

BİLGESAM ANALİZ/ANALYSIS



**The Philippine:
A Staggering Country Between China and
The United States**

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The Philippine: A Staggering Country Between China and The United States

Marcos Jr., the son of former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, won the Presidential elections on May 9, 2022, the results of which are eagerly awaited in the Philippines, one of the important countries of South East Asia. Marcos Jr. will rule his country as President of the Philippines for the next six years. In front of Marcos, there are important problems to be overcome, especially in domestic and foreign policy as well as economy. But, there is one of them that directly concerns all these fields; What path will Marcos Jr. take between China and the United States? In order to understand this better, it is necessary to first look at the background of the Philippines' relations with the US and China and then at the words of Marcos Jr.

The Philippines and the United States have been two allies in the Pacific region since the Mutual Defence Agreement (MDT) they signed in 1951. The Philippines hosted various US bases during the cold war years, including two of the largest US military bases abroad. However, with the end of the cold war, although the US withdrew significantly from these bases in the 1990s, some of its activities continued and preserved its access to them. With the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) signed in 1988, military cooperation between the allies and relations on other military issues were maintained. The good relations between the parties during the 2000s deteriorated with the coming to power of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines in July 2016. The reason for this was Duterte's approach to the conflict between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea, different from the previous Manila administrations.

After Duterte became President of the Philippines, unlike the previous administration of Benigno Aquino, he adopted and implemented an accommodation strategy with China. China and the Philippines have long had mutual claims over the same territories in the South China Sea. Mutual claims continue to this day, especially starting with China's occupation of the Mischief reef, which it claimed rights on, in 1994 and increasing its military presence on the reef. The disputed

region, called Huangyan by China and Scarborough by the Philippines, consists of shallow waters, reefs and cliffs. After the military tension between the two countries in the South China Sea in 2012, the Aquino administration brought the situation to the International Court of Arbitration. The court that gave its final decision in 2016 found the Philippines justified, but China did not accept and recognize the court decision. The new Philippine President, who could not find the diplomatic support he wanted from his ally, the United States of America (USA), turned to a policy of accommodation with China and announced that he would leave the United States after a while.

Behind Duterte's turn to a strategy of accommodation with China, there were foreign investments that the country desperately needed and attracting these investments by accommodating with China, and also not being left out of the Belt and Road Initiative announced by China. Again with this strategy, Duterte hoped to pacify China's activities in the South China Sea (such as the construction and armament of artificial islands, fishing and patrol activities). Within the framework of this policy, diplomatic relations with China were developed and many new agreements were made. Under the agreements, China has promised a total of \$33 billion in investments in the Philippines, but only a very small amount (\$4.7 billion) has been realized so far. From Duterte's point of view, it is clear that China's promises have not come true.

While it was implementing a policy of reconciliation with Beijing, Duterte administration announced in February 2020 that it would suspend the Visiting Forces Agreement signed between the Philippines and the US in 1998. However, after a while, the Manila government realized that China had not fulfilled its promises, and the Philippines government delayed the suspension of the agreement for six months in June and November of the same year. The 1998 agreement legally authorizes U.S. military aircraft, ships, and troops that return to the Philippines each year for military and humanitarian aid exercises. The extension of the suspension of the agreement for another six months by the Manila administration in mid-June

2021 was positively received by the Washington administration. In this context, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said "We also reaffirm that an armed attack on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea would invoke US mutual defense commitments under Article IV of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty," in a statement.

Blinken's statements are purely verbal and do not include any written commitment. States do not act on verbal promises. They take written commitments more seriously, but they can't even be completely sure of them. The relationship of the Philippines with the US is a striking example in this regard. For example, the alliance agreements of the US with Japan and Australia, which are among the other important allies of the US in Asia, commit the American aid in case these countries are attacked by another country or countries, while the agreement of the US with the Philippines promises "consultation" in a similar situation. On top of that, the US-Philippine alliance has been seriously injured, given the uncertainty that has prevailed in bilateral relations for a while, and China's increasing maritime and economic activity.

The intense emphasis of the Biden administration, who took over the presidency in the US in January, on promoting democracy stands as another divide between the two countries. In addition, the fact that Duterte administration repeatedly stated that the future of the VFA depends on the US to provide the Covid-19 vaccine throughout 2021 has deepened the distrust between the parties. Today, although the parties have restored the VFA, it is obvious that the bilateral alliance has a serious erosion problem.

But despite everything, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin thanked Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana on August 7, 2021 for the restoration of the VFA regarding the deployment of US troops in the country. However, Duterte has stated in recent years that he prefers relations with China and Russia to relations with the US.

However, the Philippine administration, which could not get the economic investments it wanted in return for the policy of accommodation with China and could not calm the activities of China in the South China Sea, turned to a policy change. Another recent development is that over the past few years, Beijing has been further ramping up its maritime activities in the South China Sea in part in response to Beijing's concerns about the increased US military presence in the region due to Sino-US rivalry.

In this context, China's increasing activities within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea has strained the relations between Manila and Beijing. In response, more than 5,000 US military personnel undertook exercises with their Philippine counterparts, the largest in seven years, in March and April of 2022. In fact, it should not be forgotten that strategic imperatives forced Duterte to establish strong relations with Washington.

Now, the new leader of the Philippines, Marcos Jr. will reshape the country's relations with the two great powers, China and the US, and try to establish closer relations with Beijing. Marcos Jr. has long-standing good relations with China and is willing to make a new bilateral agreement with the Chinese President, Xi Jinping on the South China Sea dispute. Marcos Jr. in an interview he gave during his election campaigns, said that "the judgment of International Court of Arbitration in favor of the Philippines regarding the South China Sea dispute in 2016 was ineffective because China did not recognize this decision and therefore would seek a bilateral agreement to overcome the differences. Marcos Jr. is open to negotiations and consultations with China and is willing to develop cooperation with China, including the development of natural gas and oil in the Western Philippines Sea.

The Western Philippines Sea is located in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. However, China also has demands on the region. In recent years, there have been increasing tensions between the ships of the two countries in the region.

However, the most serious obstacle in the way of Marcos Jr.'s policy towards China will be bureaucrats and Philippines Armed Forces commanders who really attach great importance to the Philippines' alliance with the US.

In conclusion, the time will show us whether Marcos Jr.'s fate will be the same as that of his successor, Duterte, that is, whether he will return to the US at the end of the day, or, this time, whether under Marcos Jr.'s administration, the Philippines will be able to establish relations with China at the level they want. However, one thing is certain, it will be China's attitude and policy towards the Philippines under the rule of Marcos Jr. that will determine the outcome.