Superiority Complex	Respondent 6	“China on the other hand just wants things that could benefit them and I think they only want agreement where they have the advantage, like what is happening with the West Philippines Sea.”
	Respondent 7	“..but China is more aggressive that causes harm or results in harassment..”

	Respondent 10	“China has seemed to have focused on intimidating us so we would think that we must just bow down to them”
	Respondent 13	“The joint exploration agreement that the Chinese government is suggesting will only benefit them since the territory is not theirs”
	Respondent 1	“They think that they can do whatever they want despite international laws”

Table 2. Themes that have emerged from the responses of participants as to why they trust China less compared to the USA as an ally for the Philippines

Distrust towards China based on the analysis are attributed to three factors; Issues concerning it and the Philippines, perceived threat caused by China, and its aggressiveness and superiority complex as perceived by Filipinos. The continuous territorial dispute between the two countries in West Philippines Sea is definitely the one causing this distrust as it gives Filipinos the impression that China only thinks of itself and does not really care about the region, which could also be seen on how it has mistreated Filipinos fishing in the area, eventually resulting to an impression that China is prepared to hurt people and threatening the Philippines national security. The participants of this study also believe that China only wants agreements where they have the advantage in reference to their response after the decision of the arbitral tribunal was released in 2016 favoring the country on its claim to the aforementioned territory, causing them to judge China as not trustworthy.

Factors that influence Filipinos' preference towards the USA over China

Themes	Respondents	Statements
Good deeds shown by the country over the years	Respondent 3	“Americans are giving people and they have helped the Philippines towards its independence historically speaking”
	Respondent 6	“Because they have helped the Philippines in so many ways. Historically

		speaking, they have been there for us (e.g. financial support during times of crisis, security during wars).”
	Respondent 12	“During natural calamities, the US is always here to help”
Bad actions done by China compared to the USA	Respondent 4	“China and the Philippines has territorial conflict that has affected many in the Philippines”
	Respondent 7	“China is more aggressive that causes harm or results in harassment,”
	Respondent 1	“China poses danger to Filipinos with incidences of harassment in territorial waters. I hate China for this”
	Respondent 15	“They (China) disrespected us when they did not recognized the decision of the UN”
Less issues concerning the country and the Philippines	Respondent 9	“Due to the historical alliance the Philippines has with the USA, and to the fact that they have no territorial dispute with us”
	Respondent 5	“Choosing between the two, USA because it is less evil, while China has shown how evil it is with its actions in the WPS”
Less selfishness and cleaner/less dirty perceived intention	Respondent 7	“USA and China both aim for their own economic benefits but China is more aggressive that causes harm or results in harassment, while the USA does it as it promotes peace”
	Respondent 8	“China and the Philippines have growing economic ties but it has been strained by a territorial dispute. With this, China seems to be an enemy, and security is much needed by the Philippines. I believe that USA will help us on this aspect.”
	Respondent 5	“USA because it is less evil.”

Table 3. Themes that have emerged from the responses of participants as to why they trust the USA more than China

In comparison, the USA is trusted by Filipinos more than China due to four factors. The first one is because of the good deeds shown by the USA over time to the Philippines, from granting the country sovereignty, to its continuous financial support in infrastructure

development and in times of crisis. The bad actions done by China on the other hand has also influenced their choice of the USA as an ally, as some participants expressed that they only trust the USA more because they hate China more due to its claim to Philippines' territory. The preference towards the USA is also attributed to the fact that there are less issues concerning it and the Philippines compared to what the Philippines has with China to the knowledge of Filipinos. Lastly, the less perceived dirty intention a country has and the less selfish it is perceived as, the more trust is given to it by Filipinos. The USA is perceived to have its own personal interest; however, it is also seen to advocate peace and development, while China's actions bring the idea of evilness and instability as it causes fear among Filipinos due to harassment incidents in territorial waters. Responses from the participants also indicate that the USA is perceived more of an ally than an enemy of the Philippines, while China seems to be seen as an enemy more than an ally.

Conclusion

Results are indications that the USA has remained to be the closest ally of the Philippines as perceived by Filipinos despite hatred expressed by the previous administration. The historical ties between the United States of America and the Philippines clearly have cemented this, as well as the continuous positive actions it shows. Meanwhile, China though just lies near the Philippines, is seen to be not an ally rather an enemy of the country, attributed to its government's doings in Philippines' territorial waters. This however benefits the USA, as some Filipinos only choose it as an ally for the Philippines due to their negative perception towards China. It is also important to note that with the findings of this study, American businesses are more likely to receive support from the Filipino market should more enter the Philippines in the

future. This also backs up what President Marcos Jr., have been telling to American investors during his visits; that the Philippines is a country that they should consider investing in.

Meanwhile, it is very important that the Philippines President explains clearly to his people the direction of his administration when it comes to international relations with these two countries provided that he has visited both countries already during his first year in office. Whatever move the president does involving China is very critical as Filipinos perceive the country as not trustworthy. He on the other hand must assess working on the relationship between the Philippines and the USA as this is assumed to be favored by Filipinos since they truly trust the Americans due to the countries' historical alliances.

This study also revealed that historical relationship, assistance extended in times of crisis, and the current political and security relationship could be used as indicators to the increased perceived trustworthiness of a country as an ally of another country, while issues concerning the countries of interest, perceived threat, and displayed aggressiveness and superiority complex are factors that influence increased in distrust towards a country as an ally.

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