Does Public Opinion Even Matter in Foreign Affairs?

Low Demand for Vertical Accountability and Foreign Policy in the Philippines under Duterte

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Abstract

Concepts like populist foreign policy and populist securitization have emerged as means to analyze the rise of strongmen appealing to the "People" in foreign affairs. They provide insights into the supply side of rhetoric and policies that treat the international arena as an extension of domestic struggles against perceived elites—both local and global; struggles conducted through anti-establishment tendencies, skepticism towards liberal international norms, and dramatic appeals to the "People". Without dismissing the value of such conceptual-theoretical advances, a supply side analysis appears insufficient in the face of such global political shifts. However, with the "People" being dragged into the picture by their supposed representatives, a demand side analysis appears necessary. In the context of populist foreign policy rhetoric, how can we make sense of their audience? Do they even matter, or are they mere props in a leader's performance? Specifically, we need to ask, what is the relationship between a foreign policy process and demands for vertical accountability? Such a question takes the matter beyond populist leadership and into the realm of democratization itself. By pursuing it through a secondary data analysis of foreign policy landmarks and public opinion surveys during the administration of Rodrigo Duterte, we will provide an integration of demand and supply side perspectives and explore the possibility of foreign policy being based on or enabled by the powerlessness of ordinary citizens. Its implications on the trajectory of democratization within and across countries will then be opened for future analyses.

Keywords: *Accountability, Duterte, Foreign Policy, Hedging, Political Psychology, Philippines*

Introduction

Vertical accountability is intrinsic to democratic politics. Without it, an electoral system is no more than a game between elected oligarchs. For international relations, vertical accountability ensures that foreign policies remain within the ambit of

popular control. If such an alignment between foreign policy and vertical accountability is realized, then democracies can both muster sufficient political will to meet the logistical requirements of war at home and on the battlefield, while adopting more prudent foreign policies (Stam & Reiter, 2010). Simply put, vertical accountability ensures that a democracy will neither enter risky affairs nor simply lie down when confronted with foreign threats.

But what if there is low demand for vertical accountability among ordinary citizens? How can one frame the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy under such conditions? With neither strong institutions for vertical accountability nor a demand for it from the general public, foreign policy remains exclusive to a few populating diplomatic circles and occupying concerned legislative offices. Political elites can end up enjoying a free hand in foreign affairs if there is a deficit in vertical accountability.

These obvious implications notwithstanding, further analysis is necessary to ground such a possibility in the context of (de)democratization, foreign policy shifts, and the rise of what has been termed as populist foreign policy and securitization (cf., Chryssogelos, 2018; Wajner & Giurlando, 2024). Thus, we turn to the case of the Philippines as a defective democracy (cf. Teehankee & Calimbahin, 2020) sandwiched between big powers in Southeast Asia (cf. Baviera, 2014; Baviera & Arugay, 2021; de Castro, 2016, 2017), and subjected to populist foreign policy rhetoric (Arugay & Magcamit, 2024). We ask, *what is the relationship between a foreign policy process and demands for vertical accountability?*

Through a secondary data analysis of foreign policy landmarks and public opinion surveys during the administration of Rodrigo Duterte, we will explore the possibility of foreign policy being enabled more by the leader-centric tendency of ordinary citizens than their concern for foreign affairs. We argue that the chronic lack of priority for foreign affairs among ordinary citizens is related to a leader-centric reliance on public matters. Moreover, we open the possibility that low demand for vertical accountability can give the government a relatively free hand in foreign policy making (i.e., the costs of hedging and policy shifts on political support are lowered).

Why the Philippines? We seek to contribute to the growing literature on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy in the Philippines by looking at the matter from the level of political values (i.e. stable and motivational principles and ideals towards an object) (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Rohan, 2000). Such an endeavor supplements existing analyses of political attitudes (i.e. evaluations of foreign matters and other countries), the generation and subsequent reception of foreign policy narratives, and the formation of a Filipino identity in relation to foreign affairs (Kurdli & Gonzales, 2025; Montiel, et al., 2019; Montiel & Dela Paz, 2020; Montiel, et al., 2014). We will do so by examining what ordinary citizens expect from their leaders (their values on vertical accountability as citizen-leader relations), their

values and attitudes towards international relations, and whether they find foreign affairs as a priority issue in relation to other public matters. By mapping these tendencies out, we hope to provide insights on whether ordinary citizens think about foreign affairs when facing the ballot as their only effective form of holding leaders accountable (cf. Borja et al., 2025).

To elaborate on these points, this paper will be organized accordingly with the succeeding section providing a brief review of the literature on public opinion's relationship with foreign policy, prefaced upon the literature on vertical accountability. Moreover, the next section also provides a general overview of contemporary Filipino foreign policy, gravitating around the struggle to realize the constitutional guarantees for an independent foreign policy. After these we will look at public opinion surveys, first on the prioritization of foreign affairs, and second on shared values and attitudes towards international relations and foreign affairs. We will then turn to the issue of vertical accountability itself by looking at shared values on leader-citizen relations. A general map locating both tendencies and key foreign policy landmarks will be provided as a way of grounding survey results on foreign policy movements.

Vertical Accountability and Foreign Policy: A Review of Literature

For Ashworth (2012), vertical accountability is a system of rewards and punishments that can keep policymakers tied to the will and welfare of their constituents. In other words, it is an alignment between the interests and behavior of policymakers and their constituents (cf. Hellwig and Samuels 2008). Now, if we tie vertical accountability with the Schumpeterian understanding of democracy as a circulation of political elites through competitive elections, then it can be construed as a question of citizen-leader relations.

However, despite this ideal schema, the circulation of elites can turn into a coagulation of power in the hands of a few if conditions become disempowering for the ordinary citizen (Borja 2015, 2017). Vertical accountability can collapse under the weight of power asymmetry. Consequently, such a vicious cycle can end in a democratic crisis driven by the disempowerment of the ruled and a lack of obligations and accountability among rulers (cf. Borja, et al., 2025). In relation to foreign affairs, the matter hinges upon whether international relations is a priority issue for ordinary citizen-voters. Assuming that elections are relatively fair and regular, it becomes a question of whether citizen-voters take foreign affairs as consideration whenever they participate in the elections. The next section fleshes this out from a psychopolitical perspective (e.g., are ordinary-citizens even knowledgeable enough to have sound opinions on foreign affairs), but for now, we note that the dynamics between domestic politics and international relations can take on multiple forms and facilitated by a number of factors outside diplomatic procedures.

