

# An Analysis of the Variation and Impact of Sino-Philippines Economic and Trade Relations during the Duterte Administration

**Wang Hopan**

*School of International Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China  
zbin1998@hotmail.com*

**Abstract:** *This paper aims to investigate the variation and impact of Sino-Philippines economic and trade relations during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. The Duterte administration had implemented a foreign policy that differed significantly from its predecessor, adopting a strategy of "balancing relations equally between China and the United States" and suspending the contested South China Sea arbitration ruling. By analyzing relevant data and policies, this study explores changes in trade volume, investment patterns, and collaborative projects, while assessing the consequences of these transformations for economic development and bilateral relations. The findings reveal a significant shift in Sino-Philippines economic and trade relations during the Duterte administration, leading to a remarkable turnaround in the overall bilateral relationship. This transformation has had profound implications for the Philippines domestic economy, regional cooperation, and interactions between the two nations. The results of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Sino-Philippines economic and trade relations during the Duterte era and offer insights for further studies.*

**Keywords:** *Duterte; Philippines; China; Trade; Relations*

## 1. Introduction

In the discipline of international relations, there is a well-recognized saying that holds true across nations: "Diplomacy is the continuation of domestic policy"<sup>[1]</sup>, there exists an interaction and mutual influence between domestic politics and foreign policy. This notion finds ample illustration in the case of the Philippines, particularly during President Duterte's tenure. Given the Duterte administration's strategic focus on promoting domestic economic development, the shift in its foreign policy has significantly impacted the Sino-Philippines economic and trade relations, further strengthening cooperation and exchanges between the two countries. The warming of bilateral relations between China and the Philippines has not only boosted the Philippines' trade volume with China but also facilitated deepened collaboration in infrastructure projects, resulting in tangible economic benefits for the Philippines. Despite the historical issues and challenges that persist between the two nations, President Duterte has demonstrated his country's determination to seek peace, stability, and development through state diplomacy, peaceful dialogue, summit meetings, and cooperative approaches. This commitment paves the way for more opportunities and achievements in the continuous deepening of China-Philippines economic and trade cooperation.

## 2. Overview of Sino-Philippines bilateral relations

The Philippines established diplomatic relations with China in 1975, and the two countries have engaged in bilateral cooperation in politics, security, trade, investment, tourism, and cultural exchanges. During the Arroyo administration, China-Philippines relations witnessed comprehensive development. In the 2007 East Asia Summit, Premier Wen Jiabao and President Arroyo signed 15 agreements on economic cooperation, joint ventures, and cultural exchanges. However, after President Aquino III came to power, the Philippines adopted a "lean towards the United States, distant from China" foreign policy. The South China Sea dispute became a recurring issue, causing a deadlock in China-Philippines relations.<sup>[2]</sup> The economic and trade ties between the two countries became unstable, reaching a low point since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975.

### 2.1. Duterte Political Strategy

Upon assuming office, President Duterte shifted the strategic focus of the Philippines towards internal governance, aiming to promote economic reforms, facilitate rapid economic growth, revitalize the manufacturing sector, and alleviate poverty to address social issues. At the beginning of his presidency, Duterte presented the "Ambisyon Natin 2040" plan, which set targets for economic growth, such as achieving 7% economic growth, raising per capita income to \$5,000, reducing the poverty rate from the current 21.6% to 14%, lowering the rural poverty rate from 30% to 20%, and decreasing the unemployment rate from 5.5% to 3% by 2022. In terms of social development, the government officially launched a large-scale infrastructure investment plan called "Build, Build, Build," which aims to invest 8.4 trillion pesos (approximately \$164 billion) in infrastructure development across the Philippines over six years. The plan employs a new type of public-private partnership (PPP) to expedite infrastructure projects while reducing costs, thereby addressing the country's severe traffic congestion issue. [3] The Duterte government recognizes that the deterioration of China-Philippines relations during the Aquino III administration resulted in a significant decline in Philippines exports to China and Chinese investments in the Philippines. The United States, as an ally, was unable to compensate for the Philippines' economic losses. The economic setbacks exacerbated social issues such as drug-related crimes, which were camouflaged by nationalism and became a focal point for the new Philippines leadership. On the other hand, Duterte needed China's economic support to address domestic social problems, promote economic development, and realize his ambitious plans. Therefore, Duterte shifted the Philippines' foreign policy from a balanced approach of "leaning away from the United States, leaning towards China" to strengthening ties with China through a head-of-state diplomacy approach.

