

ARTICLES

Duterte shock threatens U.S. Asia influence



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte attends Philippines Economic Forum in Tokyo on Oct.26. © Reuters

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An anti-American storm is brewing in the Indo-Pacific. "Hurricane Duterte" is shaking the longstanding alliance system constructed by the United States to maintain its hegemony in East Asia. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has upset the regional equilibrium by launching an independent foreign policy path that rebuffs U.S. strategic planning and strengthens China.

The shift is raising alarm in Washington, which has long assumed that the Philippines is a reliable ally that would always serve American interests. For the U.S. to remain a "resident power" in the Pacific and contain China, there is no better partner than the Philippines.

Traditionally a prime claimant and opponent of China's expansive claims in the South China Sea, the Philippines is the poster child and bridgehead for U.S. President Barack Obama's "pivot" or "rebalancing" to Asia, under which the bulk of U.S. military assets will be concentrated in the Pacific to counter China's rise.

Washington has rationalized its military focus on the Pacific by citing the intimidation that small countries like the Philippines face from an aggressive China. Instead of bluntly admitting that the real objective is to hem in China -- the only present challenger to U.S. influence in Asia -- Washington has projected itself as a selfless "stabilizing force" that has been invited to act by endangered and weak states.

This narrative of the U.S. as a "good sheriff" policing contested terrain with a Chinese bully on the loose has been overturned by Duterte, a populist with socialist leanings and a burning desire to wriggle out of what he sees as American neocolonial interference in the internal affairs of allies.

Since his election victory in May, Duterte's fiery personal rhetoric aimed at Obama has punctured the Western narrative that America is welcome in East Asia. His rhetorical attacks, deemed "offensive," "confusing" and "troubling" by Washington, include his declaration, while on a high-profile visit to Beijing, of a "goodbye" and "separation" from the U.S.

He has talked of terminating the decades-old practice of U.S.-Philippine military exercises, pledged to kick U.S. troops out of the conflict-plagued southern Philippine region of Mindanao, and cast doubt over the validity of deals signed by his predecessor to allow the U.S. to access more military bases in the Philippines.

Self-centered power

As a maverick strongman, Duterte is wary of Western criticism and potential sanctions over his controversial war on drugs, which has left more than 3,000 Filipinos dead in a wave of police and vigilante killings. He is sensitive to a nationalist streak in the Filipino polity that chafes at the country's earlier experience as a U.S. colony. In his world view, America is a nosy and self-centered power that uses small countries not to defend or develop them but as pawns.

Such anti-imperialistic thought used to be heard mainly among marginalized Filipino progressives. It has now been mainstreamed by Duterte's expletive-laden wildcard diplomacy.

Yet for all of Duterte's firebrand verbal jabs at the U.S., the Philippine state machinery has taken pains to issue *ex post* clarifications after his outbursts that he is not exiting the Mutual Defense Treaty signed with Washington in the Cold War era. Joint military exercises are going on and U.S.-Philippines trade and investment flows will not be halted. The large Filipino diaspora in the U.S. and the American impact on the Philippines' popular culture are underlying factors that will not permit total rupture.

What is happening is not a wholesale severance of ties with the U.S. but an adjustment toward China in the spirit of Duterte's wish for independent foreign policymaking. He is expanding economic and military relations with China to avert being "blackmailed" by the U.S. on domestic policies -- even if they entail infringements of democracy and human rights. It is a hedging ploy to shield Duterte from American pressure and compel the U.S. to make more concessions to the Philippines.

There is also a geostrategic calculation behind Duterte's bid to reduce dependence on the U.S. In his reckoning, the Philippines has not gained much by obediently acting as a junior partner of the U.S. in the Pacific. Washington huffed and puffed, but failed to win back for Manila the disputed Scarborough Shoal, which the Chinese military took over in 2012. No matter how many American battleships or aircraft the Philippines has hosted, it has not been able to make headway in claims against China in the battle for control of the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.

Riding piggyback

Duterte is skeptical of the utility of the old policy of the Philippines riding piggyback on American military guarantees to contain China. The commitment of the U.S. to its Pacific allies remains in doubt, and Duterte sees no reason why he should place all his eggs in the American basket.

Duterte's gamble is that China will sense an opportunity to diminish the U.S. alliance structure in Asia and grant him more economic and strategic privileges than previous Filipino presidents secured by subsuming Filipino interests under the umbrella of American grand strategy.

Whether he can recover at least some Philippine losses and setbacks in the South China Sea by cozying up to China will be crucial. If he does not bring home concrete gains in this arena, his newfound embrace of China will face domestic headwinds from nationalistic Filipinos.

Small states compressed between two giants can play off one superpower against the other and extract benefits from both. The Philippines could be steered by Duterte to somewhere close to the middle between the U.S. and China, provided Beijing softens its stance in the South China Sea.

But the regional impact of Duterte's volte-face will be on other East Asian nations which are part of the U.S. sphere of influence. If they too catch the Duterte bug, bolt the American stable and rush for cooperation with China and other non-Western players, it would considerably shrink the ability of the U.S. to shape and mold the security architecture in the Pacific.

Slipping American hegemony in the region should trigger fundamental rethinking in Washington about how it has mishandled its allies and neglected their true interests. America's self-proclaimed image as a leader of coalitions, a do-gooder and a promoter of stability and freedom deserves critical re-examination in light of the Duterte jolt.

Hillary Clinton, the frontrunner to win the U.S. presidential election on Nov. 8, is expected to deepen Obama's pivot to Asia. She enthusiastically implemented it as his Secretary of State, and justified it in 2013 by arguing that "if nobody's there to push back to create a balance, then [China is] going to have a chokehold."

But Duterte's flip-flop has raised uncomfortable questions about this logic. As president, Clinton would be likely to double down on the U.S. "push back" against China, but that would only further squeeze small nations caught in the scrum of the giants. Any upcoming U.S. administration would be wiser to pay greater heed to the concerns and dilemmas of nations like the Philippines, which are losing their appetite for being passive instruments in great power tussles.

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