

Trump endorses Duterte's murderous drug war in the Philippines

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On December 2, US President-elect Donald Trump held a seven-minute phone conversation with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, in which he endorsed Duterte's murderous war on drugs.

Since Duterte's installation in office at the beginning of July, relations between Manila and Washington have soured dramatically. The Obama White House sought to use accusations of human rights violations against the Duterte administration as a means of curtailing his moves toward improved ties with Beijing. Duterte, a volatile former mayor unused to the national stage, responded with bluster, publicly cursing Obama and threatening to order the removal of US forces from the Philippines.

Trump's phone call to Duterte was an attempt to improve ties with Manila, by backing his drug war, whose official death toll, as reported by the Philippine National Police, has now exceeded 6,000 victims in less than six months. The Trump camp's official read-out of the phone call innocuously stated that the two figures "noted the long history of friendship and cooperation between the two nations and agreed that the two governments would continue to work together closely on matters of shared interest and concern."

Duterte, however, held a press conference in which he described the conversation in detail. "Despite the protestations of Obama picturing the Philippines—of course, including me—to be murderers, here comes Trump and we had a talk," Duterte reported. "He said, 'Oh, President Duterte, we should fix our bad relations ... you're doing great. I know you're worried about Americans criticizing you. You're doing good, go ahead.'" Duterte claimed that Trump "wished me well in my campaign [against drugs]" and termed Duterte's approach "the right way."

Trump's call to Duterte was more than an attempt to shore up damaged relations with an ally against China. It expressed Trump's own enthusiasm for police-state

measures within the United States. Duterte declared that Trump explicitly compared the war on drugs in the Philippines with his own campaign against undocumented migrants, whom he described as "these goddamn shit guys" who were a "problem on the border of Mexico and America." Duterte claimed that Trump concluded "when you come to Washington DC or New York City, look me up and we'll have coffee, maybe you can give me one or two suggestions on how to solve these goddamned sons of bitches."

How accurate was Duterte's description of the seven-minute call? The Trump team has made no attempt, over the past nine days, to gainsay or alter his account. Reuters cited a Trump transition team advisor who reported that the president-elect intended to start "a clean slate" with Duterte. Ernie Bower of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) commented that the call was likely arranged between Trump's business partners in the Philippines and "a core group of advisers, who include his children."

In other words, this was not a pro-forma diplomatic call but a carefully calculated and arranged gambit by the Trump administration, of a similar character to his phone conversation with Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, the first direct contact between US and Taiwanese leaders since 1979, which was likewise held on December 2.

Duterte enthusiastically welcomed Trump's overtures, telling the press: "You need to choose. You want to be an Obama, then suffer the consequences. You want to be Trump, you're my friend. Trump told me, 'You're doing alright, ignore the international media. No media supported me and I did it on my own.'"

Duterte's murderous campaign against impoverished communities in the Philippines under the guise of his war on drugs, continues to rack up an average of 40 bodies in the street each day. Over 2,000 of these victims were directly killed by the police—the vast majority alleged to

have been “resisting arrest.” The remaining 4,000 were killed by vigilante squads, who wrap the murder victims in plastic and place signs on their corpses, saying, “I’m a pusher, don’t imitate me.” Duterte has repeatedly and enthusiastically called for the killing of alleged drug pushers and criminals, and has explicitly promised impunity to the police for these murders.

The crisis in US-Philippine relations, however, did not stem from this murderous crusade. The Obama administration initially endorsed Duterte’s anti-drug war. John Kerry, when visiting Manila in July, pledged \$32 million to fund it. Despite Obama’s later public criticisms of Duterte’s measures, Washington continues to fund and train counter-narcotics in the Philippines. In a bid to retain and expand the US Armed Forces presence in the country, Washington is discussing including counter-narcotics as a key component in future joint military exercises, termed Balikatan.

Washington’s cynical posturing over human rights abuses in the Philippines is bound up rather with Duterte’s moves to improve diplomatic and economic relations with Beijing. Duterte sought to repair ties with China by reducing tensions in the South China Sea, ignoring the July ruling against China by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, and canceling joint military exercises with Washington in the South China Sea.

These issues have not gone away with Trump’s phone call. Duterte has declared his intention to secure arms from China. He told the press that Beijing had offered to supply Manila with arms purchased through a Chinese loan that would be payable in 25 years. He said he would send Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana to China to make arrangements. Lorenzana has just returned to Manila from Moscow where he discussed enhanced military ties with Russia, the first visit from a head of the Philippine military since 1976.

The move to acquire arms from China, which will be deployed in domestic repression under the anti-drug war, follows the cancellation of a deal for the United States to supply 26,000 rifles to the Philippine National Police. Washington called off the arrangement, citing alleged human rights concerns, as a means of pressuring Duterte away from China.

The Duterte government declared last week that it would not allow US ships to use bases in the Philippines as staging points for Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea. While Duterte remains committed to the basing of US forces in the Philippines,

under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), he is seeking at the same time to mitigate tensions with China. The FONOPs—direct naval intrusions into Chinese-claimed waters—are deliberate provocations that have raised tensions throughout the region. Duterte declared that Washington can deploy vessels for FONOPs using its bases at Guam or Japan.

Duterte’s attempt to improve relations with China and retain relations with Washington is utterly untenable. Philippine politics, intimately tied to its former colonial ruler, the US, is in crisis. Vice President Leni Robredo, of the Liberal Party, associated with former President Benigno Aquino, has quit Duterte’s cabinet as a result of these tensions. Robredo was increasingly associated with opposition to Duterte’s policies, and was instructed by Cabinet Secretary Leoncio Evasco, formerly of the Maoist Communist Party, to stop attending cabinet meetings. She resigned.

The opposition to Duterte has received massive infusions of funding from US-based Filipino American billionaire Loida Nicolas Lewis, who has, through her organization US Pinoys for Good Government (USP4GG), called upon Duterte to resign. USP4GG bankrolled Aquino’s presidential campaign in 2010 and provided the majority of funding for the vociferous anti-China protests staged during his administration, including the provocative visits to the South China Sea by the pseudo-left organization Akbayan. Lewis met on several occasions with then Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke to discuss opposition to Chinese financial interests in the US.



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