Putnam's (1988) Two-Level game model sums up the general dynamic between these two areas by showing that through difference spaces of negotiation between domestic groups and the government, advocacies, problems, and policy/political changes carried out domestically can be translated to the formulation of a foreign policy. In a later work, Noone (2019) presented three tracks for foreign policy analysis through the following frameworks: (1) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)[1] that looks at how strong beliefs that are translated into policy by allied groups involved in pushing for such advocacies (cf., Cairney, 2012); (2) Multiple Streams Framework (MSF)[2] that three intertwined streams focusing on the framing, formation, and public acceptance of foreign policies; (cf., Kingdon, 2014); Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET)[3] that explains continuous periods of policy stasis as well as periods of intense, rapid policy change (cf., True, Jones, and Baumgartner, 2007).

Juxtaposed with such models, scholars have noted several factors that facilitate the relationship between international and domestic politics, the most basic of which are the dis/incentives faced by political decision makers. This refers to the institutions, structure, characteristics, and current conditions that shape behavior in the international arena and relations with other states. Along with this, foreign policy is also something constructed through a host of constitutive (construct identities and interests of actors), regulative (constrain the acceptable range of behavior), and prescriptive (prescribing what "ought" to be done) norms which are shared and institutionalized within and outside a state (Clarke, 2005; Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1998; Finnemore & Sikkinik, 1998).

Now, with the recent wave of populist leaders taking high offices, we note the impacts of such a twist on foreign policy discourse, especially in terms of projecting "what is" and "what should be" in the world of nation-states. Populism renders foreign policy as a matter of anti-establishment tendencies, skepticism towards liberal international norms, and dramatic appeals to the "People" vs. "elites" embodying foreign interests (Cadier, 2024). Populists also securitize foreign affairs by constructing certain issues as existential threats to the "People" in order to legitimize extraordinary actions beyond normal politics (cf., Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Such practices enable populist governments to personalize foreign policy processes, weaken bureaucratic mediation, and employ nationalist or anti-globalist rhetoric that aligns foreign policy with the popular will (Chryssogelos, 2018; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017).

In the Philippines, public opinion, institutional constraints, and interest group pressures can be weighed in when crafting international strategies. For example, while the public perceives the Philippines as "weak" against China, it has the capacity to check its stronger counterpart by gaining support from its allies (Baviera, 2014). Regarding populism, Arugay and Magcamit (2024) illustrate how Rodrigo Duterte deployed populist rhetoric to redefine traditional foreign relations—casting the liberal West or domestic elites as threats to national sovereignty and "the people."

Through this fusion of populism and securitization, foreign policy becomes a stage for dramatizing the defense of the nation against both external and internal adversaries.

Ultimately, populism in foreign policy brings forth the "People" as an actor on the world stage. But, does it contribute to the capacity of these "People" to hold their leaders accountable? Assuming that this "People" is no mere rhetorical mechanism but an actual, albeit amorphous set of actors – the ordinary citizen as a diverse mass – then the question becomes a political, psychological, and sociological one (cf. Borja, 2023a). The next section elaborates on this matter.

The Question of Domestic Support for Foreign Policy

Domestic support for foreign policy is ultimately a question of political costs and benefits. It is a matter of whether foreign policy – may it be militant and aggressive, or benevolent and cooperative, or even isolationist – can lead to the (dis)empowerment of those in power. In the context of electoral democracies, it becomes a matter of whether a foreign policy issue is a priority for voters.

Despite the brevity of the aforementioned portrayal, the chain between domestic support and foreign policy is a long one. Baum and Potter (2008), and Kaarbo (2015) have provided surveys of the literature with their works emphasizing the crucial role of domestic political processes in shaping foreign policy. On one hand, Baum and Potter (2008) have proposed a theoretical synthesis that assumes the relative autonomy of mass media in foreign affairs before placing it in a triangular relationship with the public and decision-makers. They argue further that the foreign policy process is better analyzed in terms of market relations with information serving as its currency; something that these different actors hold different measures of before acting in accordance with what they know. On the other hand, Kaarbo (2015) argues that internal political factors—leadership psychology, bureaucratic competition, coalition dynamics, and institutional context—are essential for explaining why states behave differently under similar structural pressures. Together, their reviews show that foreign policy analysis must account for the domestic environments of decision-making, communication, and political contestation that shape state behavior.

We will not provide an extensive review of the literature on this matter. Rather, we will tease out the supposed importance of public opinion on foreign policy from a psycho-political perspective (cf., Aldrich et al., 2006; Kertzer & Tingley, 2018) through the following points. First of which are the notions of audience costs and accountability environments affecting the nature and trajectory of foreign policy processes (cf., Narang & Staniland, 2018; Slantchev, 2006; Tomz, 2007). These demonstrate how domestic accountability mechanisms shape leaders' foreign policy behavior through the logic of audience costs. Slantchev (2006) argues that audience costs stem not merely from public intolerance of inconsistency but from how

political opposition and media coverage expose leaders who back down in crises, making them vulnerable to domestic punishment. Tomz (2007) shows that citizens across partisan lines do indeed penalize leaders who make threats and subsequently fail to follow through, confirming that audience costs are a real and measurable feature of democratic accountability.

Overall, the notion of audience costs allows us to measure whether ordinary citizens can reward or punish policy makers who deviate from what they perceive as the "right" foreign policy direction. The problem, however, is that despite a need to reward or punish, it is another question as to whether the electorate can do so. Hence, focusing on Narang and Staniland's (2018) theoretical contribution on this matter, we note that accountability environments:

> …create incentives for politicians to devote political effort and resources to foreign policy issues…leads politicians to pay careful attention to strategy, supports credible threats to adversaries, and disciplines individual ambitions in line with the electorate's incentives. In many other cases, however, it creates strong incentives to pay little attention to foreign policy and to delegate power to bureaucracies and militaries while allowing strategies that evade accountability even for unambiguous failures (p. 411).

