



# FURY IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Shock and Awe Presidency of Rodrigo Duterte

*By Richard Javad Heydarian*

Shortly after winning a landslide election victory in May 2016, Rodrigo Duterte declared that as president he would chart a new course for the Philippines and “not be dependent on the United States.” With a few audacious words, he became the first Philippine leader to openly question the foundations of a century-old alliance, which dates back to America’s imperial foray into Asia in the early 1900s.

Not only did Duterte decide to pursue decoupling from America, his manner of doing so crossed one diplomatic red line after the other, leading pundits at home and abroad to dub him the “Trump of the East” for his blunt and sometimes vulgar rhetoric. Duterte’s most virulent tirades followed Washington’s criticism of alleged extrajudicial killings in his war on drug traffickers. After calling President Barack Obama “a son of a bitch,” Duterte added, “You can go to hell, Mr. Obama, you can go to hell.” For good measure, he called Secretary of State John Kerry “crazy” and the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines a “gay son of a bitch.” The Obama administration labeled Duterte’s actions “a significant departure” from Manila’s longstanding partnership with the United States. Obama officials said they were deeply troubled when Duterte drew a comparison between his campaign to “slaughter” millions of drug addicts with the Nazi extermination of millions of Jews. Duterte’s bombastic attacks on his critics also targeted the United Nations, European Union, and even the Catholic Church.

Part of the reason for Duterte’s fury is that he sees criticism of his scorched-earth policy against illegal drugs as a direct challenge to his electoral mandate. The core of Duterte’s presidential campaign was a vow to clean up the streets, and his decisive victory made him certain of the righteousness of his cause. Surveys show that the majority of Filipinos, especially in metropolitan Manila area, feel safer due

◁ Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte at a military celebration, Quezon City, Dec. 21, 2016.  
*Erik de Castro/Reuters*

to Duterte's tough talk against criminality and brutal crackdown on suspected drug dealers, which has reportedly claimed thousands of lives. Yet, despite popular support for the ongoing war on drugs, most Filipinos have also expressed concerns over extrajudicial killings.

For the Philippine strongman, the doctrine of human rights is neither universal nor valid because, in Duterte's view, it ignores communitarian values such as law and order. Going further, he has questioned the wisdom and utility of the United Nations system, arguing that the global body is out of touch with the realities in developing countries and incapable of resolving global conflicts. Duterte's latest assertion of strongman rule occurred in May when he declared martial law in Mindanao—and warned he may extend it nationwide—following an upsurge in attacks by Islamist militants.

More importantly, Duterte's rhetoric reflects his administration's policy of reducing its reliance on the United States and U.S.-led security architecture in Asia, and rejecting the wider liberal international order in favor of Philippine sovereignty. Although he sometimes parrots the talk of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, he does not aspire to become another Sukarno or Nasser, much less a Filipino version of Chavez or Ahmadinejad. Duterte more closely echoes the so-called "Asian values" arguments once put forth by regional autocrats such as Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia to justify their suppression of basic civil liberties and democratic rights.

Duterte's quest for greater independence involves a reorientation of the Philippines' traditionally hostile relationship with Eastern powers, namely China and Russia. During the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in late 2016, Duterte declared that while his government would not sever ties with Washington, it was ready to open alliances with Beijing and Moscow.

### **Search for Autonomy**

Duterte's quest for an independent foreign policy is rooted in a long history of Philippine strategic subservience to the United States, which claimed the country as a possession in the 1898 Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish–American War. Throughout the twentieth century, Manila effectively outsourced its external security obligations to Washington, which enjoyed unparalleled influence over the Philippine media-security-business complex and exploited full access to Philippine military facilities from Luzon to Mindanao. Three key agreements underpinned the patron-client strategic partnership between the two countries: the U.S.–Philippine Military Assistance Pact (1947), the Military Bases Agreement (1947), and the Mutual Defense Treaty (1951). During the Cold War, the Philippines was a key ally and logistics hub for Western military operations in Korea and Vietnam.

The end of the Cold War presented an opportunity for the Philippines to assert greater autonomy. In 1991, the Philippine Senate, in a nationalist frenzy, voted against extending an agreement granting the United States the right to operate its largest overseas military bases, Subic and Clark. In 1992, after years of fruitless negotiations over the Military Bases Agreement, the Cory Aquino administration asked the U.S. government to vacate the bases. Washington complied, evidently believing that the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War diminished the value of maintaining a large and costly forward deployment presence in Southeast Asia.

