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## **Philippine President Duterte Goes Native In Beijing: U.S. May Have Lost, But Has China Really Won?**

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte used his trip to China to announce that his hosts had defeated America. But are his fellow Filipinos prepared for their nation to become a Chinese satellite?

Although officials in Beijing may be whispering sweet nothings in his ear today, the People's Republic of China is known to set a high price for its affections. And he might find his sudden switch in allegiance a hard sell back home. The U.S. is twice as popular in the Philippines as the PRC.

Since taking office at the end of June, Duterte has spent much of his time shocking, even scandalizing Filipinos and foreigners alike. He inaugurated a lawless campaign against drug users and dealers, killing more than 3000 so far. He crudely insulted President Barack Obama and other foreigners for criticizing his policy.

Nevertheless, the greatest shock to America came with his attack on the U.S.-Philippine relationship. Despite Washington's acquisition of the archipelago during the Spanish-American War and subsequent bloody suppression of Filipino independence forces, the two countries maintained a close relationship.

Clark Air Base and Subic Bay were closed during the early 1990s, but American military forces soon returned. The previous president, Benigno Aquino, sought to build on the 1951 "mutual" defense treaty, which promised American protection for the Philippines. The two governments negotiated the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) two years ago, which provides America with base access and creates joint training missions. Philippine officials were open about their desire to draw the U.S. closer as protection against China. Manila spends a paltry one percent of the PRC's outlays on the military; the Philippine navy's three finest ships, including the Philippine flagship Gregorio del Pilar, are U.S. castoffs.

In 2012 Beijing took control of Scarborough Shoal and the surrounding waters. Manila discovered that it is difficult to take on a ruthless rising power with a military of minimal capability. The Philippines responded by suing Beijing under the Law of the Sea Treaty and won, but China dismissed the verdict. Alas, Manila, even with America's backing, had no prospect of forcing Beijing to back down.

Duterte first appeared ready to follow his predecessor's more hardline approach, before announcing that he favored a negotiated settlement. Nevertheless, he allowed that he would face

impeachment if he dropped his nation's claim to the territory. Still, he recently announced that he was "reconfiguring" Manila's foreign policy.

Exactly what he intended was unclear, since Philippine officials routinely walked back his pronouncements. For instance, Duterte said he would end bilateral military exercises, one of the main points of EDCA, because of Beijing's opposition. Defense Minister Delfin Lorenzana responded that he heard of Duterte's plan on TV. About the maneuvers, said the defense chief, Duterte was "misinformed," since "the information he is getting is incomplete." Lorenzana contended that the Philippine military benefited from U.S. participation.

Duterte also promised to terminate joint Philippine-U.S. air and naval patrols of waters claimed by the PRC. Lorenzana then explained that the action was merely suspended. Duterte announced he was ordering U.S. Special Forces assisting Philippine units against Islamic insurgents out of Mindanao Island. But Lorenzana said they would stay until Philippine forces were ready to act alone, which could be years, if ever. Presidential spokesman Ernesto Abella said Duterte's statements "are not policy set in stone, not policy yet."

Overall, Brig. Gen. Restituto Padilla, the military's spokesman, insisted after one of Duterte's outbursts: "Philippine-U.S. defense relations remain rock solid." Even long-time confidante and Foreign Minister Perfecto Yasay, who denounced his nation's "shackling dependency" on America and "subservience to U.S. interests," nevertheless told an American audience that the two countries have "a special relationship" and their alliance is "a vital component of the Philippines' independent foreign policy." Indeed, he insisted, Manila would "maintain, respect, and preserve" the alliance and other agreements.

Duterte himself seemed to back away when he said "I am ready to not break ties but we will open alliances with China and [Russia]." He explained he wanted to keep the "mutual" defense pact as well as U.S. forces "there in the China Sea. We don't have armaments." Even some Chinese were skeptical that he would make good on his promises. Li Jinming, a professor at Xiamen University, observed: "We'd be curious to know how long these icy ties can last. It might just be a temporary thing."

However, in the PRC Duterte went full native. In a CCTV interview he proclaimed his Chinese heritage. Then, in addressing a binational audience of business leaders, he said: "in this venue, I announced my separation from the United States." Indeed, he added: "Both in military, not maybe social, but economics also, America has lost." Even more bizarre, he said "I've realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world—China, Philippines, and Russia. It's the only way."