Table 1: Interactions between leaders of China and the Philippines under Duterte period

Time	Event
October 2016	Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte landed in China for a state visit
November 2016	President Xi held a bilateral meeting with Duterte on the sidelines of the 25th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Peru
May 2017	President Rodrigo Duterte is in China to attend the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation
November 2017	President Xi held a bilateral meeting with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte on the sidelines of the 26th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Vietnam
April 2018	President Rodrigo Duterte arrived in China to attend the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Forum for Asia. A bilateral meeting with President Xi were held during the period.
November 2018	President Xi embarked on a state visit to the Philippines
April 2019	President Rodrigo Duterte arrived in China to attend the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang met with Duterte respectively
August 2019	President Xi, Premier Li Keqiang and Vice President Wang Qishan met with President Duterte respectively during Duterte's state visit to China
June 2020	President Xi exchanges congratulations with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte on 45th anniversary of diplomatic ties
August 2021	President Xi spoke by phone with Philippines President Duterte
April 2022	President Xi spoke by phone with Philippines President Duterte

Since 2016, China-Philippines relations have experienced rapid improvement. The Duterte government, by demonstrating a proactive and friendly attitude towards China in diplomatic occasions, made Beijing the destination of his first official foreign visit after taking office. This successful move repaired the bilateral relationship and rebuilt mutual trust between the two countries. During their first meeting, Duterte explicitly expressed the need for a peaceful resolution to the South China Sea issue, and both sides reached a consensus on setting aside disputes and pursuing mutual benefit. [4] Eventually, the two heads of state jointly signed 13 bilateral cooperation documents covering areas such as trade, investment, capacity building, agriculture, media, quality inspection, tourism, anti-drug efforts, counterterrorism, maritime law enforcement, and infrastructure construction. This marked the comprehensive resumption of exchanges between China and the Philippines. China lifted its long-standing travel advisory on the Philippines and removed restrictions on Philippine fruit exports to China. Throughout Duterte's entire term, he never visited the United States but made five visits to Beijing. From 2016 to 2019, Duterte and Chinese leaders held an average of two bilateral meetings annually. In 2018, China's President made a friendly visit to the Philippines, marking the first visit by a Chinese leader in 13 years. In 2019, Duterte made a special trip to China to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. These frequent visits by the heads of state reflect the active engagement between China and the Philippines. (see Table 1),

## 2.2. Sino-Philippines Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative

In May 2017, Duterte actively attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in China. The Philippines viewed China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as highly compatible with its "Build, Build, Build" program.<sup>[5]</sup> Duterte was keen to align with China's development strategy because the Philippines' development deficit lies in the lack of infrastructure, which hinders the flow of funds, goods, and people. The BRI could address the connectivity issues faced by participating countries. During the forum, Duterte expressed the Philippines' willingness to actively participate in the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and closely cooperate with China in areas such as trade, fisheries, tourism, and education. As an important hub on China's Maritime Silk Road, the Philippines is a natural partner in the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Infrastructure connectivity is one of the key advantages of the Belt and Road Initiative. Based on this initiative, China and the Philippines signed over 40 cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding, including projects in military, offshore oil and gas exploration and development, mining, and other natural resource development.<sup>[6]</sup> In 2018, Chinese companies signed new construction project contracts worth \$3.1 billion in the Philippine market, with 26 projects valued in the tens of millions of dollars primarily focusing on power engineering, communication engineering, housing construction, and transportation infrastructure. These projects, including major infrastructure projects such as the Manila Metro and the South Luzon Expressway, will effectively address traffic congestion, promote economic development in the Philippines, and provide technology and funding for the "Build, Build, Build" program, helping to overcome technical and financial challenges it faces and facilitating the smooth implementation of the program.