Such an environment is built on both the salience of a foreign policy issue (psycho-political dimension) and the institutional clarity of government responsibility (formal institutional and informal political dynamics). From variations in these two dimensions, different types of environments can be derived as a means to understand the overall alignment of an electorate's foreign policy tendencies with those of the elected.

What we note for this paper is that a psycho-political approach to the issue of foreign policy raises the question of cognitive factors affecting the salience of a foreign policy issue; factors beyond knowledge of foreign affairs. Though it should still be considered in analyzing the transformation of opinion into support for foreign policy (cf., Todorov & Mandisodza, 2004), differences in knowledge is no longer deemed as a decisive factor (cf., Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). For one, Kertzer (2022) shows through quantitative analysis that the supposed gap between mass and elite is an overstatement. While differences in levels of political knowledge and exposure to international affairs exist between elites and the public, they share similar underlying value orientations and respond in comparable ways to perceived threats, partisanship, or moral framing. If this is the case, then what matters more in shaping political support?

More fundamental cognitive factors enter the picture, especially values as a person's set of stable and trans-situational ideals; that is, what a person wants to happen

to a specific object that in turn can determine their motivations. Kertzer et al. (2014) and Rathbun et al. (2016) have shown that moral and personal values help determine an individual's attitude towards foreign policies. For Kertzer et al. (2014) citizens' foreign policy preferences are structured by underlying moral values such as care, fairness, loyalty, and authority. They find that liberals and conservatives differ in both their strategic and ideological stances towards foreign interventions. Building on this approach, Rathbun et al. (2016) apply value-based and psychological modeling using cross-national survey data to demonstrate that specific personal values are more related to a specific policy stance than another. Specifically, they illustrate that on one hand, conservation values emphasizing a need for security while upholding the primacy of tradition and conformity is a strong determinant for militant internationalism as a stance that emphasizes force in foreign affairs. On the other hand, the contrary is true for those with more universalistic personal values that promote the welfare of all. This tendency was more strongly tied to a more cooperative internationalist stance that stresses concern for others and a need for collective efforts.

This analytical thrust extends to the personality itself, and Gravelle et al.'s (2020) study is an example of how certain personality types can be aligned with specific foreign policy stances. Through a large-scale quantitative study of Western cases, they have illustrated that foreign policy attitudes can be traced to certain personality types (i.e., Big Five Personality Types), with the likes of openness being positively related to upholding global justice and cooperative internationalism and extraversion being positively related to militant internationalism. We leave it to the reader to visit their empirical contributions on the matter.

For the current paper, we note that these studies, among others (cf., Flanagan, 2016; Rathbun, 2020; Stoll, et al., 2023; Thierbach-McLean, 2019), emphasize the possible impacts of (mis)alignments between the values held by the general public and those underpinning foreign policies. Their key causal mechanism is that of values affecting attitudes, or in this case, moral or personal values affecting foreign policy attitudes.

The problem is that the impact of foreign policy attitudes on the policy process is itself mediated by a myriad of factors ranging from lobbying to elections. In other words, cognitive and behavioral tendencies towards domestic politics must be accounted for; that is, instead of simply trying to trace the roots of foreign policy attitudes on personal (non-political) values and tendencies, analysis must also look at the impact of political values. The literature on foreign policy ideology (cf., Haesebrouck & Mello, 2020), especially nationalism (cf., Mayda & Rodrik, 2005; Weiss, 2019) and populism (cf., Isernia et al., 2025; Jenne, 2021; Onderčo, 2020) are contribution to this analytical thrust.

In relation to contemporary democratic politics, these studies are found wanting. For one, to focus on nationalism is to focus on something more general (nationalism

as something shared by those with democratic and authoritarian tendencies alike). On the other hand, to focus on populism is to remain within the limits of its conceptualization, specifically its anti-elite component. This dimension could not measure values on vertical accountability and leader-citizen relations (Borja, 2022). Thus, to redirect analyses squarely on the issue of democratic values, we return to the issue of accountability environments and extend Narang and Staniland's (2018) analysis to the political psyche of ordinary citizens. Specifically, we must grapple with something more intimate to democratic politics, that is, political values on vertical accountability and leader-citizen relations. Elaborations will be made on this matter in the next section regarding this study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks. For now, we turn briefly to the case of the Philippines and its ongoing struggle for an independent foreign policy.

Struggle for Independent Foreign Policy: The Case of the Philippines

Vertical accountability and foreign policy in the Philippines must be understood in the context of an ongoing struggle to determine and realize an independent foreign policy. This is crucial since the Philippines is thoroughly unlike Western Europe and the United States. It is neither an ex-colonial and imperial power or self-proclaimed global police. Instead, its role in the Third World movement during the Cold War notwithstanding, the Philippines was and remains sandwiched between greater powers, a condition that renders an independent foreign policy a difficult struggle if not a far-off reality. To elaborate, we note the following points as a way of establishing the general context of this case study.

First, the struggle for an independent foreign policy is based on a thin constitutional base. Article II, Section 2, of the Philippine Constitution predicates that the Philippines must pursue an independent foreign policy, renounce war as an instrument of national policy, and adopt generally accepted principles of international law in pursuit of peace, equality, and justice.[4] Despite this, the notion of an independent foreign policy only became a "household term" in the domestic setting during Duterte's administration, when the former president favored improving relations with China over the U.S., a long-time ally of the Philippines (Quilop, 2024).

Second is the unending question of alliances—especially in terms of hard/military power. This raises the issue of hedging as a strategy that prohibits siding with any power through contradictory measures that ensure return-maximization while setting up contingencies (Kuik, 2016). More concretely, hedging involves limited and indirect forms of aligning against a principal threat (*balancing*) and siding with the principal threat (*bandwagoning*) (Walt, 1985). In general, all Southeast Asian states except the Philippines currently employ hedging strategies (Lai and Kuik, 2019). The problematique in rhetoric and narrative then becomes a matter of determining who these threats are, and justifying either balancing or bandwagoning, or even both in a certain pattern, ala' the curious shifts and turns of Orwell's 1984.

