

Manila to investigate claims of a US plot to oust Philippine president

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Heightened tensions between Washington and Manila escalated further on Tuesday, as Philippine Speaker of the House Pantaleon Alvarez announced that the legislature would be opening a public investigation of a blueprint allegedly drawn up by the US embassy for the overthrow of the Duterte government. The plot, which was reported in a front-page exclusive by the *Manila Times* on Monday, is a response not to Duterte's "war on drugs" but to his increasing geopolitical ties with Beijing.

Manila Times editor-in-chief Dante Ang cited a document, which he claimed had been supplied by an anonymous "highly placed source," and had been written by former US ambassador to the Philippines, Philip Goldberg. While rumors of military coups are a dime a dozen in the Philippines, the scenario and details documented by the *Times* are not only plausible, but quite likely accurate.

Since he took office at the end of June, Duterte has in a rapid and volatile fashion sought to restore economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing. Relations had been badly damaged by the tensions created by his predecessor Benigno Aquino, who functioned as a leading proxy of the Obama administration's pivot to Asia.

At the same time, Duterte has been taking steps toward military dictatorship under the guise of his "war on drugs," which has seen the murder of over 6,000 impoverished Filipinos, labeled by the police, military and vigilantes as "suspects."

Washington initially funded and supported this murderous campaign, but as Duterte increasingly failed to toe Washington's line in confronting China in the South China Sea, the White House began to invoke concern over "human rights" to pressure his government back into line. Duterte responded to each of these threats in a vulgar and unhinged manner, denouncing the United States and threatening to sever ties. His cabinet has always sought to soften or gainsay his words, but at every turn relations between Manila and Washington have soured.

Duterte has expressed open enthusiasm for President-elect Donald Trump, who in a seven-minute phone call at the beginning of December endorsed Duterte's bloody suppression of the population. Trump's support for Duterte's campaign of

mass murder does not, however, resolve the underlying geopolitical tensions, and, in the wake of the phone call, relations have continued to worsen.

Duterte boasted in several speeches in mid-December that he had personally killed several drug suspects, shooting some and throwing others out of helicopters. UN Human Rights High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein announced on December 19 that these admissions "clearly constitute murder" and that the UN would be launching "investigative and judicial proceedings" against Duterte. Duterte staged a press conference the next day in which he directly addressed al-Hussein, "You do not talk to me like that, you son of a bitch. You go and file a complaint in the United Nations. I will burn down the United Nations if you want. I will burn it down if I go to America."

At the same time, the US government aid agency, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, deferred its vote until May 2017 on a renewal of the \$433 million aid package for the Philippines "subject to a further review of concerns around rule of law and civil liberties."

Duterte responded on December 17 that Washington should "prepare for the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)." The VFA provides the legal framework for the basing of US forces in the country under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), and its abrogation is a red line whose violation Washington will not tolerate.

On December 19, Chinese Ambassador Zhao Jianhua made an unannounced visit to the presidential palace of Malacañang during which he extended an offer to Duterte of a soft-loan of \$500 million in addition to \$14 million worth of military equipment. Duterte declared that he would set aside the ruling against China's territorial claims in the South China Sea handed down by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague earlier this year, and was interested in pursuing joint oil exploration with China in the South China Sea.

That afternoon, Duterte delivered a speech attended by the newly appointed US ambassador to Manila Sung Kim, responding to the US deferment of aid payment. He told the ambassador to "shut up, shut up. I do not need your assistance ... China is going to release to me 50 billion, go home, I do not need your aid."

It is in this heated context that the *Manila Times* revealed that

Ambassador Goldberg had drawn up a blueprint for the ouster of Duterte. According to the report, Goldberg “outlined a list of strategies” to remove Duterte from office within “a timetable of one-and-a-half years.” He called for Washington to launch a series of “socio-economic-political-diplomatic moves against Duterte to bring him to his knees and eventually remove him from office,” while supporting and promoting the political opposition behind Vice President Leni Robredo, of the opposition Liberal Party of Aquino.

The blueprint made no mention of concern over Duterte’s war on drugs, but stated that “Duterte’s political allies are privately concerned over his shift in foreign policy.” Central among these allies is former President Fidel Ramos, who was crucial to Duterte’s election victory, but has distanced himself from Duterte in the wake of tensions with Washington.

Both the US Embassy in Manila and US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel issued statements denying the *Manila Times* report. Russel declared that “These allegations of a blueprint are false. No such blueprint exists.”

The *Manila Times* account, however, is quite credible. Washington does not tolerate violations of its geopolitical interests, but draws up plans for coups, ousters and assassinations, and this is in fact Goldberg’s specialty. He was kicked out of Bolivia in 2008 for plotting the ouster of President Evo Morales while serving as US ambassador to the country. In 2010 he became assistant secretary of state for Intelligence, responsible for the State Department’s interface with the CIA, NSA and other US intelligence agencies.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay held a radio interview on December 28 in which he declared that “I would not put such activity past Goldberg … I do not take this threat lightly. [This is] a serious matter we have to dig deeper into.”

Speaker of the House Alvarez announced that he would launch a public investigation of the alleged US ouster plot with the opening of the new session of the legislature on January 16. “It is going to be a public hearing, and all sectors, personalities concerned and mentioned in the report will be invited,” Alvarez said.

Vice President Robredo, who resigned from the Duterte cabinet in protest against his policies, is emerging as the central opposition figure. She is currently on a “vacation” of unspecified duration in the United States. A significant portion of the funding for the political opposition comes from Filipino American billionaire Loida Nicolas Lewis, who for the past six years bankrolled the anti-China organizations and protests in the Philippines.

According to the *Manila Times*, the Goldberg document recognized that the two pillars of support for the Duterte presidency were “law and order elements”—the military and police, on the one hand, and the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) on the other. Goldberg called for undermining this base of support by exacerbating tensions between the two groups.

The loyalty of the top military brass in the Philippines is to the Pentagon, far more than it is to the Malacañang—the presidential palace. The ties of the generals and colonels in the Philippine military to Washington date back to the days of US colonial rule in the country, and have been fostered through each successive new cohort with training and funding. Duterte has sought to secure the loyalty of the military by giving them carte blanche powers through the “war on drugs,” and by doubling the salaries of rank-and-file soldiers.

He has at the same time received the support of the Maoist CPP and its front organizations. When questioned about the threat of being ousted from office, Duterte declared that he was secure because “the CPP will die for me.”

The Communist Party of the Philippines has been intimately involved with Duterte for decades, and supported him during his years in office as mayor of Davao City in the southern Philippines. Members and ex-members of their armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA), served as gunmen in his death squads. With his election to the presidency, he invited them to appoint several of their members to serve in his cabinet. The CPP installed his secretaries of Social Welfare, Agrarian Reform, Anti-Poverty Commission and assistant secretary of Labor.

On December 26, the CPP celebrated its 48th anniversary, and leading representatives of the Duterte administration attended and addressed the proceedings, including Secretary of the Interior, Mike Sueno. Luis Jalandoni, a long-time head of the party declared that while the CPP would “only die for the people,” they were a “strong ally of the administration” and would “protect it from coup plots.” The next round of peace talks between the Duterte administration and the CPP will be held in Rome on January 18.



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