



## Early Access to COVID-19 Vaccines and Rodrigo Duterte-style Vaccine Diplomacy



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Vaccine nationalism and its implications to vaccine supply were a huge concern globally when COVID-19 vaccines first became available in 2021. At the time, vaccine supply was limited and it was difficult for many countries around the world to get adequate supply of the COVID-19 vaccine to inoculate their people. At its most benign, vaccine nationalism delayed the access of poorer countries to vaccines that are widely considered as the long-term solution to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Poorer countries needed to resort to diplomacy to wrangle early access to vaccine supply from vaccine-producing countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and others. In particular, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte leveraged his country's Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States and the need for Filipino nurses by countries like the United Kingdom and Germany to secure early access to COVID-19 vaccines.

It all seems trivial now (in 2022) because of better global vaccine supply, but in 2021 when countries scrambled for access to scarce COVID-19 vaccines, Rodrigo Duterte

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leveraged the Philippines' assets to gain early access to vaccine supply.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, vaccine, diplomacy, Rodrigo Duterte

## I . Introduction

Research done by online media entity Rappler and public health research firm EpiMetrics on the Philippines' COVID-19 vaccination campaign succinctly captures the difference between the situation in 2021 and in 2022: “logistical and accessibility issues” primarily hound the national vaccination campaign in 2022, whereas in 2021 supply was the biggest problem (Tomacruz 2022). In the early part of 2021, when Covid-19 vaccines first became available, vaccine nationalism and its implications to supply were a huge concern globally. Amir Khan (2021) defines vaccine nationalism as something that “occurs when governments sign agreements with pharmaceutical manufacturers to supply their own populations with vaccines ahead of them becoming available for other countries.”

Vaccine nationalism made it difficult for many countries around the world to get adequate supply of the COVID-19 vaccine to inoculate their people. According to Claire Felter (2021), manufacturing capabilities—including those of COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access or COVAX—at the onset of vaccine production in 2021 fell way short of global needs, triggering vaccine nationalism, thus leading to inequitable distribution and new COVID-19 variant outbreaks.

At its most benign, vaccine nationalism delayed the access of poorer countries to vaccines that are widely considered as the long-term solution to the COVID-19 pandemic. This delay in access to the vaccines, aside from exacting a huge cost on the global economy (Hafner et al. 2020), became a crucial domestic political issue for many countries around the world.

Some vaccine producing countries used the matter of vaccine supply during the days of vaccine scarcity as a tool to boost their

geopolitical agenda. Pratt and Levin (2021) draw attention to the “vaccine diplomacy” of China and Russia, “linking vaccine exports to policy concessions and favorable geopolitical reconfigurations.” On the flipside, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states urged countries like the United States and the United Kingdom to export more of their vaccines to the region, after facing initial shortage of supply that led to “some of the lowest inoculation rates in the world” during the first few months of their vaccination campaign (Barrett 2021).

Even though there are several configurations of vaccine diplomacy at the onset of the global vaccination drive in 2021, ranging from how vaccine producing countries utilized this valuable resource to enhance their diplomatic or geopolitical position on one extreme, and countries that had to utilize various diplomatic tools to gain access to needed supply from the producing countries on the other end, in this paper, vaccine diplomacy will be viewed from the lens of countries such as the majority of the ASEAN member-states that were forced to lean on diplomatic tools in order to get their hands on much-needed COVID-19 vaccines from producing countries. In particular, the Philippines will serve as a case study of vaccine diplomacy in the context of supply-related dilemmas at the onset of the global COVID-19 vaccination drive in 2021, focusing on the peculiar diplomatic tack of President Rodrigo Duterte to secure vaccine supply from countries such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and China.

