

Trump invites Philippine President Duterte to the White House

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On Saturday, US President Donald Trump called Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and invited him to visit the White House. During the conversation Trump reiterated his approval, previously articulated during a phone conversation in December, of Duterte's murderous war on drugs and sought to secure Manila's support for Washington's drive to war on the Korean peninsula.

Malacañang Presidential Palace stated that Trump expressed his "understanding and appreciation" of Duterte's war on drugs. The White House synopsis of the call declared that the "Philippine government is fighting very hard to rid its country of drugs, a scourge that affects many countries throughout the world." The Trump administration characterized the call as "a very friendly conversation."

White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, speaking on ABC's "This Week," said that the call was "all about North Korea." He added, "The issues facing us, developing out of North Korea, are so serious that we need cooperation at some level with as many partners in the area as we can get."

Priebus made explicit that the call was motivated by the imminent possibility of war, stating that "if something does happen in North Korea, we have everyone in line backing up a plan of action that may need to be put together with our partners in the area." He dispensed with concerns over human rights, emphasizing, "There is nothing facing the country and the region more important than what's going on in North Korea." In his bid to organize partners for the possibility of an imminent attack on Pyongyang, Trump extended a similar invitation on Sunday to Prayuth Chan-ocha, the head of the military junta ruling Thailand.

When it serves as a pretext for a massive missile strike in Syria, Washington will tout its concern for human rights, and a crocodile tear or two may even be wrung from Trump over the fate of "beautiful little babies." The corpses, however, of over 8,000 impoverished Filipinos, murdered by police and vigilantes, with full government sanction, since July of last year, certainly will not stand in the way of Washington's preparations for war in East Asia. US imperialism will roll out the red carpet for the fascistic thug

Duterte if he lines up behind its war drive.

Trump's call to Duterte came at the end of the 30th Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit, which was chaired by Duterte and staged in Manila over the prior week. The Summit revealed just how weakened Washington's economic and diplomatic clout in the region has become over the past year.

Using Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino, as a proxy, Washington drafted and filed a legal dispute in The Hague against China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. In July, 2016, when the court handed down a sweeping ruling against Beijing's claims, however, Duterte had just replaced Aquino as president. He sought to improve economic relations with China by defusing tensions over the disputed waters and effectively ignored the ruling.

Under Aquino, Manila attempted repeatedly to escalate tensions with China during ASEAN summits, but these efforts were partially stymied by the countries chairing them, notably Laos and Cambodia, which sought to maintain friendly relations with China. If Washington had had its way, the April 2017 summit—in which the rotating chairmanship of the organization had passed to Manila, and with the sweeping court ruling of the prior year handed down—should have seen a qualitative escalation of pressure on China. But it did not.

Duterte buried the 2016 ruling, maneuvering to have language referencing the decision removed from the Summit's final declaration. A draft declaration had been leaked to Reuters, containing language denouncing China's "land reclamation and militarization" in the South China Sea. The final statement was not released for a full 12 hours after the Summit, as wrangling over this language went on behind the scenes. When the final statement was released, Duterte had effectively removed all references to the ruling—and any pressure on China—from the document.

The day the summit concluded and the day before Trump called Duterte, three Chinese warships sailed to Davao City for a goodwill visit to the country, the first in more than seven years. Duterte toured the ships, where he met with the

Chinese ambassador and with Rear Admiral Shen Hao, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Deputy Commander of the East Sea Fleet. Duterte expressed interest in holding joint military exercises with the Chinese in the Sulu Sea.

As Washington's economic and diplomatic clout weakens, it turns to ever more aggressive military means to assert its dominance. Duterte's own military chiefs are part of this campaign. The Philippine military brass has intimate ties with Washington, stretching back to the creation of the Philippine Scouts in the earliest days of the American conquest and colonization of the country. In his moves away from Washington's ambit, Duterte does not have the support of his military leadership, despite his efforts to retain their loyalty by giving them effectively free rein to suppress the population through the war on drugs.

In the lead-up to the ASEAN summit, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, in clear opposition to the president, sought to establish terms of confrontation with Beijing. He flew, with a military cohort, to a disputed island in the South China Sea, known by the rival claimants as either Pagasa or Thitu, where he staged a flag-raising ceremony and sang the Philippine national anthem. Lorenzana announced that \$35 million had been earmarked to refurbish the island's facilities, including runways, a radio tower and a desalination plant.

Washington's intensifying drive to war has made Philippine politics increasingly explosive, riven by social and geopolitical fault-lines. Legislators with long-standing ties to both the military's coup plots and to Washington have filed impeachment proceedings against the president, while charges of human rights violations have been filed against him before the International Criminal Court (ICC) as well.

Other sections of the ruling elite are becoming more open in their support for a reorientation toward Beijing. Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo announced last month that the Aquino administration should never have filed the legal case before The Hague, a position which no one in Philippine politics would have dared articulate a year ago.

Under Duterte, Manila is proving increasingly insubordinate on the question of the South China Sea, and Trump is using his reckless nuclear brinksmanship on the Korean peninsula to rope the country back into Washington's war drive against China.

The Philippines was a vital staging area and support for Washington's wars in Asia throughout the 20th century. Some 7,500 Filipino soldiers fought under Washington's command in the Korean War, while thousands were deployed to support US imperialism in its war in Vietnam. The bombs that US forces rained down on Vietnam and Cambodia were dropped from jets that took off from Clark

Air Base.

The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), executed under the Aquino administration, provides for the restoration of US military bases throughout the country. Duterte has repeatedly expressed reluctance for the bases to return, but has also allowed his military brass to repeatedly gainsay his statements. Trump is doubtless looking to secure a commitment from Duterte for the use of these bases, currently under construction, in the event of war with Korea and possibly China.

In the wake of his conversation with Trump, Duterte expressed some hesitancy about visiting the White House and voiced alarm over the danger of war with North Korea. He declared that he and other ASEAN leaders had "fear of an outbreak [of war] because of the threat of a nuclear warhead. The fallout would include China, they know it, and also us. And the Philippines is within striking distance ...". Asked what he would say to Trump, he stated, "Mr. President, please see to it that there is no war because my region will suffer immensely."

Duterte stated that he could not make any "definite promise" to visit Washington, saying "I'm tied up.... I'm supposed to go to Russia, I'm also supposed to go to Israel." Spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs, however, Robespierre Bolivar, stated that Duterte would "likely" travel to the White House "in the next few months.... We are still waiting for a formal letter of invitation, and then we shall reply with our own letter to the United States saying that we will accept their invitation."



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