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Will Duterte End the US-Philippines Military Alliance?

A deeper look at the future prospects of the relationship.

By Prashanth Parameswaran
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Since coming to power in June, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has repeatedly threatened to end various components of the longstanding defense relationship between his country and its ally the United States as he seeks closer ties with China (See: “China and the Philippines Under Duterte: Look Beyond a Voyage”).

On Wednesday, in remarks to a group of Japanese and Philippine businessmen in Tokyo, Duterte doubled down on his earlier rhetoric. He said that he wanted American troops out of the country, perhaps within two years, and that he was willing to “revise or abrogate agreements” to do so. He also reiterated his previous statement that U.S.-Philippine exercises would end.

But as I noted in a recent long essay for *The Diplomat*, one needs to be cautious about the extent to which Philippine policy toward the United States and China is actually changing beyond the headlines and even Duterte’s own rhetoric.

Current State

As I specified in the piece, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana publicly said last week that though Duterte had been issuing statements without consulting his cabinet, everything in the U.S.-Philippine defense relationship is currently running as planned.

These includes not only exercises, but defense agreements including the foundational Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) inked back in 1951, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) of 1998, and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), a defense pact inked in 2014 (See: “A Big Deal? US, Philippines Agree First ‘Bases’ Under New Defense Pact”). U.S. troops are also still currently operating in the south of the country in spite of Duterte’s announcement that they would be asked to leave.

Whether or not Duterte follows through on his threat to downgrade or sever the U.S.-Philippine military relationship remains to be seen. Lorenzana mentioned that that he would be presenting findings on various aspects of U.S.-Philippine security cooperation during a cabinet meeting next month, and that Duterte could make a decision after receiving input from other cabinet members too.

On October 26, *Reuters* quoted an unnamed Philippine army general as saying that things could become even clearer after Washington and Manila hold an annual meeting to discuss military ties in late November.

Clear Constraints

There is a chance that Duterte’s advisers may be able to convince him to at least moderate his position. Though Duterte wants to advance an “independent foreign policy,” the reality is that the Philippines is still heavily dependent on the United States, especially in the defense realm.

As one of the region’s weakest militaries, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) relies significantly – in some areas even exclusively, defense officials admit – on the United States to address manifold challenges even apart from the South China Sea, including piracy, terrorism, and natural disasters. Since the 1950s, the Philippines has gotten around 75 percent of its arms imports from the United States, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. There are also additional advantages it gets from being part of the U.S.-led alliance and partnership network in the Asia-Pacific that goes along with its centrality in the U.S. rebalance (See: “Why the Philippines Matters to the U.S. Rebalance to Asia”).

Duterte appears to recognize at least part of the value of the U.S.-Philippine defense relationship following conversations with his advisers and other officials (though he is far less likely to give much weight to the broader regional implications of downgraded bilateral security ties) (See: “America’s New Maritime Security Initiative for Southeast Asia”). For example, though he initially called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country’s south, he later walked this back and said that the Philippines would need Washington’s presence for the South China Sea. He and his aides have also previously said that existing treaties would remain and that changes would be restricted to things like exercises and engagements.

He has also been unable to answer the question of where the Philippines can turn to for its security right now if it gives the United States the cold shoulder. Duterte's proposal for the Philippines to consider buying equipment from China and Russia has already seen pushback in defense circles both privately and even publicly, with issues including quality and interoperability being highlighted. If Duterte is sufficiently convinced that reducing Manila's reliance on Washington will take decades and is impossible to accomplish in his single six-year term, he may see that his rhetoric cannot really be translated into reality.

But in the end, it might be the domestic considerations that could matter most. The Philippine military enjoys close ties to the United States, and would not be pleased to see the severing of its relationship with a central contributor to its capabilities. Duterte knows that he needs the military's support for the realization of his domestic goals, including peace processes with communist rebels and Muslim insurgents that are already unpopular among some in the military. If he is persuaded that this could alienate the military to the degree that it could threaten his rule, he may be more cautious about ending the defense relationship with Washington.

