

## Would The End Of The US-Philippines Alliance Actually Matter?

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The Philippines' firebrand president has many times expressed a desire to break away from the U.S., throwing a wrench into the U.S. pivot to Asia.

The Philippines is America's oldest ally in the volatile Asia-Pacific region, and the two countries have extensive economic, military, and interpersonal ties. But ever since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in June, relations between the U.S. and the Philippines have soured.

"I will be reconfiguring my foreign policy. Eventually, in my time, I will break up with America. I would rather go with Russia or China," Duterte announced earlier this month. "I announce my separation from the United States...America has lost," he said in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Thursday.

After returning to the Philippines, Duterte clarified his comments, stating that he meant a separation of foreign policy rather than a separation of ties.

"It is not (a) severance of ties. You say severance of ties, you cut the diplomatic relations. I cannot do that...Why? Because the people of my country are not ready to accept. I said separation — what I was saying was separation of foreign policy," Duterte said Saturday at a press conference in Davao.

Duterte's comments indicate that while he may favor ending the Philippines' alliance with the U.S., he has been unable to convince his people, who trust the U.S. far more than they trust China. His recent statements, as well as his past rhetoric, suggest that he may still try to cut ties further down the road.

The question is: If he were to sever ties, would it matter?

"Duterte's announcement that he intends to 'separate' from the United States is troubling," Michael Mazza, a foreign and defense policy studies research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

"A loss of the Philippines would be particularly damaging at a time when China is acting with increasing assertiveness and rapidly modernizing its military," he added.

"Duterte's flip-flop — assuming it leads to a lasting strategic shift — is a potential disaster," Max Boot, a senior fellow for national security studies at the Council on Foreign

Relations, explained in a Foreign Policy article Thursday. “Aligned with the United States and its regional allies, the Philippines can provide a vital platform to oppose Chinese aggression in the South China and East China seas.”

Losing the Philippines “would complicate both America’s forward defense strategy, which it has employed since the end of World War II to protect the homeland, and American efforts to uphold peace and defend freedom of navigation in the South China Sea,” Mazza said.

If the Philippines aligns itself with China, Washington may struggle to hold onto the “first island chain,” which China has been working to break through for a while. “Defending that line of island barriers has been a linchpin of U.S. strategy since the Cold War,” Boot explained. China could neutralize the alliance, or worse, use the Philippines to project Chinese military power into the region, making it a greater threat to American allies and partners, such as Taiwan, Japan, and Australia.

Without the Philippines, the U.S. Navy may face difficulties securing valuable trade passages in the South China Sea.

The breakdown of the U.S.-Philippine alliance, particularly the Enhanced Defense and Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), could also pose a threat to the continental U.S.

China’s nuclear-armed submarines operate out of Hainan. “For these submarines’ missiles to pose a first or second strike threat to the continental United States, they must transit the South China Sea and enter the Western Pacific,” Malcolm Cook, senior fellow at the Iseas-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, argued. “Their most suitable route would be through the Luzon Strait between the Philippines and Taiwan.”

The EDCA, which gives U.S. forces access to military bases in the Philippines, allows the U.S. to better address this national security challenge. The loss of the Philippines would potentially limit U.S. defense options.

Not everyone agrees, though, that the Philippines are an essential American ally.

Duterte has shown the U.S. incredible disrespect. He called President Barack Obama a “son of a whore” and instructed him to “go to hell.”

“United States credibility suffers when a nation long subsidized and defended by America shows such ostentatious disrespect,” asserts Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Cato Institute. “Duterte is not a reliable ally,” he added.

“Moreover, the Philippines needs America far more than America needs the Philippines,” Bandow explains. The Philippines reportedly spends less than 1 percent of its GDP on its military. “It doesn’t help defend the U.S. from anyone,” Bandow notes. “Manila expects Washington’s protection even though the archipelago matters little to the United States. America retains the Pacific as a barrier and faces no threats to its homeland.”

Fortunately, America may not have to make a decision on the Philippines.

“Institutional ties between the two countries’ foreign affairs, defense, and military establishments are deep-seated. Those ties, along with the Philippine public’s overwhelmingly positive views of

the United States, should constrain Duterte's ability to fundamentally change the nature of bilateral relations," Mazza told TheDCNF.

"Duterte cannot afford to sever ties with Washington without risking a dangerous backlash among the Philippine security establishment, which is deeply entwined and reliant on American financing, logistical support, weaponries, training and intelligence," writes Richard Javad Heydarian, a Philippine-based expert. "Duterte would also alienate the world's most pro-American nation, which is deeply grateful for American support throughout various humanitarian crises."

It is these very factors that have forced Duterte to make an about-face on his calls for a "separation from America."

"It is apparent that Duterte has personal animus towards the United States, and moves to pressure or cajole him could easily backfire," explained Mazza. "Duterte may learn sooner rather than later that tying the Philippines more closely to China is not actually conducive to adopting a more independent foreign policy, as he wishes to do. Similar efforts from past Philippine presidents have not ended well. Over time, the United States will prove to be a more dependable partner."