Lastly, in the context of a long-standing relationship with the US, the struggle for an independent foreign policy is a sticky matter to say the least. For one, as Kurdli and Gonzales (2025) have argued, Philippine foreign policy remains structurally constrained by long-standing neo-colonial norms and identities that reinforce dependence on the US. These shape a narrow strategic outlook that obstructs the realization of a genuinely independent foreign policy (i.e., beyond dependence on US power and support). An example of such a constraint is Manila's reluctance to criticize Israel's actions in Gaza; a diplomatic constraint that is aligned with a strategic preference for US alignment (Seralbo, 2024). Moreover, the Philippines potentially faces many opportunity costs in aligning or balancing with the US, rather than pursuing a hedging strategy as was pursued during the first half of the Duterte administration by jettisoning strategic autonomy, inflaming a great-power rivalry, and foregoing beneficial economic relations (Gonzales and Kurdli, 2025).

Focusing on responses to the growing power of China, Tamalayan (2019) illustrates that the Duterte regime's own struggle for an independent foreign policy[5] aims to end US dependence by balancing relations with China. Such a move was used as a leverage for major infrastructure and investment projects in the country (i.e., Duterte's "Build, Build, Build" program) while being tied to nationalist sentiments and rhetoric that frames alignment with the US as an affront to Philippine sovereignty (Wu and Velasco, 2024). The consequence was a disruption of a long-standing US-Philippines relationship (de Castro, 2016, 2017). So how did ordinary Filipino citizens respond to Duterte's foreign policy? The succeeding section looks at recent literature on the matter.

Public Opinions on Foreign Policy in the Philippines

As far as our review is concerned, scholarship on public opinion towards foreign policy in the Philippines gravitates around two major themes, namely, that of ambivalence and identity building. Regarding the former, Fang and Li (2022) have illustrated that nationalism among Filipinos is associated with strategic ambivalence—a desire to protect national sovereignty while maintaining pragmatic flexibility in external relations, especially in economic relations. Through a quantitative analysis of survey data, they show that nationalist sentiments are not an obstacle for the government's hedging strategy between the US and China.

Specifically, their findings show that nationalist tendencies do not necessarily translate into anti-China sentiment or unconditional pro-U.S. alignment. Rather, nationalist individuals tend to favor close security ties with the United States to protect sovereignty, while simultaneously endorsing strong economic relations with China to secure development gains. This dual orientation reflects a form of pragmatic nationalism, where maintaining autonomy and maximizing national benefit outweigh ideological loyalty to either power. Overall, nationalism exerts a nonlinear and conditional influence on public attitudes: moderate nationalists are most likely

to support hedging, while those with extremely high nationalist sentiment are more inclined toward balancing or confrontation. Their findings suggest that nationalist tendencies among ordinary Filipinos can function as both a protective (primacy of independence) and adaptive (legitimizing hedging as a mode of both survival and benefitting from more powerful countries).

Regarding identity building, recent works have analyzed the congruence of narratives between Duterte's populist rhetoric and those found in social media (Montiel et al., 2017) and in media (Montiel & Dela Paz, 2020). These works show how the space for legitimation is built on the relationships between narratives, collective identities, and movements in foreign policies and rhetoric. What we can derive from their works is that policy legitimation at the level of rhetoric and public discourse is both dynamic and imperfect. For one, Duterte's rhetoric was not in lockstep with that of his social media followers when it comes to the details of an alliance with China; the latter even shifted focus on the benefits of a Trump presidency despite Duterte's pronouncements on a beneficial relationship with China (Montiel et al., 2017).

What must be noted is that these works gravitate around nationalism as a key political value. Though their insights on the matter are invaluable and aligned with the longstanding literature on nationalism and foreign policy, they fall short in providing more insights into the relationship between accountability and foreign policy. In response to Fang and Li (2022), we raise the possibility that the space for legitimizing hedging might not be due solely to a complicated sense of nationalism. Rather, it might be more basic as simply leaving foreign policy to leaders—a lack of need to hold leaders accountable on such grounds.

For the works on narrative congruence, we can deem them as measurements of values in action (i.e. as narratives constituted by expressions in mass and social media). However, their analyses did not flesh out the values behind such narratives. As far as their definition of narrative congruence is concerned, they might not even be concerned with values at all, settling instead with attitudes/evaluations expressed as storylines. Unless their subjects are merely gossiping online for the sake of gossiping itself (bereft of any goal or political motivation) – an assumption that is thoroughly unrealistic – then an analysis of political values remains necessary. To this end, we will elaborate on this study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks before presenting data on accountability and foreign policy attitudes in the Philippines during the Duterte administration.

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Philippines under Duterte

To reiterate, we ask, *what is the relationship between a foreign policy process and demands for vertical accountability*? Assuming that the Philippines is a defective democracy characterized by the concentration of power at the hands of fewer and fewer elites tied with mass disempowerment and leader-centric tendencies (cf.,

Arugay & Magcamit, 2024; Borja, 2015, 2017, 2023b; Borja et al., 2025; Teehankee, & Calimbahin, 2020), vertical accountability between the government and ordinary citizens is more a problem than an established system – a remote ideal than a reality.

It is in this context that we must understand the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. If ordinary citizens could not easily hold the government accountable for domestic matters (may it be systematic incapacity or an unwillingness to), what more for something as remote as foreign affairs. Thus, we argue that the chronic lack of priority for foreign affairs among ordinary citizens is related to a leader-centric reliance on public matters. Moreover, we open the possibility that low demand for vertical accountability can give the government a relatively free hand in foreign policy making (i.e., the costs of hedging and policy shifts on political support are lowered). Overall, we will illustrate that the accountability environment for Filipino foreign policy making can be characterized as low cost and leader-centric.

What is an accountability environment from a psycho-political perspective? We define it as values regarding leadership and leader-citizen relations that can motivate political behavior (e.g., voting preferences) through attitudes (i.e., evaluations and assessments) towards specific political objects. Through this, we can construe high-cost accountability environments as something based on a shared need to hold leaders accountable in relation to specific policy issues. Contrary to this, a low-cost accountability environment is based on a lack of need to hold leaders accountable in relation to specific policy issues.