COVID-19 vaccine supply improved particularly towards the end of 2021, but at the onset of the global COVID-19 vaccination drive during the earlier months of the year, Duterte had to leverage the country’s Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US to cajole Washington into making vaccines available to Manila (Strangio 2021). Duterte also played upon the need of the UK and Germany for Filipino nurses for their health care system in exchange for early access to vaccine supplies from these countries (Morales 2021). Lastly, Duterte leaned on his historic pivot to China (Business Mirror 2019) to similarly secure early access to vaccine supplies from Beijing (Calonzo 2021).

This paper will assert that vaccine diplomacy by the Philippines for the purpose of securing early access to vaccine supply from producing countries essentially reflect the unconventional leadership style and unprecedented political circumstances of President Duterte.

## **II . The Political Outsider**

Rodrigo Duterte was largely a political outsider when he was elected the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of the Philippines in 2016. His road to the presidency is atypical.

Born on March 28, 1945, Duterte was 71 years old when he was sworn in as president on June 30, 2016, becoming the oldest to serve in that position. Previously, Commonwealth-era President Sergio Osmeña was the oldest at 65 years old when he succeeded Manuel Quezon as chief executive of the World War II-era government-in-exile upon the latter's death in New York in 1944.

Prior to becoming president, Duterte served as the long-time mayor of Davao City in the southern island of Mindanao. Duterte became the first president to come from that area, long considered to be in the periphery of Philippine politics. Previously, Vice Presidents Teofisto Guingona Jr. (2001-2004) and Emmanuel Pelaez (1961-1965) were the highest serving executives hailing from Mindanao. However, only Pelaez was elected to the vice presidency. Guingona was a sitting senator who was appointed by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in accordance with law to the position she vacated after succeeding Joseph Estrada to the presidency in 2001.

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines after Luzon and has a population of 26.25 million as of May 2020 (Arguillas 2021). However, Mindanao only contributes around 13 percent of the Philippines' gross domestic product (GDP), considerably lower than the National Capital Region (NCR) and the Calabarzon region composed of the provinces of Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon in the island of Luzon, which contribute about 37 percent and 15 percent respectively (Adriano 2020).

As former city mayor, Duterte followed in the footsteps of former Makati City Mayor Jejomar Binay (who became vice president in 2010) as local executives who rose to the top executive positions in the Philippines. Joseph Estrada also served as mayor of San Juan (1969-1986), but he served as senator (1987-1992) prior to becoming vice president (1992-1998) and eventually president (1998-2001). In contrast, Binay and Duterte went straight from being city mayors to the highest executive positions in the country.

Duterte briefly held a congressional seat from 1998 to 2001, after serving the constitutional limit of three consecutive terms as Davao City mayor from 1988 to 1998. He returned as city mayor for another three consecutive terms from 2001 to 2010, before sliding to the position of vice mayor from 2010 to 2013, and afterwards regaining the mayoralty position from 2013 to 2016 prior to becoming the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of the Philippines in 2016.

Majority of the occupants of the country's top executive positions beginning 1992—the first presidential elections since strongman Ferdinand Marcos was ousted from power in February 1986—come from the legislature or national level positions prior to being elected therein. In 1992, Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos was elected president and Senator Estrada became vice president. In 1998, Vice President Estrada became the president and Senator Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was elected vice president. Arroyo later succeeded Estrada in 2001, with Senator Guingona appointed vice president. Arroyo was reelected in 2004 with Senator Manuel de Castro Jr. as vice president. In 2010, Senator Benigno Aquino III became president and Mayor Binay was elected vice president. In 2016, Mayor Rodrigo Duterte was elected president and Representative Maria Leonor Robredo became vice president.

Davao City is an important regional center in the southern island of Mindanao but has never been considered a viable springboard to the presidency. Davao City is different from Makati City, described as the country's "premier financial hub" and home to "many of the country's biggest businesses and renowned multinational companies" (Remo 2019). Makati also hosts many

foreign embassies and consulates, making its mayor an important player in national (and even international) politics. In comparison to Makati, Davao does not have the same kind of prominence.

