

US and Philippine militaries maintain “robust” ties

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26 November 2016

Despite the anti-American bluster of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, a meeting on Tuesday between US Admiral Harry Harris and Philippine armed forces (AFP) chief, General Ricardo Visaya, confirmed that military ties remained “robust,” highlighting “the enduring commitment of both countries to the US-Philippine alliance.”

Visaya and Harris, who is commander of US Pacific Command (PACOM) and has taken a particularly belligerent stance toward China over the South China Sea, jointly chaired a meeting of the two militaries at AFP headquarters. Visaya announced on Wednesday that about five joint military exercises, including two major naval drills, would not be held in 2017 in line with the pronouncements of the Philippine president.

Since coming to office five months ago, Duterte has called for an end to military exercises with the US and the removal of American forces based in the Philippines. He has declared he will “reconfigure” the country’s foreign policy away from the US, the former colonial power, and toward China and Russia. During his state visit to Beijing last month, the Philippine president announced his “separation from the United States” in both the military and economic spheres.

Last weekend, Duterte was similarly scathing of the US in a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Peru. He lashed out at “Western nations bullying small nations,” adding “not only that, they are into so much hypocrisy”. He criticised US-led wars and said Washington had “forced” Manila to send troops to Vietnam and Iraq.

Duterte is an erratic, right-wing demagogue who has unleashed a fascistic “war on drugs” in which the police and vigilantes have already killed more than 4,000 alleged drug dealers. His foreign policy is a

precarious balancing act: soliciting aid and investment from China and Russia while at the same time quietly maintaining ties, including military ones, with the US.

Duterte nevertheless marks a sharp shift from his predecessor, Benigno Aquino, who functioned as the Obama administration’s point man for confronting China in the South China Sea. Aquino initiated the US-backed legal case in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague that ruled in July against China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea. He also sealed and implemented a new military basing deal with the US—the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement—that provides broad access to Philippine bases for American forces.

The meeting chaired by Harris and Visaya decided to scrap two major joint exercises next year—an amphibious drill known as Phiblex and the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise, both of which usually take place in the South China Sea. In order to mend relations with China, Duterte has ended joint naval patrols in the disputed waters and played down the PCA ruling.

Visaya made clear, however, that 258 joint activities and exercises with the US would continue in 2017. While many involve a relatively small number of personnel, 13 are considered major drills. They include the annual, large-scale, Balikatan exercises although their focus would be on humanitarian and disaster response. According to Visaya, the American officers “respected” the Philippine decision to pull out of the naval exercises, but indicated the Pentagon’s intention to pursue the drills with other South East Asian nations.

Last week, before arriving in the Philippines, Harris reiterated the ongoing US engagement in Asia following the victory by Donald Trump in the presidential election. While declaring that it would be

“inappropriate for me to speculate on potential policy initiatives of the next administration,” he nevertheless added: “I have no doubt we’ll continue our steadfast commitment to our allies and partners in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.”

Harris again took aim at Beijing, saying: “I’m concerned about Chinese assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, but also with the East China Sea.” He added: “What I do as a military commander is I assume the worst... I look through a glass darkly. That applies to China; that really applies to North Korea.”

Harris has been in the forefront of the Pentagon’s push for Washington to confront China militarily in the South China Sea. Speaking in Canberra in March last year, Harris signalled what has become a central feature of US propaganda—accusing China of militarising the South China Sea through its land reclamation activities. “China is creating a great wall of sand with dredges and bulldozers,” he claimed.

As commander of the US Pacific Fleet, then PACOM commander from mid-2015, Harris has overseen the accelerating US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China.

In his remarks last week, Harris dismissed any suggestion that Duterte’s comments would halt US-Philippine military cooperation. “What I’ve seen is some statements that, I’ll be quite frank, are concerning to us, to me, coming from the new president there in the Philippines, but despite what he has said there’s been no change in anything with the Philippines, with one exception.” He was referring to the joint exercises.

An article in the *Diplomat* noted that US-Philippine exercises were only one part of the defence ties between the two countries. “The alliance also includes day-to-day collaboration in fields from maritime domain awareness [intelligence sharing] to law enforcement, ongoing capacity-building, and visits and exchanges that have led to deep relationships between the two defence establishments, which transcend any president or any downturn in specific drills or interactions. Duterte has not touched these critical aspects of cooperation, much of which remains low key and in many cases classified.”

While diplomatic in tone, Harris’s expression of “concern” is a warning to Duterte should he seek to implement his rhetorical flourishes and “separate” the Philippines from the United States. Washington would

have no compunction in finding a way to remove Duterte from power if he in any way threatened vital US economic and strategic interests in its former colony and the wider region.

Duterte has already alienated sections of the Philippine top brass. Last month, former Philippine President Fidel Ramos, one of Duterte’s key backers, resigned as special envoy to China in protest against Duterte’s undermining of military relations with the US. While supportive of closer economic ties with China, Ramos, a former head of the Philippine military, had been scathing of Duterte in the *Manila Bulletin*, exclaiming: “Are we throwing away decades of military partnership, tactical proficiency, compatible weaponry, predictable logistics and soldier-to-soldier camaraderie, just like that?”

Ramos’s comments are a not-so-veiled threat that powerful sections of the Philippine military and political establishment will join arms with Washington against Duterte if the president seriously damages military relations between the two countries.



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