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An Unlikely Bromance: Trump, Duterte and the Future of the Philippine-U.S. Alliance

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The Philippines Welcomes Trump's Presidency

With few exceptions, the unlikely electoral victory of Donald Trump came as an unpleasant shock to many capitals across the world. Most countries, including key allies, such as Japan, expected a comfortable victory for the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton – a well-known political entity to the global elite and broader policy community. The Philippines, America's oldest ally in Asia, was among the few nations, in addition to Israel, Russia and India, where the news of Trump's victory elicited a cautiously optimistic response from the political leadership, specifically under the controversial president Rodrigo Duterte, previously dubbed by Western media as the "Trump of the East." Shortly after Trump's victory, the Filipino leader, who back in September 2016, made the unprecedented move of cussing at then American President Barack Obama and the country's ambassador to Manila, Philip Goldberg, immediately struck a different tone upon hearing the surprising outcome of the American elections. He expressed, in an unusually cordial tone, his best wishes to the newly elected American president, exclaiming "Mabuhay Ka" (May

you live long!) and, half-jokingly, reassured Obama's successor that he wished not to "fight [with America anymore] because Trump is there."¹ There were at least three reasons that made Duterte optimistic about his relations with post-Obama America.

First of all, he felt a semblance of ideological affinity and temperamental rapport with his populist American counterpart, who launched an electoral and political insurgency against the liberal establishment in America, which has been highly critical of Duterte and his human rights record. In particular, Duterte expected the Trump administration to take a softer and more pragmatic stance on democracy and human rights issues. After all, as Trump said in his inauguration, "We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow." He made it clear that America "will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all

¹ Dharel Placido, "Duterte to Trump: Mabuhay ka!," *ABS-CBN News*, 9 November 2016, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/11/09/16/duterte-to-trump-mabuhay-ka>

nations to put their own interests first.”² And soon the new American government put flesh on its rhetorical sea change. The subsequent decision by Trump’s Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, a former oil giant executive with perceived friendly ties with the Kremlin, to skip for the first time in history annual human rights briefing at the State Department further reinforced Trump administration’s value-neutral foreign policy streak. Specifically, Trump’s advisers called for stronger ties with estranged authoritarian allies, such as Thailand and the Philippines, in hopes of pushing back against China’s rising influence in Asia.³

Secondly, Manila was encouraged by the possibility that under the new administration, the superpower would take a more Reaganesque “peace through strength” approach to China, thus exerting less pressure on smaller neighbors such as the Philippines to take on the Asian juggernaut on their own. For Duterte, it was best for the Philippines to stay out of the conflict, maintain friendly ties with both superpowers, and, accordingly, outsource the constraint of Beijing’s revanchist policies in adjacent waters to Washington.⁴

² See the Inaugural Address, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

³ Laura Koran, “Tillerson skips release of annual human rights report,” *CNN International*, 3 March 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/03/politics/rex-tillerson-state-department-human-rights-report/index.html>

⁴ Mark Barabak, “Trump channels Reagan, promising ‘peace through strength,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 December 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/trailguide/la-na-trailguide-updates-trump-channels-reagan-promising-peace-1481076359-htmllstory.html>

After all, one of Duterte’s main strategic concerns, and impetus for normalizing ties with China, was the perceived lack in American commitment, specifically under the Obama administration, to fully counter Chinese maritime assertiveness. Throughout his election campaign, and well into his term in office, Duterte made it clear that he didn’t trust the Americans to come to the Philippines’ rescue if there were to be a conflict over disputed land features and resources with China. After all, the Obama administration refused to deploy military assets to and declare the Scarborough Shoal as part of its treaty obligations to the Southeast Asian country, when Beijing moved ahead with wresting control of the land feature in mid-2012 after a month-long naval standoff with Manila.

Moreover, there were hopes of smoother and more personalized interaction with the new American administration. In particular, Duterte hoped to leverage longstanding business ties between his special envoy to Washington, businessman Jose Antonio, who owns the Trump Tower in Manila, and the Trump family to build direct communication channels with the increasingly parochial, family-centric and businessmen-heavy White House. After all, from China to Argentina and Turkey, various governments sought better ties with America through precisely these long-term business ties between Trump and regime-friendly businessmen⁵. The combination of these factors provided a strong foundation for a diplomatic reset

⁵ Richard Paddock, “Trump Business Partner Is Philippines’ New Trade Envoy to U.S.,” *The New York Times*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/world/asia/donald-trump-philippines-jose-antonio.html>

between the two allies. There were also other encouraging elements in place.