Duterte's political party affiliation history is quite checkered and reflects the tendencies of local politicians to switch from one party to another, depending on political exigencies. In the 2016 presidential elections, Duterte ran under the Partido Demokratiko ng Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan (Filipino Democratic Party-People Power) or PDP-Laban after party elder statesman and retired Senator Aquilino Pimentel Jr. declared (as early as 2014) that the Davao City mayor was a "good prospect" for the 2016 presidential elections (Esmaguél 2015). Duterte became a viable candidate after Pimentel's son, Senator Aquilino Pimentel III, got into a squabble with party stalwart and then-Vice President Binay in 2014 (Howard 2015). Ironically, Duterte was a member of the ruling Liberal Party or LP of President Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016) from 2009 until his "re-entry" to PDP-Laban in 2015 (Espejo 2015).

Not since the days of the 1986 Snap Elections when Corazon Aquino mounted a historic challenge against Marcos carrying the PDP-Laban banner did the political party have any national-level relevance. Pimentel Jr. ran for the vice presidency in 1992 under the PDP-Laban flag (in tandem with LP's Senator Jovito Salonga) but fared very poorly. Never again did a PDP-Laban candidate figure prominently in the presidential elections until Duterte—although the party was sometimes allied with the dominant coalition. As the PDP-Laban split into factions in the lead up to the 2022 presidential elections, President Duterte retorted to the rival group headed by Pimentel III (Salverria and Gascon, 2021):

May I just remind Koko (Pimentel III) that this party PDP(-Laban) was asleep for a hundred years. It only woke up during the (2016) election(s) and I ran for the presidency under the ticket.

Prior to Duterte's move to the LP in 2009, Duterte was with the PDP-Laban from 2001 when the party was "asleep" (Espejo, 2015). In 2011, Duterte organized the Hugpong sa Tawong Lungsod (United Citizens), a local Davao City-based political party (Tejano

2015). An early report mentioned that Duterte—in 1988 a city vice mayor officer-in-charge—was a member of a new (local) political party called *Lakas ng Dabaw* (Davao Power) (Manila Standard 1988). Another report stated that Duterte, then-mayor of Davao, joined the opposition Nacionalista Party. The same report also asserts that Duterte was party-less during the 1988 elections (Bigornia 1990).

Since the Philippine Constitution of 1987 ushered in a multi-party system on the heels of the authoritarian-dominant party system during the strongman rule of Marcos, party switching became a regular occurrence in Philippine politics and Duterte is a prime example, not the exception. Party switching is generally a consequence of the emergence of dominant presidential parties after 1986; members of political clans “regularly switch their affiliation from one presidential party to another in order to gain access to state resources and patronage” (Teehankee 2020: 110). In the case of Duterte, his father Vicente was a cabinet secretary of Marcos during his first term as president (1965-1969) prior to the declaration of Martial Law in 1972. The association of his father with Marcos may have been the reason why Duterte was not a member of the administration coalition after 1986. However, there are doubts about the supposed closeness of Vicente Duterte with Ferdinand Marcos (Reyes 2019). Besides, Rodrigo Duterte was appointed Davao City vice mayor officer-in-charge after all local officials in the Philippines were removed from office by the succeeding Corazon Aquino-led revolutionary government in 1986.

Nevertheless, Rodrigo Duterte remained outside the traditional ambit of national politics. However, due to his preeminence in Davao City politics for decades, he was constantly courted by the national parties to deliver votes for their candidates. He was never on the radar of national politics until the Pimentel III-Binay rift forced the PDP-Laban to look at him as a replacement standard bearer for the party in the 2016 elections.

Even as a candidate for president in 2016—and as president since then—Duterte has always been considered a political outsider. Phil Zabriskie (2002) labeled then-Mayor Rodrigo Duterte “The Punisher” for his peculiar exploits:

Shortly after Duterte (first) took office (in the late 1980s), he heard that some kidnappers were trying to skip town with their just-collected ransom. Duterte led the pursuit, beating the cops to the scene and stationing his car on a bridge at the city line. When the kidnappers arrived, they started shooting. Duterte and his security detail returned fire, killing three of the four suspects. It was like a scene from the Philippine movies, which are replete with Dirty Harry loner-heroes. Here, it seemed, was a man who did what he promised, a man willing to die—and kill—for Davao.

