

Dealing with Duterte's Philippines by Jeffrey Ordaniel

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While the election of Rodrigo Duterte is often framed as part of a global tide of populism and repudiation of the political establishment, the change of government in Manila has great consequences for foreign policy in Asia. His anti-American rhetoric has significantly weakened the Philippines-US alliance, and his initial foreign policy preferences dealt a major blow to the US position in Asia. He immediately reshaped the strategic environment surrounding the South China Sea - downplaying Manila's victory at a UN tribunal in The Hague, and making China his first non-ASEAN state visit. Moreover, Duterte declared the Philippines' "separation" from the United States, giving a two-year deadline to rid his country of US troops. He cursed then-President Barack Obama for criticizing his "war on drugs." He met with Vladimir Putin and personally welcomed a Russian warship into Manila Bay. Donald Trump could reverse this trajectory, but his success depends on how well the new administration can co-opt Duterte and turn his particular concerns into areas of cooperation.

Duterte has proven to be an inconsistent and misinformed leader who, on many occasions, does not act or speak on the basis of facts, proven statistics, or intelligence. Take for example his decision to "cut" ties with the US. Such rhetoric has manifested in the suspension of bilateral maritime exercises and joint patrols in the South China Sea. During a confirmation hearing in the Philippine Senate late last year, his defense secretary, Maj. Gen. Delfin Lorenzana, was asked why Manila was suspending joint exercises and patrols with Washington if they were beneficial for capacity building. The secretary answered: "Mr. Chair, I really don't know because the President has been issuing statements without consulting the cabinet." Recently, Lorenzana had to correct Duterte after the Filipino president publicly displayed alarming confusion over the location of Benham Rise, a maritime area in the Pacific under the Philippines' extended continental shelf that China was reportedly trying to survey. Duterte initially thought that the area was part of the South China Sea.

Still, some of Duterte's grievances against the US make sense. Despite the US-Philippines alliance, the Philippine military remains among the most ill-equipped in Asia. While Washington has poured in \$6.5 and \$1.4 billion of military aid to Egypt and Pakistan, respectively from 2011 to 2015, the Philippines only received \$154 million in the same period. The allotment included hand-me-downs like the three weaponless, 1960's era, *Hamilton*-class Coast Guard cutters acquired by

the Philippine Navy through DOD's Excess Defense Articles Program. Duterte complained, "We have been allies since 1951. All we got are hand-me-downs, no new equipment. The Americans failed to beef up our capabilities to be at par with what is happening in the region."

This treatment has prompted Duterte to repeatedly question the US security commitment to the Philippines. In one campaign speech, he remarked, "America would never die for us. If America cared, it would have sent its aircraft carriers and missile frigates the moment China started reclaiming land in contested territory, but no such thing happened." This is not a groundless assessment. In 2012, the Obama administration essentially abandoned the Philippines in Scarborough Shoal, despite declaring the South China Sea as a US national interest, and the much-touted "pivot to Asia" policy. During Obama's 2014 Asia tour, Manila failed to secure a commitment from Washington to defend Philippine vessels in the South China Sea per Article 5 of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty despite Obama's affirmation that the Japanese Senkaku Islands would receive coverage under article 5 of the US-Japan security agreement.

Duterte has made his fight against illicit drugs the centerpiece of his presidency. In that light, he perceived statements by the State Department and White House on human rights and the rule of law as an attack on his top priority. Juxtaposed against China's policy of non-interference and charm offensive, the US, all of a sudden, became an antagonist.

How then should the US deal with its oldest treaty-ally in East Asia with Duterte at the helm?

First, the White House transition from Obama to Trump provided an opportunity for a reset in relations. Duterte likes Trump. He praised the Republican president on several occasions, bragging about the two leaders' similarities. In one speech, he said, "We both like to swear. One little thing, we curse right away, we're the same." In another, he exclaimed, "Look at his inaugural speech. He will stop drugs. We're no different. He's also tough. He will also kill you." Duterte's admiration of Trump could lead to a more cordial atmosphere and allow alliance cooperation to resume. The two governments should initiate discussions at future summit meetings, beginning at this year's ASEAN summit in Manila. Indeed, a treaty-ally's chairmanship of ASEAN presents Washington with an important opportunity to influence the region's security and economic discourses.

Second, the Trump administration should not follow Obama's policy of merely criticizing Duterte's War on Drugs. Instead, the US should co-opt Duterte's fight against illicit drugs and offer assistance centering on reforms and modernization of the country's law-enforcement and justice system. The only way to influence Philippine policy is to co-

opt Duterte's priority and turn it into an area of cooperation, and not preach about human rights. China has been attempting to do this by building drug rehabilitation centers free of cost. Likewise, Japan has offered financial assistance to Duterte's War on Drugs. By acting as a partner in this fight, Washington will not only strengthen the alliance and keep Manila from entering Beijing's orbit, but also significantly influence the rule of law and the human rights situation in the Philippines.

Finally, a Trump-Duterte reset would provide an opportunity to further institutionalize the alliance. Despite Duterte's anti-US rhetoric, several institutionalized mechanisms in the alliance, such as the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), survived. Less institutionalized mechanisms, such as joint patrols in the South China Sea and bilateral naval exercises, did not. To strengthen cooperation, the Trump administration should be prepared to address Duterte's doubts about the alliance. A clearer commitment to defend Philippine vessels in the South China Sea, per Article 5 of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, could go a long way in not just addressing Duterte's trust issues, but also in raising the deterrent value of the alliance. The US must also set up an alternative weapons acquisition assistance program for the Philippines, since the Excess Defense Articles Program is perceived negatively in Manila. Doing so would make Washington a strong partner in achieving the Armed Forces of the Philippines' goal of establishing a minimum credible defense posture.

With all this, the Trump administration could send a message that the US national interest in East Asia's maritime commons aligns with Manila's own national interest, and is not merely a self-serving policy to contain a rising China.

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