In addition, focusing on attitudes towards specific objects, if there is a relationship between the concerned values and attitudes, then the direction of the latter (may it be positive or negative) determines how ordinary citizens will hold leaders accountable. For example, if a citizen wants to hold a leader accountable on the issue of unemployment, and if his understanding of unemployment is based on a negative attitude towards labor policies, then it is probable that such a citizen would demand the government to correct itself and provide labor generating policies in the future. All this makes sense, if and only if there is a connection between values on vertical accountability and attitudes towards a specific issue.

Table 1 below grounds this schema on the issue of foreign relations between the Philippines, China, and the US. We use two sets of values to measure demand for vertical accountability. On one hand are leader-centric values referring to a willingness to suspend accountability in favor of a paternal and/or morally upright leader. On the other are values regarding leader-citizen relations referring to how citizens would want their relationship with leaders to be like. Regarding attitudes, the indicators below point to the perceived extent and nature of US and Chinese influence in Asia and in the Philippines.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

LEADER-CENTRIC VALUES – values regarding the primacy of leadership based on moral and/or paternal standards.

Indicators:

- **Paternalistic Political Leadership** – willingness to give absolute power to a paternal figure.
- **Moralistic Political Leadership** – willingness to give absolute power on moralistic grounds.

Paternalistic Political Leadership

Q: Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.

Moralistic Political Leadership

Q: If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything.

VALUES ON LEADER-CITIZEN RELATIONS – values regarding the ideal relationship between government leaders and ordinary citizens.

Indicators:

- **Trustee vs. Delegative Representation** – willingness to either give autonomy to government leaders in determining and realizing the public good or the contrary.
- **Decisiveness vs. Accountability** – willingness to sacrifice political accountability for decisiveness or vice versa.
- **Electoral vs. Meritocratic** – preference on the source of legitimate political power.

Trustee vs. Delegative Representation

Q1: Government leaders do what they think is best for the people *Or* Government leaders implement what voters want.

Q2: The government is like parent, it should decide what is good for us *Or* Government is our employee, the people should tell government what needs to be done.

Decisiveness vs. Accountability

Q: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does. *Or* It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more.

Electoral vs. Meritocratic Legitimacy

Q: Political leaders are chosen on the basis on their virtue and capability even without election. *Or* Political leaders are chosen by the people through open and competitive elections.

ATTITUDES ON CHINA AND THE US – an assessment of the extent and nature of China and the US's influence in the region and in one's country.

Indicators:

- **Nature of impact on the region** – determining whether their impact on the region is beneficial or not.
- **Degree of influence** – determining the extent of their influence on domestic affairs.
- **Nature of influence** – determining whether their influence on domestic affairs is beneficial or not.

Nature of impact on the region

Q: Does China do more good or harm to the region?

Q: Does the United States do more good or harm to the region?
Degree of influence
Q: How much influence does China have on our country?
Q: How much influence does the United States have on our country?
Nature of influence
Q: General speaking, the influence China has on our country is?
Q: General speaking, the influence the United States has on our country is?

We conducted basic correlation tests between values on vertical accountability and on the aforementioned attitudes. We will try to confirm the following hypotheses through a secondary data analysis of survey data from the 4th, 5th, and 6th waves of the *Asia Barometer Survey* (ABS)[6] and public opinion polls from *Pulse Asia*:[7]

Hypothesis 1: There is chronically low demand for vertical accountability among a majority of Filipinos.
Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between values for vertical accountability and attitudes towards the US.
Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between values for vertical accountability and attitudes towards China.

Leader-centrism and Low Demand for Vertical Accountability

Most Filipinos lack motivation to hold leaders accountable while being willing to give more power to those they deem as worthy. Moreover, despite their attachment to elections as the primary source of political legitimacy, most share an ideal of trustee representation wherein the elected are given more autonomy in determining and realizing the public good.

Table 2 below shows that through 4th to 6th Waves of the ABS, most Filipino values toward political leadership and leader-citizen relations show a gradual but noticeable shift toward merit-oriented and trustee representation. On paternalistic leadership, agreement remains high across all waves, but support softens over time. Regarding moralistic leadership, Filipinos consistently express strong expectations that leaders should behave with moral virtue, with agreement rising from about 61% in Wave 4 to over 68% in Wave 6, indicating increasing moral demands placed on political elites.

Between trustee and delegative representation, most Filipinos prefer the former. During the 4th Wave, 62.83% agreed that leaders should do what they think is best for the people rather than follow voter preferences, and this sentiment was shared by more during the 5th Wave. Similarly, between decisiveness and accountability, most Filipinos lean slightly toward decisive government action even at the expense of citizen influence. Finally, regarding the source of political legitimacy, support for leaders chosen based on virtue or capability "even without election" rises sharply

from 33.75% in Wave 4 to 47.92% in Wave 6, suggesting growing openness to non-electoral or technocratic forms of legitimacy.

Table 2: Values on Vertical Accountability (Percentage)

	WAVE 4	WAVE 5	WAVE 6
Paternalistic Political Leadership			
Strongly agree	14	**20.92**	**14.17**
Agree	30.58	**34.58**	**39.58**
Disagree	**38.08**	23.75	35.25
Strongly disagree	**16.83**	20.33	10.83
Moralistic Political Leadership			
Strongly agree	**22.5**	**33.33**	**25.33**
Agree	**38.92**	**35.5**	**42.92**
Disagree	25.83	18.92	22.33
Strongly disagree	12.42	11.67	9.08
Trustee vs. Delegative Representation 1			
Government leaders implement what voters want.	35.67	25.58	
Government leaders do what they think is best for the people	**62.83**	**72.67**	
Trustee vs. Delegative Representation 2			
Government is our employee; the people should tell government what needs to be done.	44.75		
The government is like parent, it should decide what is good for us	**54.25**		
Decisiveness vs. Accountability			
It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more.		41.67	
It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.		**56.25**	
Electoral vs. Meritocratic Legitimacy			
Political leaders are chosen by the people through open and competitive elections.	**65.58**	50.33	
Political leaders are chosen on the basis of their virtue and capability even without elections.	33.75	47.92	

Overall, these tendencies can help create an environment that lacks a demand for accountability; that a leader, once he gains power, can achieve a free hand on policy and governance. Considering mass disempowerment and inaction outside elections (Borja, 2015, 2017, 2023; Borja et al., 2025), there is a heavy cap placed on the public expressions of discontent and demands for accountability. The next section explores attitudes towards the US and China before examining how such attitudes play out in a low-cost accountability environment.