Rebooting a Frayed Alliance

The appointment in November 2016, under Obama's presidency, of a new American Ambassador to the Philippines, Sun Kim, a seasoned Asian-born diplomat who extensively dealt with the North Korean regime, provided an additional anchor for the improvement of bilateral ties. Over the months, the American ambassador patiently rebuilt frayed bilateral ties, avoiding any direct verbal tussle with the president, while nudging the two countries towards cooperation in areas of shared interest, particularly defense interest.⁶ Shortly after Trump's inauguration, Duterte cleared the implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), an upgraded defense cooperation arrangement that was negotiated by the previous Benigno Aquino administration. Under the EDCA, the Philippines is expected to grant American defense forces permission to upgrade and enjoy expanded rotational access to key bases across the country. He also reiterated the importance of continued bilateral cooperation in the realms of counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The cooperation between the two allies in counter-terrorism in particular proved crucial, especially when, in late May 2017, Islamic State (IS)-linked elements laid a brutal siege on the Philippines' largest Muslim-majority city, Marawi, which extended over several

months. America proved a crucial source of assistance, providing state-of-the-art surveillance and intelligence support, deploying Special Forces to train the Philippine military in urban warfare, and transferred huge cache of weaponry to their Filipino counterparts. When the five-month-long siege ended, the Duterte administration specifically thanked America, among other key allies, for providing crucial assistance throughout the campaign.⁷

While deciding to nix several joint war games (i.e., Philippine Amphibious Landing Exercise [PHIBLEX] and the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training [CARAT]) in the South China Sea in order to improve ties with China, Duterte approved the bulk of bilateral exercises between the Philippines and the U.S., including the annual Balikatan (should-to-shoulder) exercises in May 2017.⁸ Observers largely interpreted this as a sign that the Filipino president was committed to maintaining the bedrock of bilateral security relations, despite his ongoing rapprochement with Beijing, which offered large-scale investment deals as well as potential compromise in the disputed South China Sea to the

⁷ Frances Mangosing, "Lorenzana thanks partner countries for help in Marawi siege," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. 23 October 2017, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/161038/philippine-news-updates-marawi-siege-marawi-liberation-maute-group-islamic-state-delfin-lorenzana-us-china-indonesia-australia-malaysia-brunei-singapore#ixzz5BSxwOefd>

⁸ Carmela Fonbuena, "1st PH-US Balikatan exercises under Duterte open," *Rappler.com*, 8 May 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/169168-balikatan-duterte-opening-philippines>

⁶ Partly based on interactions with the American ambassador to Manila Sung Kim during a private meeting in mid-2017.

Filipino leader. After all, Duterte had to also accommodate the America-leaning Philippine defense establishment. “The defense establishment, the military, never really wavered in their desire for their continuing support, partnership, alliance with the United States,” observed⁹ Dindo Manhit, president of the Stratbase ADR Institute, a Manila think tank.

The restoration of the Philippine-U.S. ties culminated in the Trump-Duterte meeting in November 2017 on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila. The two leaders discussed counter-terrorism cooperation, and a potential bilateral trade agreement¹⁰, while downplaying areas of conflict, particularly on human rights and democracy issues. Nonetheless, leading Filipino observers have remained doubtful as to whether the Duterte-Trump bromance has had a significant impact on Duterte’s foreign policy particularly towards China. At best, it may have avoided further hemorrhage in bilateral relations, but failed to restore aspects of the relationship that were downgraded under Duterte.

The Philippine-China-U.S. Strategic Triangle

“I don’t see Trump’s visit [to Manila] as having a substantial impact on Duterte’s

efforts to improve relations with China and Russia. On those fronts, nothing has actually changed. They are still improving far faster and better than [Manila’s relations] with the U.S.,” argued Jay Batongbacal, a leading maritime law expert in the Philippines.

Filipino experts tend to agree that under Duterte’s chairmanship, the ASEAN failed to stand up to China’s massive reclamation and militarization activities in the South China Sea. Trump’s visit to the summit failed to contribute any major change to ASEAN’s direction under the Philippines’ chairmanship. The regional body’s decision to push for a Code of Conduct (COC) – rather than support the Philippines’ 2016 arbitration award ruling at The Hague, or directly criticizing China’s actions in their joint statements – is seen merely as a pointless diplomatic nicety without any real impact on the ground.

In exchange for soft-pedaling on the South China Sea, Duterte expects economic benefits from Beijing. “China now sees the Philippines as a welcome partner in its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has also come around to signing with ASEAN a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, although at best that will be a protracted process, and at worst, an exercise in futility,” Baviera argues.¹¹ Moreover, Duterte’s China policy eased tensions with other Southeast Asian countries, which disagreed with the Aquino administration’s

⁹ Michael Sullivan, “Trump And Duterte Could Reset The Shaky U.S.-Philippine Alliance,” National Public Radio, 11 November 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/11/563475763/trump-to-meet-philippines-duterte>

¹⁰ Partly based on discussions with informed Filipino diplomats and American officials in late-2017.