The same story explains the reasons for Duterte's continued political success. Duterte became a cult figure in Davao City and simultaneously gained some notoriety at the national level but not to the extent that he was considered as an aspirant for national elective positions. Time paints Duterte as a unique politician: "Duterte suffers from none of the charges that dog most Philippine politicians: that he is beholden to vested interests, obsessed with retaining power, or bent on accumulating its spoils" (Zabriskie 2002), explaining to some extent why he continued to be a political outsider; Duterte was an unrepentant political maverick who seemed destined to be stuck in Davao City until his death or retirement.

Even Duterte's father, Vicente, seems to have been a local politician at heart. Vicente, as mentioned, was appointed to the Marcos cabinet in 1965, but he quickly left that position to run for congress in the 1967 midterm elections. Before that, Vicente served as governor of Davao province before it was divided into three provinces by an act of congress in 1967 (Reyes, 2019). The Dutertes were local politicians until Rodrigo ran for the presidency in 2016.

Retired sociologist Randy David (2016) asked, on the eve of the 2016 elections: "How does one account for the phenomenal rise to national stature of a local politician from a remote corner of Mindanao?" David's description of Duterte is quite telling:

Equipped with an enormous capacity to tell stories and tackle issues in street language dripping with expletives, the man talks tough against criminals, drug pushers and abusive people, promising to summarily purge them from our society. He laughs at his own dirty thoughts and desires, and ridicules our foibles as a people. But he



reserves his harshest criticism and deepest contempt for what he considers the nation's inept and corrupt public officials, and the ruling families they serve...Despite, and perhaps because of, his crude language and coarse demeanor, he comes out—to his admirers—as an endearing rogue who articulates without fear their own resentments and fantasies. That is what is interesting—and, to the rest of us, disturbing.

In sum, Duterte's career as a politician was not typical for someone who would eventually become the President of the Philippines. It is quite surprising that Duterte, a party-switching irreverent and maverick local politician from a family of local politicians in the peripheral region of Mindanao, at his advanced age, became president.

### III. Domestic Politics Shaping Foreign Relations

Political scientist Julio Teehankee (2016) rushed to explain Rodrigo Duterte's rise to the presidency in 2016 as intimately connected to the "reemergence" of "nationalist sentiment and resentment (towards the West)." However, there is little indication that nationalism was ever insignificant in the history of Philippine electoral politics. It is understandable to confuse a seemingly weak/weakening nationalist fervor with a sober appreciation of the fluctuations in the country's power relations in the context of the international system.

Philippine presidents after independence from the United States beginning with Manuel Roxas in 1946 to Corazon Aquino at the time of the historic senate rejection of the US Military Bases Agreement in 1991, as with leaders of countries all over the world, have been beholden to the might of their American counterpart or overlord, to be more accurate. However, this does not mean that the Philippine presidents during that 50-year period (and beyond) were any less nationalistic than Duterte. It is simply a matter of Manila's capability to weather Washington's punishments for insolence when the Philippine president, for instance, becomes bold enough to curse in the most crude manner the American president, as what Duterte

did to Barack Obama in 2016 (Bernal and Yan 2016).

Ever since the Philippines became independent from the United States in 1946, particularly during the Cold War era, Washington has always kept a tight leash on Manila. The Philippines was a showcase for democracy amidst the rising communist tide after the end of World War II. In 1950, official statistics showed that the Philippines was ranked second to Japan among Asian economies in terms of gross domestic product. Edsel Beja Jr. (2012) clarifies that “when the official statistics first appeared in 1950, the Philippines emerged as second to Japan only because data for the other ‘economies’ in East Asia had yet to be collected.” Beja used the data of economic historian Angus Maddison to show that China had the largest economy in 1950, with Japan in second, Indonesia in third, and the Philippines in fourth.