Foreign Affairs as a Non-priority

Do Filipinos care about being caught between two great powers? If so, to what extent, and how do they expect their leaders to act? While this study cannot fully answer these questions, examining Filipino perceptions of China and the US provides some insight. Specifically, it helps determine whether attitudes toward foreign powers are shaped by core political values and whether Filipinos even consider foreign affairs a priority. Moreover, we will try to see whether Filipinos are even interested in foreign affairs to begin with.

Table 3 below shows a stable pattern wherein most Filipinos continue to perceive the US as a largely benevolent, influential actor in the region, while attitudes toward China fluctuate but increasingly tilt toward caution or mild negativity even as recognition of China's growing influence rises. From the 4th to 6th Waves of the ABS, attitudes towards China's impact and influence in the Philippines and in the region moved from a level of ambivalence to a clear recognition of its rising power. Moreover, the 5th Wave shows the probable impacts of Duterte's shift to China. Specifically, more Filipinos see its domestic influence as more positive. Nonetheless, this experienced a slight decrease during the 6th Wave even if most still share a positive attitude toward China. This was tied to a modest increase in negative sentiments suggesting a persistent uncertainty or growing skepticism over its supposed beneficial impact on the region and on the Philippines.

In contrast, perceptions of the United States remain consistently favorable and stable across the same period. Large majorities through the 4th to 6th Waves view the US as bringing more good than harm to the region, with combined positive assessments typically hovering around 80–88%. Ratings of U.S. influence also remain high. Moreover, attitudes towards US influence stays overwhelmingly positive. Overall, while attitudes toward China trend toward caution, attitudes towards the United States remain strongly positive and stable.

Table 3: Attitudes on US and China (Percentage)

	WAVE 4	WAVE 5	WAVE 6
Nature of impact on the region (China)			
Much more good than harm	7.83	14.33	9.42
Somewhat more good than harm	**32.25**	**34.42**	28.25
Somewhat more harm than good	**38.08**	**28.5**	**36.5**
Much more harm than good	19	18.5	**22.67**
Degree of influence (China)			
A great deal of influence	**32.83**	**46.33**	**54**
Some influence	**46.83**	**40.92**	**31.58**
Not much influence	12.75	6.08	7.92
No influence at all	6.08	3.67	4.17
Nature of influence (China)			

Very positive	**5.33**	**8.25**	**10**
Positive	**25.17**	**28.08**	**24.5**
Somewhat positive	**32**	**34.42**	**25.5**
Somewhat negative	20.33	11.25	16.67
Negative	11.33	12.75	15.67
Very negative	4.42	2.5	5.08
Nature of impact on the region (US)			
Much more good than harm	**43.17**	**36.67**	**41.58**
Somewhat more good than harm	**46.08**	**47.83**	**46.17**
Somewhat more harm than good	6.67	9.25	7.25
Much more harm than good	1.58	2.75	1.83
Degree of influence (US)			
A great deal of influence	**71.33**	**48.25**	**55.17**
Some influence	**22.58**	**42.25**	**37.75**
Not much influence	4.08	5.08	4.42
No influence at all	1.25	1.75	0.92
Nature of influence (US)			
Very positive	**28.33**	**16.25**	**22.42**
Positive	**41.42**	**40.5**	**42.83**
Somewhat positive	**22.83**	**31.42**	**26.42**
Somewhat negative	3.75	3.83	3.92
Negative	2.33	4.33	2.25
Very negative	0.58	0.92	

Are these attitudes related to how Filipinos understand accountability—their ideals towards leaders and leader-citizen relations? If they are, then we can conclude that a person's sense of vertical accountability is tied to how they understand foreign affairs (i.e., for this case, their assessment of the relationships between the Philippines and these two great powers). If not, then it is plausible that the foreign policy process is situated in a low-cost accountability environment wherein an ordinary citizen could not tie a need for accountability to a specific relationship with a foreign power.

Table 4: Correlation (spearman's rho) between values on vertical accountability and attitudes towards China and the US

	WAVE 4	WAVE 5	WAVE 6
	Paternalistic Political Leadership		
Nature of impact on the region (US)	0.03	0.038	0.086**
Nature of impact on the region (China)	0.064*	0.049	0.068*
Degree of influence (China)	-0.011	0.012	0.029
Nature of influence (China)	0.085**	0.049	0.132***
Degree of influence (US)	-0.01	0.056	0.113***

Nature of influence (US))	-0.021	0.042	0.059*
	Moralistic Political Leadership		
Nature of impact on the region (US)	0.073*	0.071*	0.023
Nature of impact on the region (China)	0.022	0.011	-0.035
Degree of influence (China)	0.008	0.015	0.087**
Nature of influence (China)	0.06*	0.009	0.096**
Degree of influence (US)	0.071*	0.041	-0.015
Nature of influence (US))	0.076**	0.048	-0.027
	Trustee vs. Delegative Representation 1		
Nature of impact on the region (US)	-0.051	0.003	
Nature of impact on the region (China)	-0.027	0.047	
Degree of influence (China)	-0.046	-0.01	
Nature of influence (China)	-0.033	-0.004	
Degree of influence (US)	-0.076**	-0.011	
Nature of influence (US))	-0.045	-0.013	
	Trustee vs. Delegative Representation 2	**Decisiveness vs. Accountability**	
Nature of impact on the region (US)	0.012	-0.027	
Nature of impact on the region (China)	-0.011	-0.02	
Degree of influence (China)	-0.008	-0.008	
Nature of influence (China)	-0.074*	-0.053	
Degree of influence (US)	-0.024	0.015	
Nature of influence (US))	-0.021	0.026	
	Electoral vs. Meritocratic		
Nature of impact on the region (US)	-0.016	-0.04	
Nature of impact on the region (China)	-0.053	-0.002	
Degree of influence (China)	-0.001	-0.006	
Nature of influence (China)	-0.053	-0.061*	
Degree of influence (US)	0.029	0.027	
Nature of influence (US))	-0.002	-0.003	