¹¹ Aileen Baviera, “Duterte’s China policy shift: strategy or serendipity?,” *East Asia Forum*, 13 August 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/08/13/dutertes-china-policy-shift-strategy-or-serendipity/>

confrontational policy towards China, including the decision to take China to international court over the South China Sea disputes.

Experts argue that despite maintaining the EDCA and other defense agreements with America, including the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the 1997 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), Duterte has inflicted significant damage on bilateral relations. The clear winner has been China, which has enjoyed a de facto strategic impunity in adjacent waters. “Unlike previous *Balikatan* that involved massive combat drills directed at a hypothetical threat emanating from the South China Sea, [latest] exercises focused on humanitarian, cybersecurity and counter-terrorism exercises,” observed Renato De Castro, an expert on Philippine foreign policy at De La Salle University. “Duterte’s focus on non-traditional security has essentially rendered the alliance useless in constraining and deterring Chinese maritime expansion into the South China Sea.”¹²

The overall verdict among leading experts on the Philippine-U.S. alliance is that the Trump administration managed to prevent a further deterioration in bilateral relations, expand cooperation in counter-terrorism¹³ and other areas of defense

partnership that were decoupled from the South China Sea disputes, and significantly reduced verbal tussles and undiplomatic exchanges that animated Duterte’s exchanges with the Obama administration. Nonetheless, the Philippines has continued its strategic tilt towards China, while constraining the ability of the U.S. to leverage its alliance with the Philippines to project power in the region, whether through large-scale war games (e.g., PHIBLEX), access to strategically-positioned Philippine bases in the proximity of disputed waters (i.e., Bautista Air Base), and/or usage of Philippine ports for conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. The Philippine-U.S. alliance survives, but in a highly diminished form.

As of this writing, and based on conversations with officials in the U.S. State Department and the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs¹⁴, there are no indications that Duterte has plans to visit the White House anytime soon. This is unprecedented in Philippine history, since almost all Filipino presidents had the United States among their first foreign trips, visiting the Philippines’ century-old ally on multiple occasions during their tenure. Despite his robust and cordial personal bond with his American counterpart, Duterte seems uninterested in fully reviving or deepening bilateral strategic ties with Washington.

¹² Renato De Castro, “Beijing gone from foe to friend in Manila,” *East Asia Forum*. 25 January 2018 ; <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/01/25/beijing-gone-from-foe-to-friend-in-manila/>

¹³ Partly based on exchanges with former US Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, in June 2017.

¹⁴ Based on exchanges with Philippine Ambassador to U.S. Jose Manuel Romualdez and State Department officials in late March, 2018, in Washington D.C.

Despite his good relations with the Australian government, Duterte also skipped the Australia-ASEAN Summit in Sydney in mid-March, another indication of the Philippines' still frosty relations with the West. In Duterte's mind, he wants to deal with the West, but on his own terms. The Filipino president has shown zero tolerance for any criticism of his human rights record by any Western government. For him, it's important for the Philippines to lessen its dependence on traditional Western allies by reaching out to alternative pillars of power in the region. In particular, he seems interested in further deepening bilateral relations with China, which has, in a matter of months, transformed from a rival to a neighbor and, increasingly, a preeminent partner for national development. China has also emerged as a key strategic patron, which has provided support for Duterte against the international community's criticism of his human rights record. Beijing, for instance, has openly supported Duterte's controversial war on drugs as well as his decision to end the Philippines' ratification of the Rome Statute, effectively ending the Southeast Asian country's membership in the International Criminal Court (ICC). As a sign of blossoming bilateral relations, Duterte will be visiting China, for the third time during his presidency, in early April for the Boao Forum in Hainan, China's version of the World Economic Forum.¹⁵

Under Duterte, a century-old alliance with America is no longer sacred or special, while China has emerged as an unlikely ally. The Philippines' dramatic strategic turnaround is a reflection of a more profound shift in the Asian balance of power, with smaller Southeast Asian countries serving as a key benchmark of the new pecking order. Yet, there is no guarantee that Duterte will manage to continue his fast and furious pivot to China if the latter continues to press its claims against the Philippines' in the South China Sea. Ultimately, if there is anything that is constant about the Philippines' relations vis-à-vis China, these are the twin realities of unpredictability and discontinuity over the course of time. Meanwhile, America has managed to maintain relatively strong relations with its former Asian colony through two world wars, the long Cold War, the Global War on Terror, and the many geopolitical vicissitudes of the new century.

¹⁵ Confirmed, based on exchanges between the author and Philippine Ambassador to China Jose Santiago Sta. Romana on April 1.