

Philippine president declares “separation from the US” during visit to China

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte made a series of extraordinary comments in Beijing yesterday, denouncing the Obama administration and suggesting the Philippines would break economic and military ties with the United States.

His remarks were the most explicit in a series of statements by Duterte, since the right-wing populist was elected president in June, distancing the Philippines from Washington, the country’s closest military ally and former colonial ruler, and calling for greater economic and trade ties with China.

Duterte’s latest comments have been met with bewilderment and consternation from US officials, who view the Philippines as central to their military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific, aimed at preparing for war with China. The previous administration of Benigno Aquino functioned as the point man for the US “pivot to Asia,” aggressively prosecuting territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea.

Speaking to a business audience at a Philippines-China Trade and Investment Forum on Thursday, Duterte reportedly branded the US “arrogant” and denounced it for imposing its dictates upon countries throughout the region.

“In this venue, I announce my separation from the United States both in the military... but economics also,” Duterte declared. “I have separated from them so I will be dependent on you (China) for a long time but don’t worry we will also help.”

The Philippine president said: “America has lost now.” He added: “I’ve realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to [President Vladimir] Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world—China, Philippines and Russia. It’s the only way.”

These comments were made amid mounting tensions

between Washington and the Putin regime over the US-NATO military build-up in Eastern Europe and the US-led regime-change operation against Syria, one of Russia’s closest allies in the Middle East.

On Wednesday, addressing a group of Philippine expatriates in China, Duterte repeated his previous public denunciation of Obama as a “son of a whore.” Referring to the US, he said: “Your stay in my country was for your own benefit, so time to say goodbye my friend.”

Duterte arrived in China for a four-day visit on Tuesday and declared that his trip marked a “reconfiguring” of Philippine foreign policy. He made clear that he would seek to cement economic and trade deals worth billions of dollars with the China, the country’s second largest trading partner. Among his entourage are as many as 400 prominent Philippine business leaders.

The Chinese regime laid out the red carpet for Duterte. His trip included meetings with top Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang and National People’s Congress chairman Zhang Dejiang.

During their meeting yesterday, the Chinese president declared it was a “milestone,” while his Philippine counterpart spoke of “springtime” in relations between the two countries. The Philippine Trade Secretary Ramon Lopez said on Thursday that \$13.5 billion in trade deals were being finalised during the visit. Xi reportedly committed to \$9 billion in low-interest loans to Manila.

Most significantly, Duterte indicated that his government could be willing to drop its disputes with China over the South China Sea.

Duterte declared that the July 12 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favour

of a Philippine case against China's activities in the South China Sea was merely "a piece of paper with four corners." He appeared to give credence to China's territorial claims, stating: "The arbitral award gives us the right. China has the historical right."

These comments are undoubtedly a source of intense anger within the US government, which has stoked long-standing territorial disputes in the South China Sea to place pressure on Beijing, and legitimise the vast deployment of the American military to the region.

The Philippine legal challenge was drafted by a Washington-based law firm with close ties to the Obama administration. The US navy has conducted three incursions into Chinese-claimed waters, on the pretext of defending "freedom of navigation" against supposed Chinese expansionism.

China and the Philippines have reportedly agreed to open bilateral negotiations on their territorial disputes, and will establish a joint committee between their coastguards. Duterte did not raise with Xi the issue of the Scarborough Shoals, which have been a source of conflict between the two countries and of which China took control in 2012. But a Reuters report, based on unnamed sources with ties to the Chinese leadership, indicated that Beijing may be willing to grant Filipino fishermen access to the shoal.

US State Department official John Kirby yesterday responded to Duterte's comments by declaring they were "inexplicably at odds with the very close relationship" between the US and the Philippines. Kirby said Washington was "going to be seeking an explanation of exactly what the president meant when he talked about separation from us." It was "not clear to us exactly what that means and all of the ramifications."

Pointing to the broader implications of Duterte's statements for Washington's attempts to draw Vietnam and other South East Asian countries into its confrontation with China, the *Wall Street Journal* featured comments by Malcolm Cook, a senior fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. Cook noted: "Claimants like Vietnam and Malaysia can no longer piggy-back on the Philippines' arbitration win to counter China's territorial assertions."

Reports in the Philippines press recalled that Duterte's erratic and profanity-laden pronouncements are often subsequently "corrected" by presidential

officials.

Duterte previously denounced the Obama administration, but stopped short of breaking off the close ties between the two nations. He is seeking to balance between the country's strategic alliance with the US and its economic ties to China. The government declared an end to war games with the US last month, and at the beginning of October, suspended joint exercises in the South China Sea.

While calling for a review of the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which provides for a vast expansion of US military basing arrangements in the country, and even threatening to end it, Duterte has not moved to cancel the deal. Previous declarations from Duterte have not been acted upon, including a September 12 demand for US special forces to leave Mindanao, which was contradicted by the president's defence and foreign affairs secretaries.

Behind the scenes, Washington and its substantial constituency of supporters within the Philippine ruling elite and military are no doubt making contingency plans. Ahead of Duterte's trip, Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio warned that the president would be in violation of the constitution, and could be impeached, if he gave up sovereignty over the Scarborough Shoals.

Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, which has close ties to the US government, wrote today in *Foreign Affairs*: "This massive geopolitical shift is entirely Duterte's doing. It cannot be explained any other way. It is a product of his peculiar psychology." In a thinly-veiled call for Duterte's ouster, Boot concluded: "The only good news from the American standpoint is that what Duterte is doing could be undone by a more rational successor, assuming that democracy in the Philippines survives this time of testing."



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