Duterte also faces institutional constraints to ending certain components of the U.S.-Philippine defense relationship. Terminating or revising the MDT, as several senators reminded him last week, would require Senate consultation, though this may be a moot point since one defense official told *The Diplomat* over the weekend that he recognizes that abrogating it would be "going too far."

As for EDCA, though Duterte's assertion that it is not valid without Aquino's signature is flat out wrong, the pact itself stipulates that the parties can terminate it with just a year's notice. Therefore, that would be possible but it would not take effect immediately. And given the long process we just witnessed with EDCA in the Philippines up till the Supreme Court upholding its legality earlier this year, it could take even longer if there is some domestic opposition to its revision or abrogation.

Relative to these other agreements, exercises themselves would be the easiest to discontinue or downgrade following agreement in the cabinet as well as with the United States. That would of course depend on the exercises Duterte has in mind, and as of now, sources say he does not even have an understanding as to the breadth and depth of these interactions.

Indeed, the Philippine defense official who spoke to *The Diplomat* that he was "uncertain" whether Duterte "understood the full value" of the exercises held between the two countries each year, which total 28 and extend beyond just traditional security into other key areas like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

These domestic considerations are not occurring in a vacuum. There is already elite and bureaucratic resistance to Duterte both generally as a bold, crude outsider calling for radical change as well as specifically on the kinds of policies he has been advocating. And there is no question that in the case of U.S.-Philippine ties, he is also going against the grain of public opinion, which has long been highly favorable toward the United States, even if there is a small but vocal portion of the population that has an anti-American view.

Given this, there is a case to be made that the U.S.-Philippine relationship would only serve as yet another rallying cry for those seeking to oppose Duterte within the elite and that he is better off not wasting his political capital on this front as opposed to the several others which will also require significant support.

Stubborn Realities

But it is important not to assume that wisdom will prevail when it comes to Duterte and the U.S.-Philippine defense relationship for several reasons.

First, strategically, Duterte does not see the United States as being as important to Philippine national interests relative to other countries like China. In his view, described by a defense official in a conversation with *The Diplomat* over the weekend, since Washington is unlikely to come to Manila's defense in the event of a conflict, which is itself unlikely, there is little use for an alliance that brings only limited security benefits to the Philippines while also restricting the economic rewards it can get from Beijing.

"War is unlikely. U.S. support also unlikely. Not much from China economically presently because we made it a security threat. So is it really a good deal for us?" said the source, laying out in detail Duterte's thinking.

Second, as I mentioned in the essay, Duterte's distrust and dislike of the United States is deep-seated and longstanding and is not restricted purely to strategic considerations, but experiences he has had with the United States over decades. The mix of factors that comprise his anti-Americanism include his leftist orientation, grievances about the U.S. colonial legacy in the Philippines, as well as a string of personal incidents, including what he believes was the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) involvement in helping an American escape charges for an explosion that occurred in Davao City back in 2002, when he was mayor – the so-called Meiring Incident.

"It's difficult because for him it's policy, personal, historical, ideological, et cetera, combined," an aide close to Duterte told *The Diplomat* on Saturday after his visit to China.

Third, he has a proven track record of calling for downgrading and even opposing certain specific components of U.S.-Philippine defense cooperation. Duterte was already publicly stating his opposition to aspects of U.S.-Philippine security cooperation during his time as mayor, including the Balikatan exercises being held in the Davao Gulf and the United States wanting to use an airport for drone surveillance.

Fourth, it is unclear how flexible Duterte is with his current beliefs and how willing he is to actually factor in advice he is getting from advisers and officials into actual policy. His rhetoric thus far does not give us much confidence in this regard.

In one worrying public demonstration of this, during his first exclusive interview since coming to office, with *Al-Jazeera*, Duterte was confronted by one of the interviewers about how he was putting his country at risk by downgrading defense ties with the United States, since Washington

had played a key role even in non-military areas like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as was demonstrated during Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. Shockingly, Duterte suggested that either other countries would come or he would be willing to live with the fact that the death toll would be much higher.

“Other nations will come. Or we will die. Double the number. And so?” Duterte said.