Nevertheless, the superior status of the Philippine economy was important in the Western propaganda war against the communists during the Cold War: that democratic states under the umbrella of the United States were more prosperous economically and more stable politically. The Americans provided support (read: interference) not just for the Philippine economy, but also to promote domestic political stability in the country.

The United States notoriously interfered in the domestic politics of the Philippines (as with other countries in the world), most glaringly through the Central Intelligence Agency or CIA, as was the case in the rise of Ramon Magsaysay—a former mechanic and nondescript member of Congress—to the presidency in 1953. The Americans were also invested in the economic stability of the Philippines as a bulwark in Southeast Asia in the fight against communism, explaining why they continued to support the dictatorship of Marcos since the time he declared martial law in 1972 until his ouster in 1986. The Americans also played a key role in the ouster of Marcos as well as the survival of the Corazon Aquino administration during a serious coup d’etat attempt (Saguisag 2021).

Philippine presidents have always resented American interference in the country’s political and economic affairs, but they

were circumspect in the importance of the United States in the country's political and economic stability. Duterte is only different in the sense that he acted on that resentment, convinced that the Philippines can survive any punishment the US meted out in exchange for this assertion of independence (Reuters 2016).

Duterte wanted to stop the interference of the United States and other external powers in Philippine domestic concerns during his administration. Duterte's "War on (illegal) Drugs" campaign has been criticized outside of the Philippines—by US President Obama in 2016—because of human rights concerns, but this was the centerpiece of the former Davao City mayor's campaign promise during the 2016 elections (Ranada 2016a) and one of the reasons why he has become a very popular president of the Philippines. According to the survey conducted by pollster *Pulse Asia*, Duterte's fight against criminality (including illegal drugs) has a 74 percent approval rating as of September 2021, although this is down from a high of 88 percent from September 2020 (Gonzales 2021).

Duterte, in fact, went as far as cursing then-US Ambassador to the Philippines Philip Goldberg, calling him "gay," and accusing him of interfering in the 2016 elections—something the Americans had gotten used to doing in the country for decades (Ranada 2016b), as seen in their role in the election of Magsaysay in 1953 among other instances. The president has also subjected the European Union to his typical expletive-laden tirades, again for supposedly interfering in the domestic affairs of the Philippines in connection with the alleged human rights violations in connection with the anti-drug campaign (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2017). Duterte initiated the Philippines' withdrawal from the Rome Statute and the International Criminal Court or ICC after prosecutor Fatou Bensouda initiated moves to investigate human rights violations in connection with the president's war on illegal drugs (Regencia 2018). He subjected then-United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions for investigating killings Agnes Callamard to a similar barrage of tirades after she issued statements critical against the Philippines' anti-illegal drugs war (Lui 2017).

The Philippine National Police has maintained there are no extrajudicial killings in relation to the anti-illegal drugs campaign (Caliwan 2018). Then-Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano claimed in 2017 that international journalists often use “wrong” data when reporting about the Philippine human rights situation.

The Duterte administration views these countries and international organizations that are critical of the war on illegal drugs as interfering on the Philippines’ domestic affairs. For context, Bensouda and Callamard were viewed by the Duterte government as fraternizing with media, civil society, and other groups associated with the political opposition in the Philippines who were suspected of being engaged in an extra-constitutional plot to oust the president (Ang 2019; Castaneda 2019).

This dynamic between the Duterte government and Western countries and international institutions provides the proper context for the president’s radical and unprecedented pivot to China (and Russia, to a lesser extent), for which Duterte has been criticized by the political opposition domestically and by the West internationally. Critics have pointed out that Duterte’s pivot to China has not yet delivered on the economic benefits that were expected to come out of it. According to one source, “most big-ticket projects funded by China have yet to break ground or have not been approved, with only three under construction” (The Straits Times 2021). Additionally, the pivot has been attacked for failing to prevent Chinese encroachment into the Philippine exclusive economic zone and other irritants in the West Philippine Sea (Mangosing 2021a).