Note:

* $p < 0.05$ level

** $p < 0.01$ level

*** $p < 0.001$

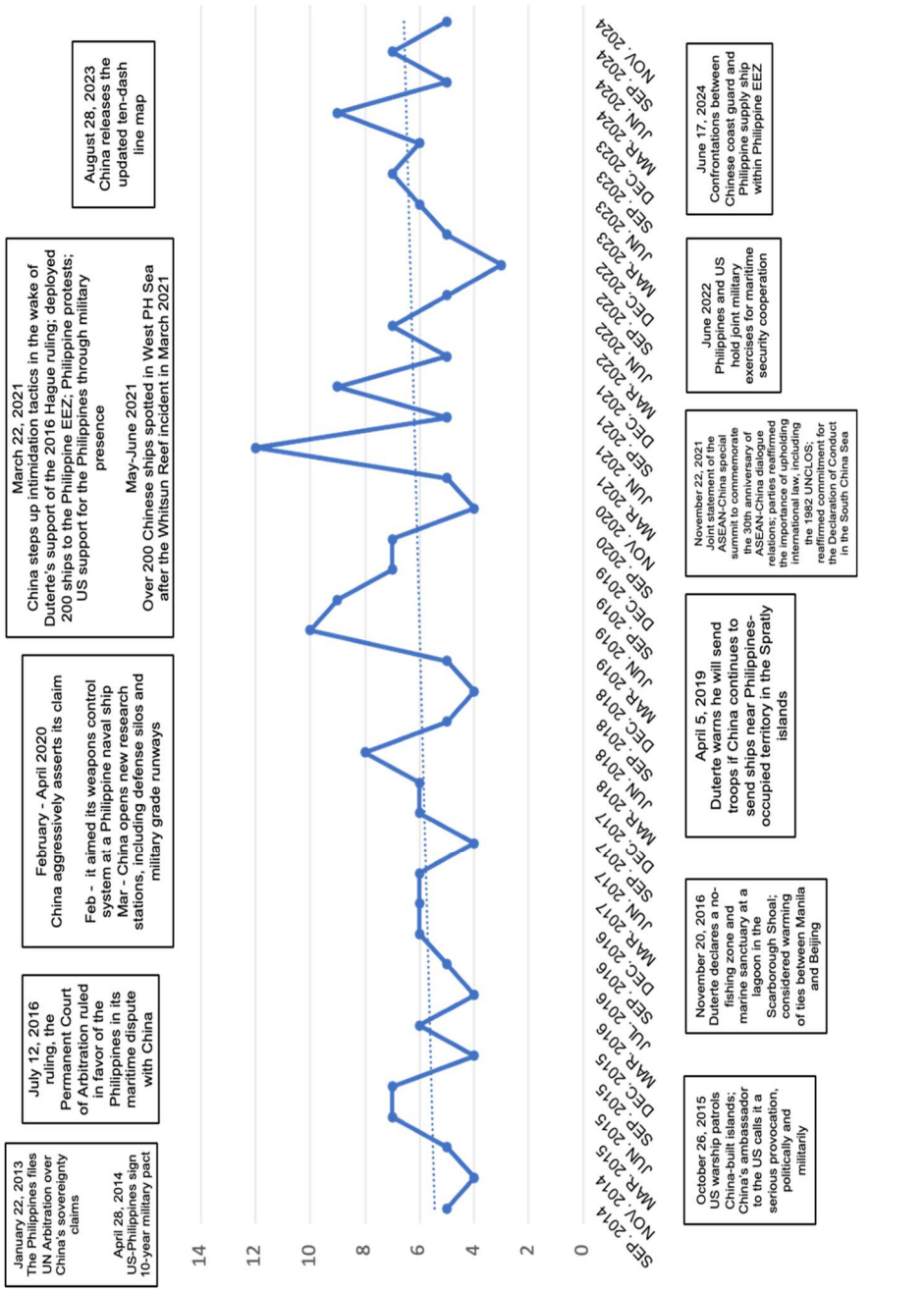
Table 4 above shows that only attitudes towards the nature of China's influence in the Philippines and the degree of American influence are weakly related to a preference for paternalistic political leadership. The rest have no significant relationship with the other values on vertical accountability or have significant but negligible relationships. This proves that such crucial political values have no bearing on attitudes towards the US and China; that there is a chasm between the issue of vertical accountability (may it be a demand for it or not) and foreign policy in the political psyche of the Filipino electorate.

At this point, we are still working on the assumption that Filipinos care about foreign affairs to begin with. Though we have no extensive measurements of this tendency, as data from Figure 1 below shows that foreign policy might not be a priority for many Filipinos. *Pulse Asia* surveys show that from 2014 to 2024, the issue of territorial integrity remains as a non-priority for most Filipinos with data showing a fluctuating upward trend. This pattern exists despite the various twists and turns during the Duterte administration and the growing aggression and presence of China in the West Philippine Sea.

Why is this so? We can entertain the following possibilities, first of which is the dynamic between media exposure, Chinese aggression, and the remoteness of the West Philippine Sea issue. Even if the media facilitates the exposure of the general public to China's aggression, it is probable that citizens have deemed the matter as something out of their control and/or far from everyday life. Simply put, China's aggression is probably normalized or distant enough to be assumed then ignored. Second, juxtaposed with Fang and Li's (2022) findings, it is also probable that ordinary Filipinos are more concerned with the economic dimensions of Philippines-China relations since such is more proximate to priority issues (e.g., employment, inflation, etc.) than territorial disputes.