Meanwhile, the successful development of the "Build, Build, Build" program is driving the Philippines to achieve new economic growth. Simultaneously, the alignment between this program and the Belt and Road Initiative provides business opportunities for Chinese companies. In 2018, Hebei Iron and Steel Group signed a steel project with the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry, with a total investment of approximately \$4.4 billion for an annual capacity of 8 million tons. This project will significantly boost the development of related manufacturing industries in the Philippines and create at least 20,000 job opportunities. The alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the "Build, Build, Build" program contributes to the continuous improvement of the Philippines' infrastructure while promoting rapid domestic economic development, resulting in a win-win situation.

## 3. The specific Variations of China-Philippines Economic and Trade Relations

### 3.1. Economic and Trade Relations

Table 2: Philippines-China trade volume 2010-2020

Year	Total trade turnover of Philippines (Unit: millions of US dollars)	Total trade turnover between China and Philippines (Unit: millions of US dollars)	Percentage of Total trade turnover	Total trade turnover between China and Philippines in rankings
2010	106430.43	10352.03	9.73	4
2011	108800.76	12322.40	11.33	3
2012	114228.18	12849.64	11.25	3
2013	119108.43	15097.54	12.68	3
2014	127499.60	18337.20	14.38	2
2015	129894.46	17645.52	13.6	2
2016	141514.17	21937.42	15.5	1
2017	164806.13	25480.73	15.5	1
2018	182148.27	30831.68	16.9	1
2019	182520.06	35310.12	19.4	1
2020	155026.06	30698.15	19.8	1

Source: 2020 Foreign Trade Statistics Annual Publication (FTS) of the Philippines.

During the period from 2010 to 2020, the total bilateral trade between China and the Philippines continued to increase. While the overall trade volume of the Philippines grew by approximately 1.5 times, the total trade between China and the Philippines grew by over 3 times, indicating that the trade growth between China and the Philippines outpaced the overall trade growth of the Philippines.

Prior to 2016, China did not have a high share in the Philippines' foreign trade. The United States and

Japan had closer trade ties with the Philippines during the Aquino III administration. However, in 2014, China surpassed the United States to become the Philippines' second-largest trading partner, after Japan. By 2016, China surpassed Japan as the Philippines' largest trading partner and has maintained that position in the following years. It is worth noting that during the Aquino III administration (2010-2016), China's share in the Philippines' total trade averaged 12.64%. However, during the Duterte administration (2017-2022, data only available until 2020), this share significantly increased to 17.9%. This indicates that China has played an increasingly important role in the Philippines' foreign trade in recent years, and the Philippines has become more economically dependent on China. (see Table 2),

In 2021, the bilateral trade between China and the Philippines reached a new high, with trade volume soaring to \$38.3 billion, a year-on-year increase of 24.9%. China has been the Philippines' largest trading partner for six consecutive years and has become the country's second-largest export market. China is also the third-largest export market and the second-largest import source for Philippine agricultural products. The Philippines remains China's largest source of imported bananas and pineapples and has expanded its exports to China, including fresh coconuts, frozen fruits, and becoming the first Asian country to export avocados to China. From 2016 to 2021, the RMB settlement volume between the Philippines and China increased nearly tenfold, reaching an annual settlement scale of nearly one trillion yuan, ranking third in the ASEAN region.