China has been steadily ramping up her presence in the West Philippine Sea and it has very little to do with the bilateral relations between Beijing and Manila (Huang 2021). In fact, the dispute in these waters involve multiple states, not just the Philippines and China. It is quite disingenuous to analyze Chinese actions in the West Philippine Sea solely from the perspective of bilateral relations. As regards the delays in the actualization of China-funded projects, there is no proof that it is the fault of Beijing. More importantly, an important factor in Duterte’s pivot to China is to put a halt to the West’s (America’s) unwanted interference in the president’s

domestic agenda, which China has either been supportive of, or has not interfered in (Santos 2017).

To put substance into Duterte's stance against Western interference in Philippine domestic affairs, Manila pivoted to Beijing and Moscow. Duterte famously went to China a few months after his electoral victory in 2016 and in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing with Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli in attendance, he said, "in this venue, your honors, in this venue, I announce my separation from the United States" (Blanchard 2016). Duterte likewise met with Russian leader Vladimir Putin in October 2019 after their initial meeting in 2017 was cut short by a domestic disturbance in the Philippines (South China Morning Post 2019).

Duterte prioritizes domestic affairs over everything else. Consequently, his bold statements—and actions—concerning Philippine foreign relations stem from his desire to realign foreign with domestic affairs no matter the cost.

#### **IV. Duterte-style Vaccine Diplomacy**

The minimum response to the pandemic has always been mass vaccination. During the early months of 2021, it was incredibly difficult to procure vaccines for countries in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world outside a few producing states. Vaccine nationalism held sway as powerful governments maneuvered with pharmaceutical companies to supply their own populations first before making vaccines available to the rest of the world. President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines complained to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021 that "rich countries (are) hoard(ing) life-saving vaccines, while poor nations wait for trickles" (Psaledakis 2021).

From the start, vaccination has been the centerpiece of any chance the Philippines has to go back to normal. In the earlier months of the commencement of the vaccination campaign for the coronavirus, it was quite difficult for countries like the Philippines to secure vaccines because of vaccine nationalism. Sensing in late

2020 that access to vaccine supply would be difficult, Duterte in a televised address announced that he wanted the United States to deliver a minimum of 20 million doses or he would scrap the Visiting Forces Agreement or VFA between the two countries (Buan, 2020). In May 2021, Duterte was quoted by his spokesperson Harry Roque as “pondering” over the fate of the VFA since the country was, at the time, still awaiting the arrival of vaccines from the United States (Parrocha 2021). Finally, by August 2021 Duterte admitted that the arrival of vaccines donated by the US helped sway his decision to recall the termination of the VFA (CNN Philippines 2021).

United States-Philippines relations have been strained during the Duterte administration, with the Philippine president unleashing tirades against Barack Obama and the American ambassador in Manila. Duterte also publicly announced his rebuke of the United States by pivoting towards China. Under such circumstances, Duterte could not bank on goodwill from the historical and traditional ties between the two countries for early access to American COVID-19 vaccine supply. Through his own fault, Duterte needed to leverage the country's assets to secure the Philippines' share of COVID-19 vaccine supply from the United States. The United States was one of a few countries with inside track on developing the COVID-19 vaccine during the height of the pandemic.

Another tack that the Duterte government chose in the context of supply problems for the COVID-19 vaccine was to supposedly offer countries like the UK and Germany the services of Filipino nurses in exchange for vaccine supply. At the height of the pandemic, the Philippines set a limit on health professionals seeking employment overseas at 5,000 to ensure the availability of medical frontliners in the country and to keep the integrity of the lockdown policy during the battle against the pandemic. Both Germany and UK requested a lifting of that cap for nurses destined for the two countries, to provide some relief to their severely exhausted medical frontliner corps during the pandemic.