Overall, though we could not offer anything definite at this point, data above suggests two things. On one hand, foreign policy holds no bearing in matters of vertical accountability. In more practical terms, it is probable that an ordinary Filipino citizen does not think of trade, territorial integrity, and foreign powers when facing the ballot; that is, when they are engaging in one of the few effective ways for them to hold leaders accountable. On the other hand, values on vertical accountability do not shape one's attitudes towards the US and China. Ordinary Filipinos are probably too reliant on leaders to establish a link between issues on foreign affairs (e.g., territorial disputes with China) and a need to hold them accountable. But then again, given the limits of the data, such a tendency could not be established definitely.

Figure 1: Percentage of Filipinos who consider "Defending territorial integrity" as a top three national priority (Pulse Asia Surveys) and key events on Filipino foreign policy and security



Concluding Remarks: At the Mercy of Leaders and the Question of Hedging

Foreign policy is generally a low national priority for most Filipinos. Leader centrism embodied in trustee representation attitudes and the prioritization of decisiveness over accountability, suggest a low demand for accountability in the foreign policy space. In particular, because hedging means refraining from siding with any great power, its associated policy rhetoric often sends mixed signals to the public. Unlike more overt alternatives, hedging evades easy categorizations of allies and enemies. This might be contrary to public attitudes that may clamor for aligning against perceived enemies or for maintaining dependency on "benevolent" superpowers. As such, a necessary precondition of hedging is sufficient breathing space to choose potentially unpopular strategic options. What might contribute to such a breathing space is a low demand for accountability in foreign policy for the simple reason that it can provide leaders with a free hand on such matters.

We cannot address the issue of hedging conclusively given the limits of the data analyzed above. And unfortunately, there are no direct measurements for it at this point—something we leave for future studies. Nonetheless, we can open up certain possible explanations and areas for inquiry on this matter.

First, it is probable that ordinary citizens probably hold a more flexible understanding of how the government should navigate between these two powers. The findings of Fang and Li (2022) attests to this and we add that such a tendency can provide room for justifying hedging to the electorate. However, assuming that considerations of domestic economic matters often outweigh foreign policy concerns (in public discourse, mass media, and even formal education), further research can examine whether hedging in the Philippines is better framed for ordinary citizens in terms of the benefits that can be derived from it rather than as a way to address adverse security issues (i.e., leaders can add something to their domestic prestige by engaging in "benefit extractive" foreign policies with little to no regard as to whom such benefits can be derived from). The prevailing trend indicates a political culture where international matters never gain political prominence unless linked to urgent economic or material issues. This can help explain why even nationalistic citizens may end support stronger economic ties with powers like China.

Second, future studies can consider how to recontextualize foreign policy in order to align it with daily priorities, and whether innovative public engagement methods, such as education, media representation, or participatory processes, can bridge the gap between citizens and the foreign policy agenda. Similar research has the opportunity to enhance our understanding of democratic accountability and public concerns about global issues typically influenced by executive discretion. Therefore, further research of this nature is essential to develop the link between vertical accountability and foreign policy.

Third, and beyond the issue of hedging, future inquiries must further dissect the Filipino political psyche when confronted by foreign policy issues. What are the factors affecting a citizen's level of interest on foreign security issues? How proximate do they see their everyday lives with international affairs? Examining public discourse on foreign affairs, as well as our own attempt to indirectly measure the relationship between political values and foreign policy attitudes will not suffice moving forward. The former assumes too much about a citizen's attachment to foreign affairs (e.g., whether it is a factor that affects their voting preferences) while the latter raises the need for more direct measurements.

Lastly, if there is a low-cost accountability environment from the electorate, then are there any other sources of accountability within the government (e.g., the relationship between military and security forces with the legislature, etc.)? Can the government further democratize the foreign policy process? Given the current conflict in Iran that involves bypassing the power of the US congress to check and balance the Presidency of Donald Trump, the issue of accountability and its supposed impact on foreign affairs stands now as thoroughly urgent.

Endnotes

[1] An example of this analysis can be used to understand when and how US foreign policy targeted the creation of the State of Israel (Noone, 2019). The highly contested discussion was centered on pro-Zion, anti-Zion, and pro-Arab causes in US Congressional hearings. Such result, while part of the policy process, extends to actual implementation of US foreign policy on Israel.

[2] The three streams are as follows: (1) the problem stream focuses on identifying and defining issues based on what actors perceive situations that require policy intervention, (2) the policy stream targets acceptability, feasibility, and integration, (3) the political stream tackles public opinion surrounding an issue and where policymakers create actual policy. Noone (2019) cited the case of Greek efforts to block recognition of FYR Macedonia where Greek Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis targeted Greek public sentiments to justify policy solutions to said problem and political streams.

[3] Noone (2019) cited the case of India-Pakistan rivalry, having been engaged in periodic conflicts that stemmed from differing foreign policy goals of each administration.

[4] Apart from this, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has been guided by the Three Pillars of Philippine Foreign policy, established during the Ramos administration under the Republic Act 7157, Philippine Foreign Service Act of 1991. RA 7157 mandated the DFA to implement Philippine foreign policy under three pillars: (1) Preservation and enhancement of national security; (2) Promotion and attainment of economic security; and (3) Protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interest of Filipinos overseas.

[5] Prior to the Duterte administration, the term "independent foreign policy" was also repeatedly stressed by the Aquino III administration, particularly during the height of the South China Sea dispute, when the Philippines initiated and brought the case to an arbitral tribunal in 2012. In a forum with the private sector, the Former Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario iterated the administration's stance for an "independent, principled and based on the rule of law." In an

interview with Quilop (2024), Del Rosario states that the foreign policy entails that, "we refuse to be bullied by China, and we refuse to be subservient to the Americans."

[6] The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) conducted its 4th, 5th and 6th waves in the Philippines over a roughly one-decade span, using consistent methodology to track public opinion nationwide. In the 4th wave, fieldwork in the Philippines was carried out in July 2014. In the 5th wave, interviews took place in December 2018. By the 6th wave, the Philippine survey was conducted on October 2021. A nationally representative sample of 1,200 were recruited through a multistage probability sample of adults.

[7] Data was drawn from the *Ulat ng Bayan* reports accessible through (https://pulseasia.ph/data-bank/ulat-ng-bayan/).

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