Table 3: Philippines-China trade volume 2010-2020(Unit: millions of US dollars)

Year	Export	Import	Balance of trade
2010	5724.47	4627.56	1096.91
2011	6237.33	6085.08	152.25
2012	6169.29	6680.35	-511.07
2013	7025.22	8072.33	-1047.11
2014	8467.44	9869.76	-1402.33
2015	6174.78	11470.74	-5295.95
2016	6372.52	15564.90	-9192.38
2017	8017.13	17463.60	-9446.47
2018	8816.72	22014.95	-13198.23
2019	9814.43	25495.69	-15681.26
2020	9830.10	20868.06	-11037.96

Source: Compiled from Philippine Statistical Yearbook (PSY), 2014, Philippine Statistical Yearbook (PSY), 2017, Philippine Statistical Yearbook (PSY), 2020.

However, tensions over the South China Sea issue have impacted the trade relationship between the two countries. China strengthened inspections on Philippine banana imports, leading to a decline in banana exports from the Philippines. While the Philippines made statements about imposing economic sanctions on China, it had limited impact given China's advantageous position in the bilateral trade relationship. Any economic sanctions from the Philippines would have minimal effect on China but would have a significant impact on the Philippines itself. [7] Despite the significant increase in total trade volume between the Philippines and China during Duterte's administration, the trade deficit has not been improved and has instead continued to widen. For instance, in 2019, the trade deficit reached \$15.7 billion, a 71% increase compared to 2016 (see Table 3). This situation has influenced the perception of China within the Philippines.

Overall, the Philippines' imports from China have been consistently increasing, with a rapid surge in 2019. The import volume from China reached nearly \$25.5 billion (see Table 3), approximately six times the amount in 2010 (\$4.6 billion), highlighting the Philippines' high dependence on Chinese goods.

### 3.2. Investment status

During the Aquino III administration, the deterioration of political relations between China and the Philippines undoubtedly affected the enthusiasm of Chinese companies for investment in the Philippines. Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority shows that although investment from China steadily increased from 2008 to 2011, it sharply declined in 2012 and 2013, which coincided with the period of highest tension in China-Philippines diplomatic relations [8].

However, with President Duterte taking office, China-Philippines relations have been successfully repaired, and fruitful results have been achieved in investment, engineering projects, and cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

In terms of investment, in 2010, China's total direct investment in the Philippines was \$387 million, which grew 2.5 times to reach \$831 million in 2019, making China the second-largest source of foreign

investment in the Philippines. Over the past six years, China's agreed investment in the Philippines has reached 161 billion pesos, doubling the total investment compared to the previous six years. This growth has been led by companies in industries such as information and communication technology, food production, real estate, and power. The largest project is the joint venture with China Telecom to establish the Philippines' third telecommunications operator. This investment is attracting related projects in the telecommunications, infrastructure, and service sectors. The network coverage of the China Telecom-backed third telecom operator in the Philippines is nearly 70%, with nearly 9 million active users. Several Chinese high-end manufacturing companies, such as home appliances and high-end bearings, have invested in setting up factories in the Philippines. The Panhua Group is advancing the first phase of the integrated steel mill project in the Philippines. Alibaba Cloud has completed the construction of data centers in the Philippines.

Furthermore, other well-known Chinese investors in the Philippines include C&U Group Limited, New Hope Group, Azure Gaming (Hong Kong) Limited, Suzhou Bomai Technology Group Co., Ltd., and JTK Technology (Suzhou) Co., Ltd. These companies have committed to investing significant resources in the Philippines in the near future.<sup>[9]</sup>

### ***3.3. Collaborative projects***

In terms of contracted engineering projects in the Philippines, since 2016, China's newly signed contract value for projects in the Philippines has nearly tripled, with an annual scale exceeding \$10 billion. In 2021, the Philippines became the second-largest engineering contracting market for China in ASEAN. In the cooperative projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, China and the Philippines have deepened their collaboration, aligning the Belt and Road Initiative with the "Build, Build, Build" program. They have jointly undertaken nearly 40 intergovernmental cooperation projects, covering areas such as epidemic response, disaster relief, roads and bridges, and agricultural cooperation. Currently, 16 projects have been completed, and more than 20 projects are in progress or being promoted. Chinese companies actively participate in the construction of road and bridge projects, ports, power plants, housing, water conservancy, and other areas in the Philippines, aiming to help enhance the country's infrastructure level and improve the quality of people's lives.

