

## **Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte is no ally of America**

Doug Bandow

August 2, 2017

Most foreigners see Donald Trump as unbalanced, vulgar, and dangerous. But Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte makes President Trump look like a statesman.

Elected last May, 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."

His enthusiasm for the Sino embrace appeared to fade when Beijing failed to ease its territorial claims. However, in his recent State of the Nation address President Duterte again ostentatiously flaunted his anti-Americanism.

He demanded the return of three bronze church bells taken in 1901 by U.S. troops. 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."

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.

The relationship between America and the Philippines has been complicated from the start. Although Filipinos already were fighting for independence, Washington insisted that they accept a new colonial master at the end of the Spanish-American War.

Many refused. The American military fought an increasingly dirty war against the insurgents. Some 200,000 Filipinos died.

In Balangiga guerrillas infiltrated the town and assaulted a U.S. Army base. Retaliation was brutal. Ordered Brig. Gen. Jacob W. Smith: "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me." Amid the slaughter the U.S. Army took the bells as war booty.

While criticism of America's war-time conduct is warranted, the abuses occurred almost 120 years ago. President Duterte is most sensitive to Western scrutiny of his murderous misbehavior

today.

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.

U.S. forces finally left the Philippines in 1992. Eventually U.S. forces trickled back to the Philippines, helping train the Filipino armed forces and combat Islamic insurgents. Recent Philippine presidents also sought 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 the same time, Duterte made a dramatic outreach to China. Since then his ardor seems to have faded, though he still hates America.

Duterte's chief problem is that he governs a nation without a serious military. 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."

Some observers believe Duterte's erratic behavior is an attempt to squeeze a stronger defense commitment and/or more cash out of a frazzled Washington. However, he simply isn't capable of sustaining a false front for long.

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. However, Washington has a meaningful interest in its one-time colony's independence, not its control of a barren, useless piece of rock.

Moreover, America's security does not depend on Manila. Washington certainly does not want to turn over the decision for war with a nuclear-armed power like China to an unimportant client state governed by an irresponsible and unpredictable leader who has disliked America for most of his life. Ultimately, to avoid war Washington must accommodate Beijing's insistence that it play a larger regional role, one commensurate with its growing wealth and military power.

Manila should look elsewhere for support against China. Both Japan and India have significant potential conflicts with Beijing and benefit from constraining if not containing Chinese territorial claims and naval activity.

Nearby South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam share a similar perspective. They also should take over responsibility for advancing their interests.

Americans should thank President Duterte for challenging a status quo which benefits his nation far more than the U.S. Washington 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.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.*