Philippine President Duterte tells Obama to "go to hell"

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Tensions between Manila and Washington escalated further Tuesday when Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte told US President Barack Obama to "go to hell" in a public speech. Duterte then declared that the European Union (EU) can "go to purgatory, because hell is full up."

The statements were the latest in a string of outbursts by Duterte, who has responded angrily to Western criticisms, especially from Washington, of his murderous anti-drug crusade. These criticisms have nothing to do with concern over human rights, but originate rather with Washington's displeasure with Duterte's attempts to defuse tensions in the South China Sea and to enhance trade and diplomatic relations with Beijing, in opposition to the US war drive against China.

Duterte also stated that he intended to review, and possibly end, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) basing deal, which was signed under his predecessor Benigno Aquino, and which allows for the unlimited basing of US military forces in the country.

Speaking at the Makati City synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, Duterte apologized for positively comparing his anti-drug crusade to the holocaust, and then announced, "In my time, I will break up with America. I would rather go to Russia and to China." The same day, in another speech, Duterte stated, "The Americans, I don't like them... they are reprimanding me in public. So I say: 'Screw you, f*ck you.' … Better think twice now because I will be asking you to leave the Philippines altogether."

These vulgar and politically unhinged statements from the Philippine president follow what is emerging as an established pattern. After Duterte's public and unscripted vitriol, key figures in his cabinet addressed the press and directly refuted the president's words.

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told the media that Philippines still needed the US military presence, stating that "the president is misinformed." Presidential spokesperson Ernesto Abella told journalists they needed to use their "creative imagination" when dealing with Duterte's statements, and "not be too literal." At the same time, and this captures the volatility of the current situation, while denying that the President was severing ties with Washington, Abella said, "It's a possibility that he could, that he might."

None of Duterte's prior statements against Washington has yet been acted on. He publicly stated on September 12 that he was ordering US troops to leave the southern island of Mindanao. His defense secretary and foreign affairs secretary publicly contradicted him and no further action was taken.

Washington itself has made clear that it is not opposed to Duterte's war on drugs, which has racked up a death toll of nearly 4,000 in less than four months. On September 24, the US State Department quietly supplied the Duterte administration with $6.7 million specifically earmarked to fund his drug war. On Wednesday, as Duterte told Obama to go to hell, the US Embassy in Manila released press statements about how Washington was supplying Manila with information crucial to the war on drugs, which they claimed had led to a major drug bust.

The Philippines is currently under a "state of national emergency" which grants the police and military power to carry out warrantless arrests and place checkpoints throughout the country. Duterte stated in a speech on Sunday that he was "tempted to declare martial law."

The *Guardian*, quoting an unnamed high-ranking police officer, reported that secret police death squads had been organized and were directly responsible for the majority of the vigilante killings of the past months. Duterte's chief of police, Ronald de la Rosa, publicly denounced the *Guardian*'s source, drawing a page from his vulgar superior. "You're an official and that's what you do,

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destroy the organization?" he declared. "What kind of official are you? You have no balls."

Duterte continues to pursue closer ties with Beijing and Moscow. He is scheduled to travel to Beijing on October 19. The press announced today that he has appointed Chito Sta. Romana, a former leading member of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organizations, to serve as Manila's ambassador to China.

Washington will not tolerate Duterte's failure to toe its line against China. They will pursue every avenue from economic measures to coup plots to secure Duterte's support or remove him from office.

The peso has plunged to a seven-year low. The Standard & Poors credit rating agency blamed Duterte's public statements, warning that his behaviour meant they were unlikely to upgrade the country's credit rating for the next two years.

US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel in a statement to Associated Press issued a veiled but clear threat that Washington would back Duterte's forcible ouster. "I think it would be a serious mistake in a democratic country like the Philippines to underestimate the power of the public's affinity for the US. That's people power," he said. "People power" is a reference to the military coups, which with mass support, led to the ousters of former presidents Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada. Washington had a hand in both.

In an attempt to shore up his hold on power, Duterte is cultivating two bases of support—the military and the Maoist CPP. Duterte seems to have won the support of a large portion of the military's rank-and-file by promising to double their salaries. The top brass, however, including his own defense secretary, who is repeatedly gainsaying Duterte, are deeply loyal to Washington. The ties between the Philippine Armed Forces and the US military date back to the US colonial occupation of the country and have been carefully cultivated by Washington.

As Duterte has announced that he intends to purchase arms from Russia and China, several US-based think tanks have released statements that these weapons systems will not be interoperable with existing US military-supplied hardware, nor will Moscow supply the kind of training which Washington does. These remarks seem calibrated to find an audience in the military brass in the Philippines.

A second round of peace talks between the CPP and the Duterte administration opens this weekend in Oslo. The CPP has been in key positions within Duterte's cabinet and have come to play a key role of support for his government. Over the weekend it released a statement that Duterte's positive remarks about Hitler were "tactless." Nonetheless, it asserted, this head of death squads was a "progressive" figure.

Duterte is vastly out of his depth, a fact which he openly acknowledges. He stated in a speech this week, "My personality is only suited for a mayor. I'm not ready for the big league." He has repeatedly declared that he does not expect to finish his term in office and anticipates being removed by impeachment, coup or assassination. He claimed over the weekened that the CIA was plotting to assassinate him.

The volatility of Duterte is an expression of the explosive economic and social crisis in the Philippines, which is a product of the global economic crisis of capitalism and, above all, the US drive to war against China, which has destabilized the entire region.

Duterte's conduct bears parallels to the actions of Indonesian President Sukarno in the 1960s. Attempting to balance between Washington and Beijing, in a situation of intense domestic and geopolitical crisis, Sukarno sought support from both the military and the Stalinist Communist Party (PKI).

To secure this support, Sukarno took to making increasingly volatile statements, telling the United Nations to "go to hell," and positively comparing himself to Hitler. While Washington worked with his administration, it began plotting his ouster and the suppression of the population. The result, in 1965-66, was the slaughter of over a million members and supporters of the PKI, who were disarmed and betrayed by the Stalinist policies of their leadership.

The Cold War has ended and a new far more dangerous period has opened up. Moreover, Sukarno was a towering figure compared to the vulgar, parochial mayor from the southern Philippines. The parallels, however, carry a warning for the Philippine working class: Washington will stop at nothing to secure its geopolitical interests. The only means to prevent a catastrophe on the scale seen in Indonesia is for the working class to fight for its independent class interests behind the banner of world socialist revolution.

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