

What Duterte Demonstrates About US Security Commitments Abroad

Ted Galen Carpenter

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By every measure, both economic and military, the United States is the most powerful nation on the planet. And most of the time it acts that way, sometimes to the benefit of humanity and sometimes not.

But there are occasions involving Washington's mushrooming network of global security dependents when the United States plays the role of supplicant superpower. At those times, U.S. leaders act as though allies, even small, utterly dependent allies, are doing America a favor by maintaining a close relationship.

That point has become apparent most recently in Washington's reaction to the behavior of Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte. In rapid succession during September and early October, Duterte allegedly called President Barack Obama a "son of a bitch," stressing that he had no intention of following Washington's foreign policy lead, indicated that he was open to alliances with Russia and China, proclaimed his admiration for Adolf Hitler, and emphasized that he was prepared to purchase weapons from Russia or China rather than the United States.

What was Washington's response to all of this? The White House did cancel a meeting between Obama and Duterte following the s.o.b. epithet, but that has been about the extent of the substantive displays of displeasure.

The Obama administration carried out the bilateral joint military exercises as scheduled, even as Duterte flirted with military purchases from U.S. geostrategic rivals. Following his embrace of Hitler, U.S. officials professed to be "troubled," and even "deeply troubled," but they took no further action, not even recalling the U.S. ambassador.

Indeed, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter went out of his way to stress that Washington's alliance with the Philippines was "ironclad." Duterte was the one who actually escalated the confrontation, ordering an end to joint U.S.-Philippine naval operations in the South China Sea and indicating that he might terminate the alliance.

It would be bad enough if Washington's squishy behavior toward Manila was an aberration, but it is not. A succession of administrations since the early 1950s have admonished the NATO allies that the United States was upset with their lack of burden sharing regarding the common defense effort. However, virtually all of those expressions of dissatisfaction were accompanied by statements that U.S. leaders regarded Europe's security and well-being as essential to America's own.

Needless to say, such comments vitiated any implied or even explicit warnings that the United States might scale back its defense commitment to NATO if the allies did not make more substantial contributions. The European powers have concluded correctly that they could continue underinvesting in defense, diverting financial resources to bloated welfare states, and free ride on America's security exertions.

Washington just does a poor job of bargaining with allies. However much the United States might need Europe, democratic Europe has always needed the United States a lot more. America could have survived even a worst case scenario (a Europe dominated by the Soviet Union). By definition, democratic Europe would not have survived such an outcome.

Yet in its dealings with the NATO allies, U.S. officials acted as though America needed a friendly Europe more than Europe needed U.S. protection. A similar dynamic is taking place as professed fears about Russia's intentions under Vladimir Putin are voiced throughout NATO's Central and Eastern European members. Despite the agitation, their principal response has been to press Washington to station troops and weapon systems in the most vulnerable alliance members.

On the other hand, even getting those same countries to fulfill the commitment they made following the 2006 NATO summit to devote at least two percent of their annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense has been an uphill struggle.

A solid argument can be made that the United States has far too many security commitments in far too many regions around the world and that an aggressive pruning is in order. But at a minimum, Washington should recognize the value of the protection that it provides to security dependents in East Asia, Europe, and other regions.

There is little reason why the U.S. government should accept cynical free-riding behavior on the part of so-called allies. There is even less reason to tolerate insulting and duplicitous behavior. Yet we are currently experiencing the former from the NATO members and the latter from the Philippines. One does not have to be a Donald Trump supporter to conclude that he is correct when he argues that some new, more equitable, bargains are long overdue.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of 10 books and more than 600 articles on international affairs.