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U.S. Should Give Balangiga Bells Back To Philippines, Then Leave Rodrigo Duterte To China

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Most foreigners see Donald Trump as unbalanced, vulgar, and dangerous. But Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte makes President Trump look decent, stable, and even statesmanlike.

Elected last May, President Duterte governs a half-failed state. His signature domestic policy is the extra-judicial murder of drug users and dealers. His government faces a bitter Islamic insurgency in the country's south. In a region dominated by economic "tigers" the Philippines barely muddles along, leaving its energetic and entrepreneurial population well behind neighboring peoples.

After taking office Duterte wasted no time in denouncing President Barack Obama, the United States, and the U.S.-Philippine alliance. For a time Duterte even appeared to join Team China, proclaiming that he was in Beijing's "ideological flow." Although his enthusiasm for the Sino embrace appeared to fade when Beijing failed to ease its territorial claims, in his State of the Nation address on Monday President Duterte ostentatiously again flaunted his anti-Americanism.

He demanded the return of three bronze church bells taken in 1901 by U.S. troops battling the Filipino resistance against Washington after the latter seized the archipelago from Spain. Explained Duterte: "Those bells are reminders of the gallantry and heroism of our forebears ... who resisted the American colonization and sacrificed their lives in the process. Give us back those Balangiga bells. They are ours. They belong to the Philippines. They are part of our national heritage."

In fact, the Filipino people have good claim to the bells. But demanding them in a high profile speech after ostentatiously trashing America guarantees rejection. Indeed, the only reason Donald Trump didn't respond in kind is because he took no notice of Duterte's speech. The latter was a political act, not a genuine request to redress history.

he relationship between America and the Philippines has been complicated from the start. Washington launched the Spanish-American War in 1898 in the name of freeing Cubans from Spanish colonial oppression. Madrid also conveniently controlled the Philippines, which offered America an advanced naval station on the way to what were imagined to be illimitable Asian markets.

Although Filipinos already were fighting for independence, Washington insisted that defeated Spain surrender the islands and then undefeated Filipinos accept a new colonial master. Many refused. The American military fought an increasingly dirty war against the insurgents. Some three years and 200,000 dead Filipinos later, Washington had established its control over most of what now was America's first "Salt Water" or overseas colony. Some resistance, especially among the Muslim minority, continued for years.

One of the noted battles occurred in Balangiga, where guerrillas infiltrated the town and assaulted a U.S. Army base, killing 48 Americans. The ringing of church bells signaled the start of the attack. Retaliation was brutal, the kind of conduct Americans most often associate with Nazi Germany. Brig. Gen. Jacob W. Smith ordered the killing of anyone who could fight, meaning ten years old and up. Explained the commander: "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me." He further instructed his men to make the region "a howling wilderness." Estimates of the number murdered start at around 2000, though no one really knows. Smith was forced into retirement, but not otherwise punished.

Amid the slaughter the U.S. Army took the bells as war booty. One is housed in a military museum at Camp Red Cloud in South Korea; the other two are displayed at Wyoming's Francis E. Warren Air Force Base. President Duterte complained: "they hijacked it, stole it and never returned it to us." The bells represent oppression, not liberty; brutality, not bravery. Given their history, the bells should generate shame and embarrassment in any American who views them. They should go back to the Philippines.

But Washington never has reacted well to demands to reexamine America's past dubious conduct. President Bill Clinton rejected the request from far more respectable Philippine President Fidel Ramos for the bells' return. Wyoming politicians also have steadfastly defended their state's plundered bells. Three years ago Filipinos started an online petition requesting the bells back, but received no response.

While criticism of America's war-time conduct is warranted, the abuses occurred almost 120 years ago. President Duterte's anti-American feelings date to his childhood (his grandmother reportedly described U.S. war crimes) and apparently were reinforced while he served as mayor of Davao City, when he was denied a visa to visit America because of his use even then of extrajudicial killings to fight crime. Today Duterte is sensitive to foreign, and especially U.S., scrutiny of his murderous misbehavior at a national level.

For instance, last week Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) led a hearing on Manila's drug war, which has killed more than 7000 people over the past year. He said he would protest if the Philippine president accepted President Donald Trump's invitation to visit America. In return, said Duterte, "You're investigating me and the internal affairs of my country? I'm investigating you, and I will investigate you, and I will expose it to the world what you did to the Filipinos, especially to the Moro Filipinos."

As for visiting the U.S., Duterte said he wasn't interested, proclaiming: "There will never be a time that I will go to America during my term, or even thereafter. So what makes this guy think I'll go to America? I've seen America, and it's lousy."

Washington loosened its controls over the archipelago before World War II and the two peoples fought together in that conflict. Independence followed the war and the U.S. agreed to the 1951 “mutual” defense treaty. American forces finally left Clark Air Base and Subic Bay naval station in 1991 and 1992, respectively. Eventually U.S. forces trickled back to the Philippines, helping train the Filipino armed forces, combat the terrorist/gangster band Abu Sayyaf, and battle other Islamic insurgents, like today in the city of Marawi on the island of Mindanao. Recent Philippine presidents also sought to expand Washington-Manila ties in order to enlist America against the People’s Republic of China, which seized control of Scarborough Shoal, part of the Spratly chain claimed by the Philippines.

However, after taking office last year the 71-year-old former mayor challenged the cozy relationship between the American and Philippine militaries. At one point he talked of voiding the 2014 agreement giving Washington access to Philippine bases and even sounded like he wanted to end the alliance. Then Duterte said he desired to keep the 1951 defense treaty while “realigning” the country and expanding its military ties to other countries.

