

Special envoy of Philippine President Duterte resigns in protest

Joseph Santolan
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On October 31, former Philippine President Fidel Ramos resigned as special envoy to China of current President Rodrigo Duterte in protest against Duterte's increasingly open opposition to Washington in pursuit of diplomatic and trade ties with Beijing. The resignation of Ramos, a central figure in Philippine politics for over four decades, highlights the extraordinary tensions caused by Washington's drive to militarily encircle and subordinate China to US interests.

The diplomatic architecture of this war drive is in shambles. Manila, under the Duterte administration, is seeking to secure trade and political relations with Beijing by repudiating the six-year political legacy of his predecessor, Benigno Aquino, whose administration served as a leading political proxy for the geopolitical interests of Washington.

While Duterte's method has been a volatile and vulgar one, the underlying pressures behind his foreign policy choices are clear. Washington's war drive has reached a point at which it is increasingly difficult to simultaneously support its 'pivot,' and to maintain trade relations with China. The historic economic decline of the United States underlies both its diplomatic defeats and its determination to control the world through military means even if it entails a third world war.

In the wake of Duterte's visit in October to Beijing, Filipino fishermen began returning to the disputed Scarborough shoal. For the past four years, this shoal has been the hottest flashpoint in the South China Sea, as Chinese Coast Guard vessels denied Filipino fishermen access to its rich fishing grounds.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague ruled in July that this shoal did not belong to China. Washington sought to use the ruling to escalate

tensions in the South China Sea, looking for Manila to assert its legal claim against China and possibly provide a pretext for a direct military confrontation between US and Chinese naval forces. To Washington's consternation, the Duterte administration downplayed the decision and engaged in talks with Beijing without mentioning the ruling.

Paul Reichler, Washington-based lawyer, who was the lead counsel for Manila in The Hague, tried vainly to depict the return of Filipino fisherman to Scarborough as a result of the court's decision, stating that the act was a recognition by Beijing of the ruling. It was nothing of the sort. Spokespersons for the Philippine Armed Forces initially claimed that Chinese vessels had left the Scarborough Shoal, but those statements were quickly retracted. Beijing, in appreciation of Duterte's diplomacy over the South China Sea, had instructed its vessels to tolerate the presence of the fishermen.

It emerged in the Philippine press from statements by members of Duterte's entourage that a joint statement between China and the Philippines on the Scarborough had been mooted which would have declared that China "allowed" the fishermen to return, but was rejected as it would appear to be an official acknowledgement by Manila of Beijing's territorial claims.

Press statements from Beijing, however, make clear that this is China's understanding of the arrangement. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying stated that "The Chinese side has always been exercising normal jurisdiction over Huangyan Dao [Scarborough]. The situation there is and will remain unchanged." Filipino fishing these waters, she stated, was a concession on the basis of the rapprochement with Duterte. "We have seen all-round improvement of China-Philippines relations following President

Duterte's visit to China. Under such circumstances, the Chinese side makes proper arrangements based on the friendship between China and the Philippines in response to the issue of President Duterte's concern."

Far from being a result of the ruling in The Hague, the coexistence at Scarborough is the result of its being deliberately ignored. Greg Poling of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies was far more accurate when he stated, "Basically, the Xi-Duterte understanding seems to be to return to the status quo that was in effect for most of the Aquino presidency."

Claiming that it had human rights concerns over Duterte's murderous anti-drug war, which has seen the police and vigilante killings of over 4,000 people, the US Senate foreign relations committee, and the US State Department, announced that it was intending to cancel the slated sale of 26,000 assault rifles to the Philippine National Police.

As it has around the world, Washington is using the mask of human rights to conceal its imperialist interests. As the body count mounted, US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Duterte and pledged \$32 million to support Duterte's fascistic policies. Washington is slated to give another \$9 million in counter-narcotics aid to Manila in 2017. The curtailed arms sale is about geopolitics, not human rights; Washington is tightening the screws on the increasingly rogue administration in Manila.

In a speech in which he turned over 17 Vietnamese fishermen, arrested for fishing in Philippine waters, to Hanoi, Duterte denounced the refusal to sell the arms. He stated that "we Orientals understand each other [and] don't go around bullying each other or treating them like dogs, as the Americans have done." Now the "American monkeys" refused to sell Manila weapons, he stated. He claimed he was unconcerned and would buy weapons from Germany, Russia and China.

Next week, Duterte's cabinet is scheduled to meet to hear the Defense Department give a presentation of US bases in the Philippines and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that was signed under the Aquino presidency. The press reports that the meeting may decide to reduce or end this agreement.

It is in this context that former President Ramos resigned and publicly denounced the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. Ramos, a West Point graduate, and

head of the Philippine military during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, has played a key role in the politics of the country for the past four decades. His words carry immense weight and reflect the interests of a large section of the ruling class.

For the past decade, Ramos has sought to secure closer economic ties with Beijing, and he was a leading figure behind the moves of the Arroyo presidency to secure them. The ties of Ramos, however, are ultimately in West Point, Annapolis and the Pentagon. As Duterte has increasingly provoked the anger of Washington, Ramos—who was crucial to his election—broke with him.

Ramos explained his reasoning in a two-part piece published in the *Manila Bulletin*, in which he stated, "In the overall assessment by this writer, we find out Team Philippines losing in the first 100 days of the Duterte's administration—and losing badly. This is a huge disappointment and let-down to many of us."

Ramos was clear, the disappointment stemmed from Duterte's failure to support US interests. He continued, "So, what gives?? Are we throwing away decades of military partnership, tactical proficiency, compatible weaponry, predictable logistics and soldier-to-soldier camaraderie just like that?? On President Duterte's say-so?"

Ramos is giving clear voice to concern within large sections of the ruling class which have been intimately tied to Washington since their fathers' fathers served under, and profited from, its colonial rule over a century ago. He also speaks for the majority of the military brass, which is far more closely tied to the Pentagon than to any civilian government in the Malacañang presidential palace. If Duterte continues his present course, Washington will be calling on these forces to effect—in one fashion or another—his removal from office.



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