

Marcos-Duterte Feud a Reflection of the New Cold War. Opposing Views on US and China

Former and incumbent presidents trade barbs and threats but root of the discord could boil down to opposed views on US and China

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The family feud between the Duterte and Marcos dynasties reached a crescendo when the former and incumbent Philippine presidents [publicly accused each other](#) of drug addiction.

During a rally in his hometown of Davao in the southern Philippines, **former President Rodrigo Duterte** accused his successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, of being a [longtime "drug addict."](#)

"We have a drug addict president, son of a bitch," the former president said amid escalating tensions with the ruling administration that has steadily purged elements from the former regime and squeezed the Duterte family's access to public resources, including [confidential funds](#) for **Vice President Sara Duterte** as well as [large-scale pork barrel funds](#) for the Davao district under another Duterte offspring.

Meanwhile, his son, **Sebastian "Baste" Duterte**, currently the mayor of Davao, called on the president to ["resign" from office](#). In response, the comparatively urbane and soft-spoken Marcos Jr broke character [and openly accused](#) his predecessor of dependence on addictive painkillers.

"I think it's the Fentanyl. Fentanyl is the strongest painkiller that you can buy. It is highly addictive and it has very serious side effects, and [former president Duterte] has been taking the drug for a very long time now," the president claimed.

Beyond the personal insults, Duterte has also incited rebellion, openly [calling for secession](#) of his home island of Mindanao from the rest of the Philippines, and publicly threatened to depose Marcos Jr through popular revolt.

Just as worrying to top security officials, however, is the possibility that Duterte will serve as a vortex of opposition to Marcos Jr's West-leaning foreign policy. Over the past year, Marcos Jr has adopted an increasingly proactive position in the South China Sea, culminating in several violent encounters between Philippine vessels and their Chinese counterparts.

Eager to balance against China's superior military, the Filipino president has welcomed expanded security cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, South Korea, India and Europe.

Both Duterte and [top Filipino-Chinese businessmen](#) have openly warned Marcos Jr against adopting an assertive stance against China, a top bilateral trading partner. In many ways, the escalating Duterte-Marcos feud is taking place against the backdrop of an intensified New Cold War between the US and China in the region.

Secession Threats

Duterte's threats of secession and establishment of a "separate, independent" Mindanao have been met with condemnation from all quarters, including [top leaders in the southern island province](#). Crucially, even former top generals who served in Duterte's cabinet minced no words.

National Security Adviser Eduardo Año, who earlier served as interior secretary and chief of the Philippine military under Duterte, [warned that](#) the government "will not hesitate to use its authority and forces to quell and stop all attempts to dismember the Republic" since "there is only one Philippines."



Then-president Rodrigo Duterte fires a few rounds with a sniper rifle during the opening ceremony of the National Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Challenge in Davao City, southern Philippine island of

“Any attempt to secede any part of the Philippines will be met by the government with resolute force, as it remains steadfast in securing the sovereignty and integrity of the national territory,” the former top general and Duterte official added.

For his part, presidential peace adviser **Carlito Galvez Jr.**, also a former military chief who served in a similar capacity under Duterte, warned “this call for separation is anathema to the letter and spirit of the Philippine Constitution, which is the bulwark of our nation’s identity as a people.”

Philippine **Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr.**, yet another former Duterte ally, was also quick to join in opposing a “separate and independent Mindanao.”

“The mandate of the Department of National Defense is to secure the sovereignty of the State and integrity of the national territory as enshrined in the Constitution...We will strictly enforce this mandate whether externally or internally,” Teodoro declared, underscoring the unanimous pushback from the defense establishment against the former president.

But while Duterte’s quixotic (if not treasonous) call for secession of his home island failed to gain any traction, his opposition to his successor’s pro-Western foreign policy has gained more currency among Philippine elites, especially the ruling business class.

“China is very close to us, we cannot be too antagonistic,” warned Teresita Sy-Coson, [SM Investments](#) Corp’s vice chairperson, during a major event for her company, which is the largest real estate and mall operator in the Philippines. “Even though we know what is happening, I guess we have to do it through a more peaceful negotiation,” she added.

Her views were echoed by other major Filipino-Chinese businessmen. Cecilio Pedro, president of the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry Inc, recently warned of investment opportunity costs caused by the deepening maritime row between the Philippines and China.

“The problem with the big [Chinese] companies is that they don’t want to invest until they are clear what are the relations between China and the Philippines moving forward. If the picture is not clear, they will not come,” Pedro told reporters during a recent interview. “To bring money in, they want to make sure that in the next five to 10 years we have a clear direction,” he added.

While China is the Philippines’ top trading partner, critics note that [bilateral trade is deeply lopsided](#) with the Philippines incurring huge trade deficits in recent years.

In December, China was responsible for a quarter of the Philippines’ total monthly imports, amounting to US\$2.72 billion. In contrast, the Philippines’ exports to China were only \$821.53 million, or around 13.3% of total shipments in the same period.

Moreover, there is no evidence that rising geopolitical tensions have had any major impact on bilateral economic ties. If anything, bilateral trade steadily increased during the **Benigno Aquino III** administration, which took China to international court over the two sides’ South China Sea disputes in 2016.

Meanwhile, the staunchly pro-Beijing Duterte administration [failed to attract any big-ticket Chinese infrastructure investments](#) during its six-year tenure despite a \$26 billion pledge made on one occasion by China.

Meanwhile, critics of the incumbent are also questioning the true motivations behind Marcos Jr's foreign policy pivot toward the West. Early in office, the namesake son of the former Filipino president vowed to pursue warmer ties with China but he progressively adopted a tougher stance in the past year amid deepening maritime feuds.

More Than Immunity

Pro-Beijing and other critics have implied that the US may have offered Marcos Jr, who [faces multiple court cases](#) in the US on allegations of massive [corruption and human rights violations](#) during his father's dictatorship, more than "[sovereign immunity](#)."



President Ferdinand Marcos Jr meets US President Joe Biden in a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on September 22, 2022. Photo: Office of the Press Secretary / Handout

Some observers suspect that Washington may have relaxed its scrutiny of the Marcoses' massive ill-gotten wealth, [estimated at \\$10 billion](#), which is suspected to be hidden in various offshore accounts, in exchange for greater military base access and deeper security cooperation vis-a-vis China.

By all indications, though, Marcos Jr's foreign policy is [deeply popular among Filipinos](#), a majority of whom have consistently backed stronger cooperation with Western allies.

In many ways, the namesake son of the former Philippine dictator is having his cake of popularity at home and eating the benefits of warmer ties with the West. The China issue has also allowed him to gradually marginalize the once-powerful Dutertes, who are seemingly fighting a hopeless and erratic political war from an increasingly weakened position.

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Featured image: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (L) and his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte (R) increasingly don't see eye to eye. Image: Twitter / ABS-CBN

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