In April he called the U.S. “the Philippines’ only defense treaty ally.” Contrary to his earlier rhetoric, Duterte did not end military cooperation with the U.S., though he suspended joint patrols in the South China Sea. The two armed forces held their annual exercises in May, but on a reduced scale and without attention to maritime defense. A Philippine military spokesman emphasized: “Just to make clear, this is not a war game.”

At the same time, Duterte made a dramatic outreach to China. After taking office he said he would “set aside” the territorial ruling in Manila’s favor by a tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. He followed up with a visit to Beijing. While there he announced his “separation from the United States.” He added: “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.” Despite his seeming readiness to salute their flag the Chinese appeared wary of adopting the mercurial leader as their client. Beijing promised \$24 billion in aid and investment, but did not offer to compromise its territorial claims. Duterte also indicated his desire to participate in China’s “One Belt, One Road” economic initiative.

In April he appeared to toughen his stand toward the PRC, ordering the Philippine military to occupy contested territories of the Spratly Islands and “put in structures.” He explained: “We tried to be friends with everybody but we have to maintain our jurisdiction now.” Indeed, he added, “It looks like there’s a race to grab islands. What is ours now, we should get and make a strong point that it is ours.” But after Beijing objected, or gently admonished him, as he put it, he promised not to deploy any weapons to the islands (“Because of our friendship with China,” he explained). At the April ASEAN summit he said it was impossible to pressure the PRC on territorial issues: “talking—that’s the only luxury we have.”

In May he welcomed a Chinese naval visit to Davao, where he had long served as mayor. He also said he was interested in undertaking joint military exercises with China. Acting Foreign Minister Enrique Manalo explained: “We are actively looking at developing greater contacts, such as defense cooperation, with China. Our defense officials are meeting regularly.”

Duterte's chief problem is that he governs a nation without a military, a least one directed against foreign threats and capable of serious action. The army is the most important service and is focused on internal security, such as combatting insurgencies, as in Mindanao.

The other services' reputations have been of a navy that couldn't sail and an air force that couldn't fly. Reported the Pentagon: "Although Manila recognizes the growing importance of external threats and has acquired a coast guard cutter, the country still lacks adequate air defense, maritime patrol, and reconnaissance capabilities." The website GlobalFirePower.com's latest global ranking places the Philippines at 50. China ranks number three, and the gap between the two is vast.

Some observers suggested that Duterte's erratic behavior is an attempt to squeeze a stronger defense commitment and/or more cash out of a frazzled Washington. However, rather like Donald Trump, Duterte seems to lack the nuance, dedication, organization, calculation, and self-control necessary to implement such a plan. He says whatever he feels or thinks. He simply isn't capable of sustaining a false front for long. And if he was, that would merely be another reason for Washington to put distance between the two nations. Equally important Duterte apparently fears a military establishment which not only remains committed to the status quo but has removed previous elected presidents.

Analyst Gordon Chang blamed the U.S. for failing to spring to Manila's defense, promising to protect Philippines' territorial claims like America's own. Apparently so does Duterte, or perhaps one of his multiple personalities. Earlier this year the Philippine president reported that he had asked the U.S. ambassador "Why did you not send the armada of the 7thFleet" to stop China from building artificial islands? The obvious reason is because Washington has a meaningful interest in its one-time colony's independence, not its control of a barren, useless piece of rock. One which the Philippines has demonstrated little interest in doing much to defend. A country with a U.S. Coast Guard cast-off its flagship isn't serious about protecting its island possessions.

Duterte's former foreign minister, Perfecto Yasay, Jr., similarly complained that "America has failed us" because it "could not give us the assurance that in taking a hard line towards the enforcement of our sovereignty rights under international law, it will promptly come to our defense under our existing military treaty and agreements." Another Duterte adviser, Jesus Dureza, said "The idea is that our allies are not going to go to war for us, so why should we align with them?"

But Manila, not Washington, is the supplicant. The question is, why should the U.S. go to war for the Philippines? America's security does not depend on Manila. Washington has a substantial interest in freedom of navigation and rightly prefers peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. However, the PRC has a far greater interest in what is its neighborhood and will devote more resources and take more risks to assert itself. Washington certainly does not want to turn over the decision for war with a nuclear-armed power to an unimportant client state governed by an irresponsible and unpredictable leader who has disliked America for most of his life.

Ultimately, if the U.S. wants to avoid conflict with China, Washington must accommodate the latter's insistence that it play a larger regional role, one commensurate with its growing wealth and military power. The U.S. should reduce, not expand, the number of war contingencies for which it must plan. That is best achieved by dropping client states and encouraging them to avoid conflict.

Which means Manila should look elsewhere for support against the PRC. Both Japan and India have significant potential conflicts with the PRC and benefit from constraining if not containing Chinese territorial claims and naval activity. Nearby Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam share a similar perspective. They all should take over responsibility for advancing their interests.

Give Rodrigo Duterte his due. He pointed to a continuing injustice dating back more than a century. Washington should return the stolen Balangiga bells, ending America's continuing shame. More important, Uncle Sam should forswear the sort of thoughtless, promiscuous military intervention that continues to characterize U.S. foreign policy today.

Moreover, Americans should thank President Duterte for challenging a status quo which benefits his nation far more than the U.S. His lawless drug war caused the Obama administration to suspend development assistance. Washington also should back away militarily, ending its defense commitment and shifting to less formal military cooperation designed more to benefit America than Manila. In the meantime, the Philippines should focus on fixing its internal problems. Only then will it be able to stand up against China and any other threatening power.

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