International Labor Affairs Bureau Director Alice Visperas

divulged in February 2021 that a request was made by Department of Labor and Employment Secretary Silvestre Bello III to the two countries mentioned to exchange a relaxation of the labor exporting policy for vaccine donations (Patinio 2021a). After being roundly criticized for making such a request, Bello clarified that he merely wanted to guarantee the vaccination of nurses headed to these countries, and that no such exchange was suggested. Public backlash forced the Philippines' Labor department to disavow the *quid pro quo* arrangement, but it seems to have pushed through, albeit more discreetly.

For his part, British Ambassador to the Philippines Daniel Pruce denied the existence of such an agreement but divulged that there were indeed plans for the UK to donate vaccines to the country but was a separate matter unrelated to the deployment of Filipino nurses (Mangosing 2021b). Eventually, the UK was able to secure an exemption from the deployment cap on Filipino nurses overseas and a donation of 415,040 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines arrived in Manila in August 2021 (Cudis 2021). By the end of November 2021, it was reported that the UK donated a total of 5.6 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to the Philippines (Rocamora 2021).

As for Germany, it was reported in March 2021 that about 4,000 Filipino nurses were expected to be deployed to that country for the year. More than 1,000 nurses were going to be processed through the government-to-government hiring program between Germany and the Philippines called Triple Win Program. The rest of the nurses, according to Philippine Labor Attache to Germany Delmer Cruz, were to be coursed through private companies (Patinio 2021b). In October 2021, the Philippines received 844,800 AstraZeneca vaccines donated by Germany through the COVAX facility. Reports say this is just the first tranche of more than 1.6 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines that Germany was donating to the Philippines (Patinio 2021c). By the end of 2021, it was reported that Germany's COVID-19 vaccine donations to the Philippines through COVAX went over 10 million doses (de la Cruz 2021). National Task Force Against Covid-19 chief implementer Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. also reported that the European Union (EU) had

donated more or less 60 million doses to the Philippines.

In the end, the UK and Germany were able to get the nurses that they needed from the Philippines and Manila received a robust donation of COVID-19 vaccines from London and Berlin.

Finally, President Duterte has leaned heavily on his historic pivot to China in 2016 as leverage to secure ample vaccine supply from Beijing. As of October 25, 2021, the Philippines' National Task Force Against COVID-19 chief Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. told reporters that of the 97,678,340 total jabs secured by the country almost 45 million doses were produced by China-made Sinovac Biotech Ltd. (Caliwan 2021). During his final State of the Nation Address on July 26, 2021, Duterte thanked his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for helping the Philippines secure COVID-19 vaccines. Duterte said:

And after election, I was a good friend of President Xi, until now... When the pandemic struck, the first country I called for help was China. President Xi, *sabi ko* (I said), 'Mr. President, we have no vaccination program here because we do not have the vaccines. We have not been able to invent one. We might have a hard time.' He said, 'no, it's okay. We'll send you.'... And he send (sic) us—donated about 1,500,000 of vaccines. *Ganoon, kaya nga sabi ko ako, lalo na kaming mga Bisaya, mabigat sa amin iyan, for us Visayans, iyong utang na loob mabigat talaga iyan. Hindi mo mabayaran ng ano pero pag may utang na loob ako sa iyo, you can be sure that I will be your friend, a true friend and die for you*" (It was like that so I said, for us Visayans, that is quite significant, that debt of gratitude is very important. That debt of gratitude cannot be repaid. But if I have a debt of gratitude, you can be sure that I will be your friend, a true friend and die for you. (Official Gazette, n.d.)

Upon witnessing the arrival of one million doses of Sinopharm vaccines donated by the Chinese government in August 2021, Duterte said:

My deepest gratitude goes to China for the various COVID-19 assistance extended in the past, including the donation of vital medical supplies and equipment and the provision of technical support on COVID-19 response. These initiatives are indeed a



testament of the goodwill of the Chinese government and the deep strong relations between the Philippines and China. These additional doses will definitely boost our efforts to ramp up our vaccination rollout and allow us to achieve herd immunity soon (China Daily 2021).

