

Philippines

Philippines balances security and trade in US-China contest

Manila bids to strengthen ties with both nations amid fears it would be on the front line of any conflict



Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Jr meets US president Joe Biden in New York this month © Evan Vucci/AP

Kathrin Hille in Manila YESTERDAY

Political allies have hailed Ferdinand Marcos Jr's first visit to the US as Philippine president as a "home run": he secured one of the few bilateral meetings with Joe Biden on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

The US welcome reflected the decisive steps [Marcos](#) is taking to revitalise Manila's alliance with Washington following a pivot towards China under his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.

But Manila is attempting to carefully balance ties with its security ally and its powerful neighbour amid concern that it would be on the front lines of any conflict between the superpowers.

"We are cognisant of the contest between the two hegemons. We're just trying to look at it from a point of view that will really match our interests," Clarita Carlos, Marcos' national security adviser, said in an interview with the Financial Times.

"Whatever China is offering us in terms of trade . . . or infrastructure, we'll take it. Whatever the US is offering us in terms of security umbrella has to be taken into consideration also," Carlos said.

As [the FT reported last week](#), US defence secretary Lloyd Austin and Philippine counterpart Jose Faustino Jr will join bilateral military co-ordination talks on

Thursday, the first time such senior government figures have participated in the annual discussions. The two militaries also plan to double the scale of their annual joint exercise next year.



Philippine troops take part in a military parade at the oath-taking of Ferdinand Marcos Jr in June this year © Ezra Acayan/Getty Images

According to US and Philippine officials familiar with the situation, Manila and Washington aim to upgrade their security relationship with a regular dialogue between foreign and defence secretaries, which will probably kick off early next year. They also intend to strengthen joint planning by adopting a set of bilateral defence guidelines, such as those the US has with Japan.

Separately, Marcos, who is known at home as “Bongbong”, has taken a harder line in his country’s territorial dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea, which Manila calls the West Philippine Sea, than Duterte.

Duterte described contesting Beijing’s territorial claims as a “waste of time”. In sharp contrast, Marcos stressed in his inaugural address he would “not preside over any process that will abandon even one square inch of territory of the Republic of the [Philippines](#) to any foreign power”.

While Duterte tried to refocus the armed forces on internal security, Faustino has made external security the first priority in his 10-point policy agenda — reflecting Manila’s realisation that it needs to prepare for the scenario of [being dragged into a war](#) between China and the US over Taiwan.

US diplomats have gone out of their way to ensure controversy over Marcos's family past will not interfere with engagement as they seize the opportunity to bolster ties with Washington's oldest security ally in Asia.

In 2011, a Hawaii court fined Marcos and his mother Imelda Marcos \$353mn for contempt of court in a case stemming from human rights violations during the martial law rule imposed by his father, the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Despite that standing court order, Washington publicly reassured Marcos he could enter the US without the risk of detention.

But Beijing is courting the Philippine president as well. At Marcos's inauguration in June, Chinese vice-president Wang Qishan expressed hope for a "new golden age" in bilateral relations, playing on the incoming leader's desire to restore his family's image and on the Marcos clan's role in building ties in the 1970s.

Ahead of his election, Marcos's backers [described his father's rule as a "golden age"](#) for the country — a view at odds with those who remember the persecution of political opponents and economic decline. The family still prides itself on its early relationship with Chinese leaders, stemming from a 1974 visit to Beijing during which Mao Zedong kissed the hand of then-first lady Imelda.

Beijing has declared agriculture, infrastructure, energy and people-to-people relations the "big four" priorities in bilateral ties, matching Marcos's own agenda.

Moreover, Beijing is cultivating links with the Philippine establishment by offering cheap and easily accessible English-language scholarships in China for government and military officials, several Philippine officials told the FT.

Last month, China set up an association for alumni of its defence college in Nanjing in the Philippine military and organised a photo exhibit celebrating bilateral relations at the Philippines' Department of Defence.

Despite Marcos's rebalancing towards the US, his government is receptive to Beijing's overtures as well.

"The contest in the West Philippine Sea will not be the main thing to define our relationship with China. That is the reason why we proceed with the things that we agree upon," Carlos said. "I believe there will then be more likelihood of co-operation, collegiality, trust and confidence building."

The national security adviser said she wanted to prioritise academic exchanges and a

fisheries agreement with China. The military and the foreign service want the government to do more to strengthen the alliance with the US.

“What saved the alliance so far was our military-to-military relationship. But now we need to involve the higher-ups to make things more sustainable,” said Rommel Jude Ong, a professor at the Ateneo School of Government in Manila and former vice commander of the Philippine navy.

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