

Obama cancels meeting with Philippine President Duterte

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The White House announced on Monday that President Obama was calling off his scheduled meeting with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte following an angry press conference tirade by Duterte against the US president. The two leaders were slated to meet on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in the Laotian capital of Vientiane.

While Obama ostensibly canceled the meeting due to a dispute over Duterte's anti-drug crusade, the real source of the tensions is Washington's increasing displeasure over Duterte's failure to play his assigned role in the US pivot to Asia.

Since he assumed office on July 1, Duterte has pursued a vicious war on the poorest layers of the Philippine population in the name of the "war on drugs," racking up a body count of nearly 2,500 people murdered by police and vigilantes. He is erecting the architecture of a police state, announcing a nation-wide "state of emergency due to criminal lawlessness" over the past weekend, and calling on the military and police to "run the country."

This campaign of mass murder received initial support from Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Manila and—as the number murdered grew by an average of 30 a day—committed \$32 million to fund Duterte's anti-drug crusade.

Washington's backing for Duterte's dictatorial aspirations, however, is contingent upon his support for the US war drive against China. Washington expects Duterte to use the July 12 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling, which declared China's territorial claims in the South China Sea to be illegal, to ratchet up pressure on Beijing.

Duterte has instead sought to quietly pursue trade ties with China and has downplayed the territorial disputes to secure better relations with Beijing. In response,

Washington has begun raising concerns over "human rights" and "due process" in the Philippines.

Asked by a reporter on Monday night in Davao, just before his departure to Laos, how he would respond to Obama during their meeting to possible criticisms of extra-judicial killings in the Philippines, Duterte replied with an angry, profanity-laced rant.

Duterte told the media: "The Philippines is not a vassal state. We have long ceased to be a colony of the United States." He cited the Philippine-American war at the beginning of the 20th century and stated that if Obama, whom he called a "son of a bitch," would give an apology for the 600,000 Filipinos killed during that war he would answer him about the ongoing extra-judicial killings. He stated: "We inherited our problems from the United States because they invaded us and made us their subjugated people."

Duterte's nationalist posturing does not contain a shred of genuine anti-imperialism. Duterte has pledged his full support to the presence of US military bases in the country and has committed to revising the Philippine constitution to allow increased foreign ownership.

Rather, Duterte invokes the crimes of US imperialism to justify his own crusade of mass murder. He made this perfectly clear as he continued his rant, stating: "The campaign against drugs will continue. Plenty will be killed. Until the last pusher is killed we will continue and I don't give a shit about anybody observing my behavior."

Obama responded in a press conference staged in Hangzhou at the end of the G20 summit prior to his departure for Laos. "Clearly he's a colorful guy," Obama told the press, "What I've instructed my team to do is talk to their Philippine counterparts to find out is this in fact a time where we can have some

constructive, productive conversations.”

Obama stated: “We will always assert the need to have due process ... if and when we have a meeting this is something that is going to be brought up.”

The Obama administration has overseen the systematic dismantling of due process in the United States. Former Attorney General Eric Holder drafted the legal memo that justified Obama’s drone assassinations of US citizens on the grounds that secret deliberations carried out by the executive constituted “due process.”

Obama invokes due process, not out of any concern for democratic rights, but to pressure Manila to assist in the drive to war against China. His mild language to date on human rights is a clear indication that he still feels that this “colorful guy” can be persuaded to fall into line.

Duterte toned down his comments in a press conference on Tuesday morning in Laos, stating: “I do not want to quarrel with him. He’s the most powerful president of any country on the planet.”

Shortly afterward, US National Security Council spokesman Ned Price announced: “President Obama will not be holding a bilateral meeting with President Duterte of the Philippines this afternoon. Instead, he will meet with President Park (Geun-hye) of the Republic of Korea.”

Duterte traveled to Laos with an entourage of 30 officials, including Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay and Senator Alan Peter Cayetano. While Obama and Duterte may not meet during the summit, doubtless many meetings discussing Philippine policy and the US pivot will be staged on the sidelines between US officials and their Filipino counterparts.

The Philippines will assume the role of chair of ASEAN for the coming year at the end of the summit. This will increase the significance of Manila’s role in US plans within the region, as well as Washington’s pressure on Duterte.

In the immediate lead up to the ASEAN summit, Manila adopted a more assertive stance toward China over the South China Sea. Yasay summoned the Chinese ambassador in Manila to explain the presence of Chinese coastguard vessels in the disputed waters of the Scarborough Shoal.

Duterte told the press that he might confront China over construction on islands that the PCA had ruled did

not belong to China.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying addressed the press on Monday, counseling the Philippines not to “hype up” the situation in Scarborough, which she stated involved routine fishing operations.

The Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, Zhao Jianhua, met with the Philippine secretary of finance on Monday to extend an offer of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to fund infrastructure development as well as fast-tracked membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These offers are clearly contingent upon Duterte not raising public objections to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

It is in this context that Washington is seeking to use “due process” and “human rights” as a weapon to pressure Manila to promote its war drive against China.



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