During a recorded message to the nation in August 2021, upon the arrival of one million Sinopharm jabs donated by the Chinese government, President Duterte heaped praises on China saying that at a time when vaccine supply was difficult, Beijing delivered for the country. He added that if he adopted a more belligerent attitude towards China in connection with the West Philippine Sea row, the country would not have access to vaccines during difficult times (Bordey 2021).

By October 23, 2021, Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. reported that the country had been able to secure roughly 97.7 million doses of the vaccine, of which about 62% were procured by the government, about 25% were donations from the COVAX Facility, 8% were purchased by the local government units and the private sector, and about 5% came from “bilateral partners.” Sinovac supplied 44.5 million doses, followed by Pfizer with 25.3 million doses, and AstraZeneca with 11.8 million doses. More than 25 million have been administered with their second doses and 55.5 million in total received at least one jab (Caliwan 2021b).

Afterwards, when the supply of COVID-19 vaccines improved, the share of the Chinese-made vaccines in the overall inventory of the Philippines went down percentage-wise as other sources began to arrive in the country with regularity. Still, in the early days of the national COVID-19 vaccination drive in 2021, when supply was difficult to secure, a large part of that supply came from the Chinese.

## **V. Conclusion**

When access to COVID-19 vaccine was hampered by vaccine nationalism prevalent among supplier countries, poorer countries

like the Philippines resorted to diplomatic tools to wangle supply. President Rodrigo Duterte leveraged his country's assets vis-à-vis the supplier countries to get his hands on vaccine supply. With the United States, Duterte dangled the continuation of the Visiting Forces Agreement between the two countries as leverage. With certain European countries, the Duterte administration leaned on the former's need for Filipino nurses to extract vaccine donations. Finally, Duterte took full advantage of an earlier decision to pivot the Philippines away from the United States and towards China to secure vaccines from Beijing. Almost half of the total vaccines secured by the Philippines came from the Chinese biopharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech Ltd.

A deeper analysis of Duterte's diplomatic strategy reflects the significance of his unexpected rise to power from a long-time mayor of a peripheral city in the southern Philippines to the presidency in 2016. Duterte was carried by a wave of popular support drawing mainly on his reputation as a no-nonsense, if not bloody, crime fighter in two decades at the helm of the city of Davao in the main southern island of Mindanao.

Western criticism for Duterte's bloody anti-illegal drugs campaign forced the Philippine president to dramatically recalibrate the country's foreign relations consistent with domestic affairs, eventually necessitating his peculiar vaccine diplomacy tack during the onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic. In particular, he turned to China instead of the country's traditional Western allies for COVID-19 vaccine supply early in the national vaccination drive when supply was difficult to secure. Critics will point out that Duterte brought that to himself, with his sharp rebuke of the West in retaliation for their comments on the country's anti-illegal drugs campaign.

Still, the point remains the same: Duterte's peculiar background as a marginal politician from the peripheries of Philippine politics and his rise to power influenced the conduct and shake-up of the country's domestic politics and foreign relations. Having adopted an antagonistic stance towards the West—justified in his mind—Duterte could no longer rely on the goodwill of the

country's traditional Western allies for early access to COVID-19 vaccine supply. Hence, the president needed to leverage the country's assets in exchange for badly needed early access to COVID-19 vaccine supply when such was in scarce supply during the earlier parts of 2021. Such was no longer the case later when COVID-19 vaccine production ramped up late in 2021 and supply relatively improved.

In dealing with a problem like access to early access to COVID-19 vaccines, President Rodrigo Duterte's actions are best understood through the lens of his individual circumstances and by how he has endeavored to realign foreign relations with his domestic agenda.

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Received: Feb. 17, 2022; Reviewed: Apr. 29, 2022; Accepted: June 30, 2022

