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The US can't afford a Duterte II in the Philippines

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The landslide victory of Ferdinand (“Bongbong”) Marcos, Jr. in the Philippines’ presidential election raises new questions about the health and direction of Washington’s alliance with Manila.

In some respects, the expiration of Rodrigo Duterte’s term in office may come as a relief to U.S. policymakers. Duterte was a frustrating, difficult, and at times embarrassing ally for the United States — especially given his regime’s notorious abuses of civil liberties.

However, there is no guarantee that Marcos will be a significant improvement. He shows signs of wanting to continue Duterte’s geopolitical flirtation with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Moreover, since Marcos was a Duterte political ally, and Duterte’s daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio, was his vice presidential running mate, indications are that there is likely to be more continuity than benign change in both domestic and foreign policies under the new administration. And that prospect is worrisome, both for human rights advocates and U.S. foreign policy officials.

Under Rodrigo Duterte’s rule, death squads (with the government’s blessing and assistance) ran amok. Estimates generally range from 6,000 to 30,000 victims. According to Duterte and his allies, the individuals who were executed without trial were odious drug traffickers, so the lack of due process really shouldn’t matter. Even if one accepted that self-serving, thoroughly amoral rationale, there is strong evidence that the regime used the “drug trafficker” label as a cover to eliminate political critics.

Indeed, even when serving as the mayor of Davao City, Duterte was condemned by Human Rights Watch and other organizations for tolerating and working with police-affiliated death squads. That practice continued, intensified, and spread country-wide when he became president. In its 2021 report, Human Rights Watch concluded that the level of such violence had reached unprecedented levels.

Washington's response to the record of mounting human rights violations seemed cautious bordering on ambivalent. A State Department report released in March 2017 was modestly critical of Manila's performance. "The most significant human rights problems were killings allegedly undertaken by vigilantes, security forces, and insurgents; cases of apparent governmental disregard for human rights and due process."

However, even that document stopped short of an unequivocal condemnation of the government's behavior. The State Department's 2021 report was just modestly sharper in its criticism.

Members of Congress pressed the Biden administration to take a strong stand against Duterte's abuses. In a July 21, 2021, letter to the president, 11 Senate Democrats asked Biden to forthrightly condemn the human rights violations of Washington's treaty ally. "Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has waged a multi-year extrajudicial, violent, and inhumane 'war on drugs' that has devastated communities, and has been used as justification to target the independent press, political opponents, human rights advocates, and compromise judicial due process."

The senators expressed deep concern about continuing U.S. security assistance to Manila, given such conduct. "How has the administration weighed the Duterte government's pervasive human rights abuses when evaluating sales of weapons and military aircraft to the Philippine military? What steps has the administration taken to utilize these sales as leverage to encourage the Philippines to improve its human rights record?"

However, revitalizing and enhancing Washington's security relationship with Manila has been the top U.S. priority during both the Trump and Biden administrations. Human rights concerns have taken a back seat — and that pattern is likely to continue. Notably, the United States strongly backed Manila's territorial claims when a dispute broke out in March 2021 over the growing presence of PRC "fishing vessels" near the disputed Whitson Reef. The Biden administration promptly injected itself into the dispute.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphatically took Manila's side in a statement on Twitter. "The United States stands with our ally, the Philippines, in the face of the PRC's maritime militia amassing at Whitson Reef," he stated, emphasizing that. "We will always stand by our allies and stand up for the rules-based international order."

Antiwar.com analyst Dave DeCamp noted that in an earlier telephone call with Philippines' Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr., Blinken emphasized Washington's solidarity with its longtime treaty ally, including on South China Sea territorial disputes.

Complaints from U.S. officials focused far more on discouraging Duterte's periodic geopolitical flirtations with Beijing (despite the Whitson Reef incident) than on his horrid human rights record. Early in his administration, Duterte announced his country's "separation" from the United States and "realignment" with China. Both militarily and economically, he proclaimed, America had lost its contest for influence in the region.

However, there was always an “on again, off again” quality to his ties to the PRC, just as there was regarding his relationship with the United States. For their part, U.S. leaders sought to conciliate Duterte and work with more conventional and cooperative members of his government, rather than seek a direct confrontation over his apparent disloyalty to the bilateral alliance.

In the summer of 2019, during one of Duterte’s pro-China initiatives, senior Philippines officials stressed to their U.S. counterparts that, despite their president’s rhetoric, Manila was not drifting into the PRC’s military orbit. The Trump administration responded with a vote of confidence in the durability of the bilateral alliance, stating that “A strong U.S.-Philippines alliance deters aggression and promotes regional stability, and we welcome enhanced defense cooperation with the Philippines.”

Given the somewhat volatile relationship with Manila during the Duterte era, as well as uncertainty about the new president’s domestic and foreign policy priorities, the future of the alliance is unpredictable. A temptation to assume that the younger Marcos’s tenure will replicate his father’s corrupt, brutal dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s needs to be avoided. The son can’t — and shouldn’t — be held accountable for the sins of the father.

His appointment of respected economists and technocrats to key positions in his administration offers encouragement regarding the corruption and economic mismanagement issues that plagued the elder Marcos’s rule. He also stated that he wanted to pursue a more nuanced drug policy, with a greater emphasis on treatment rather than heavy-handed law enforcement.

However, his campaign platform was exceedingly vague on nearly every important issue — from economic policy, to the drug war, to respect for democratic norms. That is cause for concern.

The Biden administration may have even greater reason to be concerned about the new president’s attitude toward the PRC. During the campaign, some knowledgeable observers of East Asian politics concluded that Marcos was outwardly pro-China, and clearly favored the PRC over the United States. That thesis gained additional credibility with Marcos’s comments in May emphasizing that relations between Manila and Beijing needed to expand and “shift to a higher gear.” That statement is not likely to reassure nervous officials in Washington.

One can hope that the Philippines now will be both a more democratic and a more reliable U.S. ally than it was under Duterte. However, it is far too soon to reach that conclusion. U.S. officials need to pay very close attention to developments.

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