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Marcos Jr. is putting on a deceptive new front

Unexpectedly, the Philippines have realigned with the US and against Russia and China. Yet, it is doubtful that this strategic honeymoon can last

Sometimes things turn out differently than planned. When Ferdinand Marcos Jr. won an emphatic electoral victory almost exactly half-a-century after his father imposed a brutal dictatorship, many expected the new Filipino leader to go against the 1986 'People Power' Revolution. The 1986 revolution led by Corazon Aquino – the widow of Marcos family's ultimate bête noire, Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino – established a new constitutional order, which expressly sought to avoid another Marcosian dictatorship. After winning an unprecedented 31 million votes, and securing the largest margin of victory in contemporary Philippine elections, the namesake son of the former Filipino strongman was in a unique position to create a new political regime altogether.

Once back in the Malacañang Palace, the Marcoses didn't disappoint their loyalist base. During his first 100 days, the new Filipino president defended his father's dictatorial legacy by invoking Cold War strategic exigencies and domestic insurgencies. While the presidential sister, Senator Maria Imelda 'Imee' Marcos, oversaw the release of an unabashedly revisionist movie, 'Maid in Malacañang', which portrayed her family as hapless victims of pro-Aquino mobs, American conspiracy and treasonous allies. The torrent of revisionist politics, powered by an army of pro-Marcos influencers, has coincided with a systematic assault on mainstream media and independent journalists. To top it all off, during Marcos Jr.'s major speeches, including his inauguration speech and first State of the Nation Address, he refused to even discuss the topics of human rights, democracy and corruption. Nor has his administration shown an appetite for the rule of law, including accountability for widespread extrajudicial killings under his predecessor.

A break in foreign policy legacy

At the rate thigs are going, the Philippines will likely end up as a 'hybrid regime', where semi-competitive elections simply legitimise the supremacy of an illiberal ruling elite. On the foreign policy front, however, Marcos Jr. has overseen a strategic reboot, which has won praise among traditional allies and partners.

In a bid to 'reintroduce' the Philippines, and rebrand his notorious family's international image, Marcos Jr. has steadily repaired frayed ties with the United States through the adoption of a more critical stance towards China and Russia. The contrast with his immediate predecessor couldn't be any starker. Fuelled by historical and personal grievances, Duterte publicly cussed at Western leaders and threatened to end his country's military alliance with America. Throughout his entire term in office, the former Filipino leader refused to visit even a single Western capital, while conducting multiple tris to both Beijing and Moscow.

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While touting an 'independent' foreign policy, Duterte was brazenly obsequious, and at times almost slavish, towards the Eastern powers. Describing China as his 'protector'. The former Filipino president called on smaller nations to 'remain meek and humble' in exchange for the Asian power's 'mercy'. At the same time, Duterte fawned over Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom he described as a his 'idol' and 'favourite hero'.

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In a twist of fate, Marcos Jr. openly backed Duterte's foreign policy orientation during the presidential campaign. But once he secured the highest office, largely thanks to the backing of the Dutertes, he began to sing to a different tune. Urbane and affable, the new Filipino president shunned his predecessor's colourful language in favour of traditional diplomacy.

Reigniting the American friendship

He appointed a career diplomat - Enrique Manalo - as his foreign secretary, the first in two decades. He also turned back on his earlier promise to appoint Sara Duterte - former presidential daughter, and current vice-president - as his defence secretary, a position that was given to a veteran general. While welcoming expanded economic cooperation with China, in order to boost post-pandemic recovery, Marcos Jr. also began to take an uncompromising stance on the South China Sea disputes. Unlike Duterte, he has reiterated the finality of the arbitral tribunal ruling in the South China Sea and made clear that he 'will not compromise it in any way' over the county's 'sacred' territorial and maritime rights. Later, he would go so far as to categorically reject China's claims by arguing that 'what we have [is] China claiming territory that belongs to the Philippines.'

On top of that, Marcos Jr. also nixed his country's single major defence deal with Russia in favour of American replacements. He also suspended multiple big-ticket infrastructure projects with China due to concerns over high interest rates and lack of financing. While adopting a more critical attitude towards the Eastern powers, Marcos Jr. has praised America's stabilising role in the Indo-Pacific region as 'something that is much appreciated by all the countries in the region, and the Philippines especially.'

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Barely three months into office, he personally met several top US officials, including President Joseph Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who actively courted the new occupant of the Malacañang.

With both sides agreeing to put their recent 'rocky times' behind them, the two allies are now doubling down on their security cooperation. Amid shared concerns over China's rising assertiveness in the South China Sea as well as over Taiwan, the Philippines and US are expected to conduct as many as 500 joint military activities next year, from 300 this year; the Pentagon also aims to deploy up to 16,000 troops to the annual Philippine-US *Balikatan* wargames, which have increasingly focused on a maritime security cooperation with the growing attendance of likeminded countries such as Japan and Australia.

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Marcos Jr., put it: '[o]ur relationship with the United States is at its best right now.' In a bizarre twist of events, the new Filipino president has been welcomed as a breath of fresh air by many Western counterparts, especially in the US, who bemoaned six years of strategic hostility under the Beijing-friendly Duterte. It remains to be seen, however, whether this strategic honeymoon can last in absence of genuine good governance reforms under the Marcoses.



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