But in view of developments in the coming decades, Manila alternated between leaning toward non-alignment and maintaining close strategic ties with Washington. A few years after American troops departed, the Philippines confronted creeping Chinese maritime expansion. Beijing seemed keen to exploit the power vacuum in the region. In 1994, it took control of the Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef, which lies close to the island of Palawan (the Philippines' westernmost province) and the energy-rich Reed Bank within Manila's two hundred nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Fidel Ramos administration responded by increasing Philippine defense spending and revitalizing Philippine-U.S. military cooperation under the Visiting Forces Agreement.

In the mid-2000s, dismayed by the U.S. government's narrow focus on fighting terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Gloria Macapagal Arroyo administration sought to diversify its foreign relations and solicit economic support from external partners such as China and Japan. In a short-lived golden age of Philippine-Chinese relations, Arroyo and Chinese leader Hu Jintao expanded trade and investment relations, signed defense agreements, and explored a joint development scheme in the South China Sea under the Joint Maritime Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) agreement. Philippine-Chinese relations quickly soured, however. Major Chinese infrastructure investment projects became embroiled in corruption scandals, which undermined the Arroyo administration's legitimacy and enabled the opposition to take power in the 2010 presidential election. And China embarked on more aggressive claims in the South China Sea.

The incoming Benigno Aquino administration took a different approach to China. It showed little interest in attracting large-scale Chinese investments and adopted a tougher position in the South China Sea, specifically refusing to pursue an arrangement similar to the JMSU, which lapsed in 2008 and became mired in controversy and accusations of treason. China hosted Aquino for a state visit in 2011, but relations again quickly deteriorated with a naval showdown over the Scarborough Shoal, which falls within the Philippines' EEZ but lies nine hundred kilometers from the nearest naturally formed Chinese coastline in Hainan. As the standoff intensified, China imposed

non-tariff barriers on Philippine fruit exports, discouraged its citizens from traveling to the Philippines, and began exercising administrative control over Scarborough.

The Aquino administration responded by expanding the Philippines' military relations with the United States as a deterrence against further Chinese aggression. It negotiated the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which grants American military expanded rotational access to Philippine bases and paves the way for more American military aid, logistical assistance, and intelligence support. The Aquino administration adopted a lawfare strategy, filing a case against China with a UN-appointed international tribunal in The Hague for violations of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Considering that such tribunals lack enforcement capabilities, the Obama administration's support for the case was critical and further deepened Philippine dependence on America. To the delight of the Philippines and its allies, the lawfare strategy produced the best possible legal outcome. The tribunal ruled against China's claim of "historic rights" and criticized its massive reclamation activities in the contested Spratlys for inflicting ecological damage on coral reefs and marine life.

### **Divorce, Duterte-Style**

By the time the tribunal ruled, however, the Philippines had another new president. In his election campaign, Duterte had expressed skepticism about the value of the arbitration, questioned the utility of American support in the South China Sea dispute, and called for direct engagement with China.

Meanwhile, U.S.-Philippine relations quickly nosedived over Duterte's draconian antidrug campaign. In its final months in office, the Obama administration withheld a shipment of American firearms to the Philippine National Police and postponed the renewal of the \$400 million Millennium Challenge Corporation aid package to Manila. Duterte cancelled joint military exercises and plans for joint patrols in the South China Sea, and denied American warships access to Philippine bases to conduct "freedom of navigation" operations.

In October 2016, Duterte visited China with great fanfare, and announced his "separation" from America and his interest in joining China's "ideological flow" in a new alliance "against the world." Since then, Duterte has been seeking long-term military agreements with both China and Russia—a serious blow to the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia and Washington's efforts to curb Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea. Hence, in his first six months in office, Duterte abruptly downgraded Philippine relations with the United States, which has historically enjoyed high favorability ratings among Filipinos, and upgraded ties with China, seen as a strategic threat by a majority of Filipinos and particularly by the security establishment.