Meanwhile, aid and construction assistance have been a major mode of cooperation between China and the Philippines. China's assistance to the Philippines encompasses various aspects, including not only technical support but also direct construction of infrastructure and basic facilities. Examples include the donation of construction machinery for the Marawi rehabilitation project in 2017 and the completion of the South Agusan Drug Rehabilitation Center in 2020. In terms of technology, during the process of the main span shifting and demolition of the Pasig River Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge, the Pasig River was closed for only 6 hours before quickly resuming navigation. This achievement is not only the result of technical cooperation between personnel from China and the Philippines but also a consensus reached between the two countries. China's assistance to the Philippines is provided without any attached conditions. It can be seen that the assistance and projects carried out by the Chinese government in the Philippines under the leadership of President Duterte are a prime example of the China-Philippines friendship and contribute to the economic cooperation and development between the two nations.

In recent years, although the development of both countries has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, China and the Philippines have maintained close communication and worked together. China's aid projects to the Philippines have continuously yielded cooperation dividends. In addition to the Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge, the Binondo-Intramuros Bridge, aided by China, held its completion and opening ceremony in April 2022. (see Table 4), In the agricultural sector, after more than 20 years of construction, the Philippine-Sino Center for Agricultural Technology (Phil SCAT) has directly and indirectly benefited more than 134,000 farming households, resulting in a 308-million-kilogram increase in grain income. The construction of the Kaliwa Dam project started in 2022, and once completed, it will provide a daily water supply of 700,000 tons, effectively alleviating the water demand of residents. During the pandemic and disasters, China's assistance to the Philippines included the first batch of COVID-19 vaccines, which arrived at the end of February 2021, making China the first country to provide vaccine assistance to the Philippines. This solidly supported the smooth implementation of the national vaccination program in the Philippines. Additionally, 10,000 tons of rice aid successfully arrived, playing an important role in the relief operations for Typhoon "Odette." Although some of the projects have faced criticism from Philippines society for their perceived environmental impact, especially the Kaliwa Dam project, the aforementioned cooperation projects reflect China's commitment to seeking pragmatic cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. China attaches importance to the social needs and national interests of both parties, striving for a win-win situation and aiming to establish more long-

term cooperative relationships.

*Table 4: Sino-Philippines' Cooperation projects during the Duterte Administration*

Project Name	Status	Usage
Sarangani Drug Abuse Treatment and Rehabilitation Center	Finished in 2020	as a sign of support for the Duterte administration's fight against illegal drugs
Manila Bay South Shore Project	On progress	Build a highly intelligent and modern residential sea view apartment building
The Central Luzon Link Expressway Package 2, Phase 1 (CLLEX-2) Project	Construction begins from 2023	Contributes to the formation of the Central Luzon express network
The Cavite Gateway Terminal (CGT) Phase 1	Finished in 2018	Alleviates traffic congestion on major roads in Metro Manila
The NCC to SCTEX Access Road Project	Finished in 2018	Ensures the successful convening of the 2019 Southeast Asian Games
The Flood Mitigation Program - Construction and Maintenance of Flood Mitigation Structure and Design System	Finished	Construction of Revetment along Mamburao River, protects local residents from longstanding floods and waves along the river bank estuaries along the coast.
GNPower Dinginin Ltd. Co. (GNPD) of 2×660 MW supercritical coal-fired power plant	Finished in 2021	Considered as the biggest coal-fired power plant to be built in the Philippines.
The Philippine GNPk 4X135MW coal-fired power plant project	Finished in 2018	Has the largest installed capacity on Mindanao Island
Dito Telecommunity cell towers	On progress	Covering the five northern cities (Davao has been the first commercial operation in the Philippines), 747 towers had been lit by the end of 2021
The Batangas Kiln Upgrade Project	Finished	Speeds up the green development of the local cement industry
Dumaguete Norths Road, Manjuyod-La Libertad Road Section	Finished in 2019	Improve the transportation of the tourist scenery attraction.
Chico River Pump Irrigation Project (CRPIP)	Started in 2018	As the first flagship infrastructure project financed by China, it aims to irrigate 7,530 hectares in Tuao and Piat, Cagayan, and 1,170 ha in Pinukpuk, Kalinga benefitting around 5,000 families
Binondo-Intramuros Bridge	Finished in 2022	Alleviate traffic on Manila's busiest thoroughfares
Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge	Finished in 2021	Decongest vehicular traffic at Edsa
The Kaliwa Dam project	On progress	Supply water to Metro Manila households and nearby areas