No doubt, both Beijing and Moscow are looking for new friends. But it's not clear Manila, especially governed by a man who makes Donald Trump look stable, is the partner they are seeking. If you wanted to face down America, Europe, India, and most of Asia, would you choose the Philippines to share your international foxhole? In fact, Chinese officials have been quite restrained, mostly talking about pushing "China-Philippines relations back on a friendly footing." Apparently no plan to challenge the world together.

Indeed, the back-pedaling at home began almost immediately. Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez and Economic Planning Secretary Ernesto Pernia said jointly: "We will maintain

relations with the West but we desire stronger integration with our neighbors.” That makes eminent sense—but is not what Duterte said. Not even close.

Although Duterte is a popularly elected leader, he may have trouble forcing even his own appointees to go along with his new direction. After all, U.S. relations have been a good deal, too good, really. Personal and cultural relations run deep, despite the terrible beginning based on American military repression. Over the years Washington has provided nearly ten times the development assistance as China. Last year Filipinos sent about \$8 billion back home from America in remittances, ten times the amount from China, Hong Kong, and Macao combined.

Then there’s the superpower security guarantee with essentially no obligations in return. It’s as close to a free-ride as one can find. Former President Fidel Ramos, who backed Duterte’s election, cited the risk of “throwing away decades of military partnership.” Richard Javad Heydarian of De La Salle University argued that Duterte risked “a dangerous backlash among the Philippine security establishment, which is deeply entwined with and reliant on American financing, logistical support, weaponries, training and intelligence.”

Nor has Duterte swayed the Philippine public. A poll earlier this week found that most Filipinos view America favorably. In an earlier Pew Research Center survey the U.S. had the highest rating of any country covered; the latter’s 92 percent favorable score was more than twice that of the PRC, at 38 percent. These numbers explain the undiplomatic threat from U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel: “I think it would be a serious mistake in a democratic country like the Philippines to underestimate the power of the public’s affinity for the U.S.” The Philippine public might not want to become the third member of a Sino-Russian axis.

It is possible that Duterte’s outbursts are cynical, a ploy seeking negotiating leverage with the U.S., which tosses far more money at such nations as Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey. He also may be hoping for stronger security guarantees covering Scarborough Reef and other contested areas.

Whatever the case, Washington’s best response is to shrug its collective shoulders and say, “whatever.” Duterte’s flirtation may not end well. Beijing is anything but selfless when giving assistance, constructing infrastructure, and investing in business. A number of countries, including Burma and Zambia, have found Beijing’s embrace to be unpleasantly tight, as countries sacrificed control for cash. In Zambia popular dissatisfaction with Chinese arrogance became an election issue. It isn’t likely to take long for the PRC to press Duterte to sacrifice Philippine territorial claims.

Another reason for the U.S. to remain aloof is the fact that the Philippines is a democracy entitled to choose its own leaders and policies. If Duterte’s reign ends ignominiously, it should be obvious to all that it was his fault, not the result of American machinations. Instead, Washington should prepare to substitute more general cooperation for EDCA and the misnamed “mutual” defense treaty. That means ending aid, weapons transfers, and anti-Chinese military operations even if he changes his mind—again.

America doesn’t need the Philippines. The U.S. faces no major, existential military threat, and Manila couldn’t help combat such a danger if it existed. Indeed, a quarter century ago Washington lost its air and naval facilities in the Philippines and nothing untoward happened. America continued to dominate the region. The

Washington wants bases in the archipelago to help contain China by constructing a Pacific cordon sanitaire. However, that objective is not worth a willingness to go to war with a nuclear power in its own backyard. Those who should be constraining the PRC and protecting their own interests, including in contested territory such as Scarborough Shoal, are the interested parties, not distant America. The U.S. really doesn't have to litter every country on earth with bases. Washington should take a broader defensive role, protecting against a hegemonic power attempting to control Eurasia rather than contesting who controls which piece of worthless rocks in surrounding waters.

Winston Churchill warned that democracy was the worst system except all others, and Duterte's political ascendency proves the point. Nevertheless, Washington doesn't need to "win" in the Philippines. Better that the American people win by dropping an expensive and risky commitment to go to war on behalf of a nation largely irrelevant to U.S. security.

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