How did Duterte pull off this high-wire act? Duterte's brand of populism is anchored by a wholesale rejection of not only the liberal elite, but also their policy paradigm. Similar to other successful anti-establishment candidates such as Donald Trump in the United States or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Duterte's rise to power was based on a promise to upend the status quo. Duterte's propaganda machine has worked around the clock to discredit elites, particularly American-leaning liberals, as unpatriotic stooges of foreign powers and as rapacious oligarchs. In a country that has one of the highest rates of income inequality, poverty, and unemployment, Duterte's anti-establishment narrative gets significant traction.

Duterte quickly managed to consolidate his power over the state apparatus in what some have described as the authoritarianization of the Philippine political system. With much of the Congress defecting to the president's party and the Supreme Court struggling to exert its independence, institutional checks and balances have fallen into a hibernation mode. Duterte enjoys extraordinarily high approval ratings, oversees a super-majority bloc in the legislature, and has strong support from the law enforcement agencies.

Duterte risked little backlash for questioning America's reliability as an ally given what any Filipinos viewed as U.S. waffling in the South China Sea dispute. The Obama administration consistently refused to clarify whether it would aid the Philippines in a direct conflict. During the Scarborough Shoal crisis, Washington refused to offer military assistance and instead encouraged bilateral negotiations to defuse the situation. Recent surveys show that a plurality of Filipinos share Duterte's doubts about Washington.

Meanwhile, China has been playing a robust game of carrot and stick. Chinese officials are making it clear that the Philippines would benefit from large-scale trade and investment deals if it sets aside the arbitration case in The Hague and reduces joint military exercises with the U.S. Navy near the contested areas. At the same time, Chinese officials are warning they could move ahead with an Air Defense Identification Zone in the disputed areas, proceed with reclamation activities on the Scarborough Shoal, and expand military deployments in Philippine-claimed waters.

Another factor that explains Duterte's actions is his longstanding personal skepticism about American policy toward the Philippines. He is a self-described socialist with old ties to leading Philippine communists and Moro-Islamic ideologues. Since his days as mayor of Davao City, the commercial hub of Mindanao island, Duterte has had testy relations with Americans. During the George W. Bush administration, when America was involved in extensive counterterrorism operations in Mindanao, Duterte blocked the 2007 edition of the annual joint military exercises which were scheduled to take place within his jurisdiction. In 2013, he denied the Obama administration access to Davao Airport for conducting drone operations. To Duterte, the

United States is contributing to the problem rather than the solution in Mindanao. He often portrays Americans as cruel and arrogant, insensitive to the conditions of the developing world.

### **“Unbelievable Job on the Drug Problem”**

Despite Duterte’s bluster and actions, Trump’s presidency may well lead to another reset in U.S.–Philippine relations. Duterte has praised Trump as a kindred spirit—a fellow strongman populist bent on overthrowing the establishment—and even claimed that Trump supports his crackdown on illegal drugs. Duterte appointed Jose Antonio, a former Trump business associate and the owner of Trump Tower in Manila, as a special envoy to Washington. Duterte has given a green light for the implementation of the EDCA, paving the way for expanded American rotational military access to Philippine bases. Duterte is particularly pleased with Trump’s inaugural promise that America would not seek to impose its values on other nations—interpreted by Duterte as meaning the United States would no longer hound other countries about human rights and democracy. Duterte is also pleased with Trump’s vow to take a tougher approach against China in the South China Sea.

Relations certainly seemed warmer when Trump placed a call to Duterte on April 29 and invited the Philippine leader to visit the White House “anytime you want to come.” No date has been set, but Trump will be traveling to Manila in November for a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations hosted by Duterte. In the call, whose content was leaked by Philippine officials and confirmed by a U.S. administration official, Trump began by congratulating Duterte for his “unbelievable job on the drug problem.” It was a statement that provoked immediate alarm among human rights groups, but appeared to delight Duterte. He told Trump that he was fighting the drug scourge to preserve his nation, to which Trump responded that America “had a previous president who did not understand that.”

The specter of terror—with Philippine groups affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria launching a recent attack on the southern island of Mindanao—is bringing the two estranged allies closer together. In June, the Pentagon provided a new cache of weapons to Philippine troops and deployed special forces to train Philippine counterparts. American drones were deployed to gain intelligence on the movement of the insurgents.

Under Duterte and Trump, the Philippine–American alliance may still have a future.