Future Scenarios

What most observers seem to be hoping for is that Duterte will eventually realize the error of his ways after fully hearing the advice of defense officials and his advisers and will not actually downgrade U.S.-Philippine defense ties at all.

If that occurs, we will see no change in policy accompanying Duterte’s rhetoric. If the first few months of his administration are an indicator, the rhetoric itself is likely to stay, though that too may ease if there is some kind of reset under a new U.S. administration as well as a fresh U.S. ambassador (See: “The U.S.-Philippine Alliance Under Duterte: A Path to Recalibration”). After all, Duterte continues to maintain that his current frustration with Washington is partly due to the outgoing U.S. ambassador Philip Goldberg’s comments directed against him during his campaign, as well as the unfair treatment he has received from the Obama administration.

But given Duterte’s fierce anti-American stance, his record of opposing the U.S. security presence in the Philippines, and his belief that Manila does not really need Washington as much as defense officials and some of his own advisers think it does, the possibility of the president forging ahead with a significant downgrading of the relationship cannot be discounted.

A significant downgrading of ties would include the eventual ending of major exercises (or perhaps all 28 of them if Duterte really is that ambitious), and even revisions to or a complete nullification of EDCA as well as other changes like the withdrawal of all U.S. personnel from the country. This could come either now or in response to future perceived transgressions by Washington, and it would no doubt have significant, longer-term impacts on U.S.-Philippine military relations. If things continue as is, it will be difficult for the United States not to react in some way.

If this is paired with closer defense ties with other countries like China, Russia, or others, this could start to truly look like an about-face in Philippine defense policy. Nonetheless, it is still worth keeping in mind though that Duterte has not said he would also end ties with key U.S. allies and partners – such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia – which are also security providers. That means that despite this downgrading, the Philippines would still remain part of the broader U.S. alliance and partnership network in the Asia-Pacific, or, if you prefer, the principled security network (See: “US Hits Right Note At Shangri-La With Principled Security Network”).

But one also needs to entertain the possibility of mixed and messier scenarios in between these two extremes, which could in fact be the eventual outcome. Duterte could, for example, cancel a few key exercises or adjust some specifics (like making sure exercises do not occur in or near

more provocative parts of the South China Sea or are focused primarily on less contentious areas like HADR) just to irk the United States and please China. He could also try to revise the terms of agreements like EDCA to ensure that the Philippines gets a better deal, or ask the United States to clarify its commitment to Manila if it wants existing pacts to stick as is.

This slight or selective downgrading in defense ties could coexist with fierce public disagreements as well as continued cooperation in other areas – like law enforcement or counterterrorism or even some aspects of maritime security cooperation. Though Duterte may seem to have a more black-and-white view of defense ties now, he may become convinced of the wisdom of this moderate approach if he sees that the Philippines would be left too vulnerable on the South China Sea issue or other rising threats like the Islamic State make a cleaner break more difficult.

As I have argued before, Duterte's lack of foreign policy experience, poor understanding of the workings of the bilateral defense relationship, and relative disinterest in foreign military issues as opposed to domestic economic and security ones, makes it more likely that selective U.S.-Philippine cooperation in certain areas could go on but remain under the radar. Though the circumstances would be different, the outcome would somewhat resemble what we saw in U.S.-Malaysia relations under Mahathir Mohammad in the 1980s and 1990s.

Irrespective of what actually happens, it is important to keep a longer-term perspective in mind. The U.S.-Philippine alliance has been through its share of ups and downs. When the United States had to close its bases in the country in 1992 after a close vote in the Philippine legislature, many were quick to declare the end of the alliance. But China's South China Sea assertiveness in the years following that drove Manila to negotiate the 1998 VFA; a rising terrorism threat following the September 11 attacks saw a significant upgrading of bilateral security cooperation on that front; and yet another round of Chinese South China Sea assertiveness during the Aquino years saw the inking of EDCA in 2014.

To be sure, current trends are still far from encouraging. But it is a useful reminder that even if dramatic reversals do occur in the U.S.-Philippine defense relationship, history suggests that the tides can turn much quicker than the naysayers believe.