Source: Philippines and China Cooperation Gaining Momentum, Anna Malindog-Uy, The Asian Post.

#### 4. The Impacts of the transformations in economic development and bilateral relations

During President Duterte's tenure, there have been significant changes in China-Philippines economic and trade relations, which have had important impacts on the Philippine domestic economy, bilateral relations between China and the Philippines, and regional cooperation.

In terms of bilateral relations between China and the Philippines, the changes in China-Philippines economic and trade relations have had profound effects. Political trust between the two countries has been strengthened, and cooperation has expanded across various fields. Since 2016, President Duterte has made multiple visits to China and held numerous meetings with Chinese leaders, fostering frequent exchanges between the heads of state. These efforts have successfully repaired bilateral relations and rebuilt mutual trust between China and the Philippines. Multiple bilateral cooperation agreements have been signed during these high-level meetings, covering areas such as trade, investment, capacity building, agriculture, and infrastructure development. These agreements have brought increased investment, technological support, and cooperation opportunities for the Philippines, promoting domestic economic development and infrastructure construction.

In terms of the domestic economy, China-Philippines economic and trade cooperation has had a positive impact on the Philippine domestic economy. Through collaboration with China, the Philippines has received substantial investments and technological support, driving domestic economic growth. China has undertaken numerous construction projects in the Philippine market, particularly in sectors

such as power, telecommunications, housing construction, and transportation. The construction of these projects has helped address issues like traffic congestion, promoting economic development in the Philippines. Additionally, they have provided technological and financial support for the Philippines' "Build, Build, Build" program, facilitating the smooth progress of domestic infrastructure construction.

In terms of regional cooperation, China-Philippines economic and trade cooperation has played a role in promoting regional collaboration. The Philippines has actively participated in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expressed willingness to contribute actively to the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. China and the Philippines have advantages in infrastructure connectivity, and they have signed multiple cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding, even in previously disputed projects such as joint oil and gas exploration and development. These cooperative projects have provided new opportunities for regional cooperation, fostering connectivity and economic collaboration between ASEAN countries and China.

## 5. Conclusions

In general, there have been significant changes in China-Philippines economic and trade relations during President Duterte's tenure, and the foreign policy of the Duterte administration has played a notable positive role in promoting bilateral trade between China and the Philippines. Specifically, it has facilitated an increase in the Philippines' export of goods to China and cooperation in infrastructure projects, resulting in tangible economic benefits for the Philippines. Through collaboration with China, the Philippines has gained more investment projects, technological support, and cooperation opportunities, driving domestic economic growth and infrastructure development. As China-Philippines relations have improved and strengthened, political trust has increased, and the scope of cooperation has expanded. This change has also provided new impetus for regional cooperation, promoting connectivity and economic collaboration between ASEAN countries and China. In the future, China-Philippines economic and trade cooperation is expected to continue deepening, bringing more opportunities and achievements for both countries and the entire region. Although territorial disputes and other challenges still exist between the two countries, Duterte has demonstrated that peaceful dialogue, meetings, consultations, and cooperation are effective means to promote peace, stability, and development among nations and in the region, aligning with the Philippines' national interests in its foreign policy.

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