

Philippine President Duterte continues US military basing deal, hails Trump election

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On November 7, the administration of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte officially announced that Manila would continue the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) military basing deal with Washington, as well as most joint military exercises, but would discontinue naval and amphibious assault drills. The decision represents a reversal of previous statements made by Duterte that he would end the basing deal as part of his “separation” from the United States.

The announcement was followed on Wednesday by Duterte’s enthusiastic hailing of the election of the Republican Donald Trump as the next US president. Leading members of Duterte’s cabinet declared that Trump marked a sharp departure from the “pivot” policies of the Obama administration, and they foresaw a restoration and strengthening of ties with Washington after the rocky first four months of the Duterte government.

Duterte, who assumed the presidency at the end of June, represents the interests of sections of the capitalist class in the Philippines who are alarmed at the threat to trade and economic ties with Beijing posed by the war drive launched by the Obama administration in the Pacific to military encircle and isolate China. Each new provocation staged by Washington in the South China Sea in alliance with the previous administration of Benigno Aquino, who served as a leading US proxy in the region, saw diminished investment from China and curtailed access to Chinese markets.

To Washington’s dismay, both The Hague ruling against China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, and the Philippine Supreme Court’s final decision declaring the EDCA deal constitutional, were handed down in July, after Duterte took office. The US was thus not given the opportunity to immediately

implement either of these decisions under the Aquino administration in the aggressive manner it intended.

In a volatile, at times almost unhinged fashion, Duterte sought to rebuild Manila’s ties with Beijing by publicly declaring his opposition to the interests of Washington. In late October, he announced that the Philippines was “separating from the United States” and he was ending joint military exercises and the EDCA agreement for the basing of US forces in the Philippines. During his travels to Beijing he deliberately sidestepped The Hague ruling, reaching an agreement with Beijing for the Coast Guard to permit Filipino fishermen to return to the disputed Scarborough shoal without resolving or even mentioning the territorial dispute.

Washington is prepared to tolerate a great deal of Duterte’s rhetoric—he can call the American president a “son of a bitch” without upsetting US geostrategic interests—but the EDCA basing deal is a red line whose transgression the US ruling elite will not tolerate. While Duterte declared in off-the-cuff remarks during his speeches that he was ending the US military presence in the country, at no point were formal measures presented to act on these statements.

On November 7, Duterte convened his cabinet. His top military advisors, led by Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, presented their recommendations for continued US-Philippine military ties. The top military leaders in the Philippines have received extensive training in Washington and their core political allegiance is to the Pentagon. Lorenzana called for the continuation of the EDCA basing deal, which will allow for the unlimited basing of US forces throughout the country, and of the annual Balikatan military exercises, the largest joint military exercises between the two countries.

Lorenzana proposed to expand Balikatan to include extensive anti-narcotics training, thus directly incorporating US forces in Duterte's murderous anti-drug crusade. At the same time, Lorenzana proposed to end CARAT, the joint naval exercises in the South China Sea, and Phiblex, the Marine Amphibious Assault drills, also in the South China Sea. The cancelled drills were those which openly targeted China.

Duterte accepted all Lorenzana's proposals. Lorenzana will formally present these decisions to his counterpart, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, at the US panel of Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board, which will be held later this month.

The decisions reached by the Duterte government over the basing and joint exercises with Washington clearly confirm the analysis of the *World Socialist Web Site* over the character of Duterte's oppositional posture to Washington. He is proposing to curtail the measures most likely to inflame tensions with China, while continuing and developing the most crucial components of military ties with Washington. Duterte is engaged in a balancing act between ties with Washington and economic relations with Beijing that has become so untenable that it produces an alteration in policy on an almost weekly basis.

In a move to improve ties with Duterte, Washington has replaced its ambassador to Manila, Philip Goldberg, whom Duterte despised and had publicly cursed on a number of occasions, with Sung Kim, a US diplomat born in Korea, who previously served as US special representative for North Korea policy.

Duterte sees in the election of Trump an opportunity for the restoration and strengthening of ties with Washington. The isolationist and economic nationalist measures are being interpreted in Manila as the curtailing of the pivot while its economic wing, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Trump openly opposes, has been proclaimed "dead."

Speaking in Kuala Lumpur, where he was meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, Duterte congratulated Trump, and stated: "I no longer want to fight [with the United States] because Trump is already here. I'm just four months [in office] and there has been a lot of controversy around my person, including my quarrel with America. I don't want enemies. Trump already won. Why don't we just shut up?"

Duterte's spokesperson, Martin Andanar, was more direct, claiming that Trump's election meant diminished military tensions between Manila and Beijing. He stated: "The world cannot afford a Third World War or we are all finished." Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay said: "The election of Trump signals an opportunity for change that can result in a stronger Philippine-US relationship."

Never one for subtlety, Duterte immediately appointed Jose E.B. Antonio to serve as his special envoy to Washington. Antonio is Trump's key business partner in the Philippines. The head of Century Properties Group, he was responsible for the construction of Trump Tower in the business district of Makati.

There are concerns, however, within the Philippine market that Trump's economic nationalism will spell crisis for the country's vital Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector, which includes a massive network of call centers. Seventy percent of BPO revenue in the Philippines comes from the United States, and the BPO sector in 2015 generated \$22 billion in revenue and 1.2 million jobs.



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