

Philippine President Duterte tilts toward China

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The Philippine defence secretary, Delfin Lorenzana, announced last Friday that he would suspend any participation in joint patrols with the United States in the South China Sea and ask a US Special Forces detachment on the southern island of Mindanao to leave.

The moves, which were previously declared by President Rodrigo Duterte, are aimed at encouraging closer relations with China, which the president will visit next week. The announcement will deepen a rift with Washington that Duterte opened up last month when he branded US President Barack Obama “the son of a whore.”

Lorenzana has indicated his disagreement with the decisions. Associated Press reported that he attempted to press Duterte to reconsider and stressed the importance of the 28 annual joint exercises with the US, including three major ones involving thousands of troops. He said on Friday that US military officials wanted to continue the war games.

While Lorenzana suspended joint exercises in the South China Sea, it is not clear whether other drills will be axed. He also added a rider to the removal of 107 US troops from Mindanao, saying it would only take place once Philippine forces could operate independently. An American military unit has been operating drones and collecting intelligence, nominally to assist in countering the Islamist Abu Sayyaf militia.

Under the previous president, Benigno Aquino, the US integrated the Philippines far more closely into its military build-up throughout the region against China, signing an agreement that came into effect this year to open up a string of military bases to US forces. Aquino was also central to Washington’s aggressive campaign against Beijing in the South China Sea, which included the US-backed Philippine legal challenge in the

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) to Chinese territorial claims in the disputed waters.

Duterte has made clear that, while balancing between the US and China, he intends to shift toward Beijing and Moscow. He declared last Tuesday that he was “reconfiguring” his foreign policy and was “very emotional because America has certainly failed us.” Eventually, he added: “I might in my time ... break up with America.”

Yesterday, while declaring he would not abrogate the military alliance with the US, Duterte openly questioned its value to the Philippines, asking: “But do we really need it?” After pointing out that US troops take all their hi-tech weapons away with them after joint exercises, he declared: “They are the ones who benefited, they’re the ones who learned but we got nothing.”

The “reconfiguration” of Philippine foreign policy is aimed at securing closer economic relations with China, currently the country’s second largest trading partner. Duterte heads to Beijing next week with a delegation that could include more than 250 Philippine businessmen, according to his trade undersecretary Nora Terrado.

Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez signalled last Friday that Duterte would look to China for major infrastructure funding. He criticised the previous Aquino administration that “hardly spoke to them [China].” He called for a lowering of tensions, adding: “You know the Chinese, they don’t like to lose face. Just so long as they don’t lose face it’s OK to continue arguing with them.”

The Duterte administration has removed a major obstacle to improving relations with China by publicly shelving any mention of the PCA ruling, which went overwhelmingly against Beijing. By doing so, the

Philippines has mollified China, which refused to recognise the decision, and alienated the US, which planned to use the verdict to ramp up pressure on China.

Duterte is confronting a mounting social time bomb at home, with about a quarter of the population living in poverty. While the economy is projected to grow by 6.4 percent this year, it is highly vulnerable to global recessionary tendencies. The mining industry has been hit by falling commodity prices and the closure of mines for failing to meet safety standards, which, according to the Chamber of Mines, threatens 750,000 jobs.

Since coming to office, Duterte has launched a murderous anti-drug war that has claimed more than 3,600 victims in extra-judicial killings by police and vigilantes. Overwhelmingly, those killed have been from the poorest and most oppressed layers of society. In the name of combatting illegal drugs, the administration is implementing police-state measures, including a state of national emergency and arbitrary arrest powers, that will be used in the future against the working class.

Washington, which initially supported this fascistic agenda and allocated funds for the anti-drug war, has become increasingly critical of “human rights” abuses in the Philippines as Duterte has shifted his foreign policy. Duterte’s hysterical tirades against the US are in part an indication that he is aware that Washington will take steps to remove him if he establishes close ties with Beijing.

A *New York Times* article on Sunday, entitled “Behind Duterte’s bluster, a Philippine shift away from the US,” indicated the mounting concerns in Washington. It declared that Duterte’s foreign policy marked “a radical departure for a country that has historically been the most dependable American ally in South East Asia, and could undermine Mr Obama’s so-called pivot to Asia, a keystone of his foreign policy. That strategy depends on American allies to counter China’s increasing power in the region.”

The newspaper cited Richard Javad Heydarian, a political scientist at De La Salle University in Manila, who said Duterte had shifted the balance of power in the South China Sea. The article added: “By declining to press claims against China over disputed territory there, despite a favorable ruling by a United Nations

tribunal, Mr Duterte has made it hard for the United States to galvanise international pressure on China over the issue.”

An apparently innocent remark late last month by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter contained an ominous warning to Duterte. “As it has been for decades, our alliance with the Philippines is ironclad,” he commented. In other words, Washington is not going to allow any undoing of an alliance that is critical for US preparations for war with China.

Already there are divisions within the Duterte administration over his moves to distance himself from Washington. Former President Fidel Ramos, whom Duterte credits with being instrumental in him winning the presidency, also has become critical, writing in Sunday’s *Manila Bulletin*: “Team Philippines [is] losing in the first 100 days of [his] administration—losing badly. This is a huge disappointment and let-down to many of us.”

While referring to Duterte’s gutter language and the controversy over his anti-drug war, Ramos described as “discombobulating” the Philippine president’s “off-and-on” approach to the United States, particularly his ending of joint exercises. “What gives? Are we throwing away decades of military partnership, tactical proficiency, compatible weaponry, predictable logistics, and soldier-to-soldier camaraderie just like that,” he wrote.

These remarks by Ramos, who has been generally supportive of closer economic relations with China, are highly significant. The former Philippine Armed Forces chief is saying that Duterte endangers the alliance with the United States at his own peril. The implicit threat is: what has been given to Duterte, can also be taken away.



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