

Philippine President Duterte says he wants US troops out of the country in two years

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In the midst of a three-day official state visit to Japan on Wednesday, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced that he wanted US military forces out of the Philippines within approximately two years, and declared that he would end the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to achieve this.

Addressing an economic forum in Tokyo, Duterte stated that “I want, maybe in the next two years, my country free of the presence of foreign military troops,” adding “I want them out and if I have to revise or abrogate agreements, executive agreements, I will.”

Duterte’s statements came in the wake of his four-day state visit to Beijing last week in which he declared that he was “separating from the United States.” Beijing and Manila signed 13 agreements during the trip, for an estimated total of \$13.5 billion in trade and investment. During the visit, Duterte deliberately downplayed the July verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague which ruled that China’s nine-dash line claim to the South China Sea was invalid.

The speeches in Beijing and Tokyo were carefully delivered policy statements of the Duterte government. They had none of the vulgar, unhinged character of his prior denunciations of President Obama and the United States, and thus they far more clearly revealed the geopolitical roots of his volatility.

Duterte’s prior statements, calling Obama a “son of a whore” and positively comparing himself to Adolf Hitler, expressed in large part the psychology of the man—an erratic, parochial figure with a fascistic agenda—who was clearly out of his depth. The abrupt shift in Manila’s foreign policy toward China, however, is an expression of the immense geopolitical tensions caused by the economic decline of the United States and its attempt to shore up this decline through

global military domination.

In Asia this has taken the form of Washington’s drive to militarily encircle and control China, and Manila has played a key role in support of this agenda for the past six years. Manila’s economic ties with China drastically soured as a result.

US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel, speaking in Manila on Wednesday addressed Duterte’s remarks, stating that it was a mistake to think improved relations between Manila and Beijing “somehow come at the expense of the United States ... This should be addition and not subtraction.”

This is a lie. Washington’s ‘pivot’ to Asia has created a perilous geopolitical powder-keg in which it is impossible for countries in the region to maintain friendly relations with both China and United States. For Duterte to continue the policies of his predecessor, Aquino—openly contesting Beijing’s territorial claims and providing a pretext for the dramatic escalation of US military presence in the region—would mean a continued and accelerating souring of trade relations with China. Washington has made geopolitics into a zero-sum game.

This was what was at stake in Duterte’s remarks in Tokyo, when he declared, “I want to be friends to China ... I do not need the arms. I do not want missiles established in my country. I do not need to have the airports to host the bombers.” Duterte is expressing opposition to the US military presence precisely because it jeopardizes business ties with China.

Duterte’s trip to Japan underscores these geopolitical tensions. Tokyo has allied itself with Washington’s pivot to Asia as a pretext for the remilitarization of the country but also to begin to assert its own imperialist interests in the region. Tokyo is looking to use the PCA verdict as a legal precedent for its own disputes with

China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and with Russia over the Kuril Islands. Duterte's downplaying of the decision has frustrated Japan almost as much as it has the United States.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had a cordial meeting with Duterte, but these tensions were nonetheless present. Tokyo and Manila signed a joint agreement to uphold "Freedom of Navigation" in the South China Sea, in accordance with the "rule of law." These are the watchwords of Washington in opposition to China's territorial claims. Japan committed to supplying Manila with aircraft and maritime surveillance equipment for patrolling the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

Duterte indicated an awareness of the tensions over his increasing ties with China when he attempted to reassure Tokyo that "the only thing discussed in China was economics. ...We did not talk about arms, we did not talk about stationing of troops, we avoided talking about alliances, military or otherwise."

As yet none of Duterte's public pronouncements against Washington have been acted upon. US troops are still in Mindanao and they have not been formally asked to leave. US State Department spokesperson John Kirby stated that the United States was "not going to respond and react to every bit of rhetoric. We're going to continue to work at this relationship." In other words, Washington intends to publicly ignore Duterte's statements and to maintain its presence in the country.

At least one aspect of Manila's military ties with Washington has already been impacted. The meeting of the Mutual Defense Board and the Security Engagement Board, chaired by the head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Gen. Ricardo Visaya and US Pacific Command chief Adm. Harry Harris, has been postponed.

The meeting which was slated for October 24, and which determines when the Philippines and the United States next hold war games, has been postponed until November 22, ostensibly to await the outcome of the US election. Reuters quoted a Philippine defense ministry official, however, who stated that the meeting was delayed because "the president has not put down in writing what exercises with the US will be scrapped ... There was nothing to discuss because there was no specific instruction from the President."

Duterte's sudden shift of Manila's foreign policy toward Beijing is an indication of economic weakness

of the United States. Washington is attempting to shore up this weakness at every turn by escalating its military provocations and increasing the danger of world war between nuclear-armed powers.

While Washington is currently expressing an intention to publicly ignore Duterte's volatile remarks, there are no doubt multiple plans currently in preparation for his removal from office. Ernie Bower, of the influential think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), hinted at these plans when he told the *New York Times* on Friday, "President Duterte risks creating a lethal combination of adversaries if he moves to truncate the alliance with the United States."



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