



Why Washington should seek a security divorce from Manila

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Until very recently, the Philippines appeared to be among the closest US allies in East Asia. Both former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama had gone out of their way in public statements to emphasize the importance of the bilateral defense alliance, and in what was a thinly veiled warning to China, stress Washington's solidarity with Manila. The United States quietly backed the case that the Philippines had filed before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague regarding its competing territorial claims with China in the South China Sea. Indeed, Chinese officials suspected that Washington not only supported Manila's position challenging Beijing's expansive claims but was the instigator of the court case.

There had also been an impressive rapprochement between the US and Philippine militaries. After an absence of nearly two decades following the expiration of its lease on the Subic Bay naval base in the early 1990s, US forces began to return to the Philippines. And the government of President Benigno Aquino III was pleased to have a renewed US presence, both because of Islamic militant activity in the nation's south and the looming Chinese menace over the horizon.

The relationship between Washington and Manila still seemed on track even when firebrand populist Rodrigo Duterte succeeded Aquino in June 2016. Indeed, just weeks into Duterte's administration, both US and Philippine officials were pleased when the Permanent Court of Arbitration issued a ruling that rejected almost all of Beijing's arguments and accepted nearly all of Manila's.

But the relationship between the United States and the Philippines has deteriorated with amazing speed and to an equally amazing extent. Duterte has proven to be more than an angry, unpredictable populist. He has made outrageous comments and engaged in even more outrageous actions. The two countries have gone from being close allies to being poised at the brink of a bitter divorce.

Among the early lowlights of his presidency was Duterte's labeling President Obama a "son of a bitch," which cost him a summit meeting with the leader of his country's patron and protector. People in the United States tended to focus on the crudity of the comment rather than the context, but the context was important. Duterte emphasized that he was answerable only to the Philippine people, and that Manila's foreign policy would not necessarily follow Washington's wishes.

Although US policymakers initially thought that statement might be primarily for domestic consumption, they quickly discovered that they were dealing with a leader stubbornly inclined to pursue his own agenda.

Duterte soon went on to indicate that he wished to conclude alliances with both Russia and China, adding that there would be no further military exercises with US forces because China objects to such exercises. A few weeks later, he was in Beijing, concluding an agreement with China (in exchange for a \$24 billion aid package), and stating that it was China, Russia and the Philippines against the world.

If those actions were not enough to cause US officials concern, Duterte also favorably compared himself to Adolf Hitler, affirming that he was gladly slaughtering thousands of alleged drug dealers and drug users – all without the inconvenient obstacles of due process – and would like to kill millions, just as his German hero killed millions of Jews. Although he subsequently apologized for that statement, the evidence is compelling that Washington is again allied with a regime that uses death squad tactics – much as the US sometimes was during the Cold War.

The reaction of the American foreign policy establishment to Duterte’s behavior has ranged from embarrassment to alarm. The State Department professed that it was “disturbed” by some of his actions, especially his praise of Hitler. Yet Washington has shown little inclination to sever ties with its increasingly odious client. Indeed, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter affirmed that Washington’s alliance with the Philippines is nothing less than “ironclad”.

The one point that practitioners of the conventional wisdom seem to agree on is that the alliance is vital to the United States. Max Boot, a senior fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations, is only a little more shrill than his colleagues when he states that Duterte’s tilt toward China is “a disaster” for the United States. Julia Fumulario, a scholar with the Project 2049 Institute, likewise asserts that Manila is one of the essential partners Washington needs to stop China in the South China Sea.

Given the alleged importance of the alliance, the policy implication is that Washington must put up with Duterte, attempt to curb his worst excesses, and hope for better relations with his successor. But such a belief greatly overestimates the importance of the Philippines to the United States. Manila is not a crucial strategic ally; it is a minor security client. Even if one accepts the dubious view that it is wise strategy for the United States to try to preserve its position of primacy (dominance) in East Asia instead of embracing a more restrained role, the Philippines are not essential to that strategy.

The world has changed a great deal since the 1890s when Washington acquired the islands as a key coaling station and forward staging area for its naval forces. Naval vessels have far greater range today than they did then. Indeed, naval (and air) forces have considerably greater range than they did just 50 years ago. Even if Washington seeks to sustain strategic primacy, it has other options, including bases in Okinawa and Guam – the latter even being a US territory.

Moreover, legitimate US interests in the South China Sea are both limited and specific. They are confined to sustaining the right of freedom of navigation, which is important, especially given the multi-billion-dollar volume of commercial shipping that passes through the area each year.

But it is not in America's interest at all to become entangled in the complicated, multisided territorial disputes between China and several neighbors. Put bluntly, as long as China does not interfere with navigation in the South China Sea, we should not have a quarrel with Beijing.

Unfortunately, the alliance with the Philippines has entangled the United States in those underlying territorial disputes. Perhaps the American people should thank Rodrigo Duterte. His odious and duplicitous behavior has given Washington a justification to terminate the alliance and extricate America from that beckoning quagmire. US leaders should seize that opportunity and implement a strategic divorce as soon as possible.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.