

Philippine president calls for US special forces to leave Mindanao

By Joseph Santolan
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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, in a speech before newly sworn-in government officials on September 12, called for US special forces to leave the southern island of Mindanao. The next day, in an address to the Philippine Air Force, he said the Philippines would no longer stage joint patrols with the United States in the South China Sea.

Duterte also declared he was looking to secure arms from China and Russia, saying he would send Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana to these countries to see what they had to offer.

The statements mark a further souring of ties between Manila and Washington under the new president. The US State Department responded by saying it had received no formal notice from the Philippines regarding its special forces in Mindanao and thus would not pull the troops out.

Duterte's cabinet promptly went into damage control. Presidential spokesperson Ernesto Abella stated that Duterte was concerned with the risks that American forces faced. The president's statements were not "policies set in stone" but were "layered" and "could be interpreted in several ways."

Defense Secretary Lorenzana told the House Appropriations Committee the next day that American troops would not leave Mindanao, saying: "We still need them there because they have the surveillance capability that our armed forces don't have."

Duterte is an exceptionally volatile figure and many of his public statements are greeted with public questions regarding his seriousness. His policy pronouncements, including those regarding Washington, are invariably delivered in the midst of

lengthy, off-the-cuff, profanity-laden public speeches. Monday's speech was an example. He spoke extemporaneously for 30 minutes, wandering in a stream of consciousness manner from topic to topic.

Unlike his press secretary, Duterte expressed no concern for the safety of American special forces operatives. "The Americans are real hypocrites," he stated. "They know we have a real problem with drugs." He defended his campaign to kill "tens of thousands" of drug suspects and pointed to the violence of the 1899-1902 American conquest of the Philippines to justify his own crimes.

Duterte then stated: "For as long as we stay with America we will never have peace. This is why the special forces have to go. There are lots of whites in Mindanao. They have to go. Even if you're a black, or a white, but as long as you're an American you have to go."

In the same speech, the president accused the Chinese—using the racial slur "mga intsik"—of being responsible for the drug trade in the Philippines. He said his rivals were trying to impeach him. He told the assembled audience that social ills were the product of politicians "not having the balls to carry out the death penalty."

Duterte stated that anyone who has used drugs for over a year "cannot be rehabilitated. The only solution is to kill them, grind them up, and feed them to the animals."

Duterte delivers numerous such lengthy speeches every week. His most common audience is the military, to whom he delivers similar unprepared addresses two or three times a week.

The one consistent theme of all of Duterte's speeches is his commitment to the violent suppression of the population in the name of his war on drugs. The official

death toll of those killed by police and vigilantes since he took office on July 1 is now over 3,500. More people have been murdered in the first two and half months of the Duterte government than during the entirety of the martial law dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos from 1972 to 1981.

Last week, Duterte declared an open-ended state of national emergency in response to a “state of lawlessness.” He called upon the military “to run the country.” His administration has clarified that the state of emergency authorizes warrantless arrests. Senator Richard Gordon recently put forward a bill authorizing the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, which forbids detention without trial.

Duterte is, in his extemporaneous articulation of policy, looking to cultivate an audience for his fascistic policies. He routinely resorts to nationalist appeals, including publicly denouncing “Americans.” He said on Monday: “I do not like the Americans. It’s simply a matter of principle for me.”

According to the Philippine Department of Defense, there are only 107 US special forces in question in Mindanao. The issue of their presence has become, for Washington, a secondary matter. First stationed in 2002, the US regarded these troops as necessary to re-establish a foothold in the Philippines after the closure in 1992 of its major facilities—the Subic Bay naval base and Clark Airfield. Now, however, the chief US focus is the war drive against China in the South China Sea.

What Duterte’s pronouncements increasingly call into doubt, however, is Manila’s commitment to the renewed basing of US forces in the country under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which was signed under Duterte’s predecessor, Benigno Aquino. The termination of this agreement is something Washington will not tolerate.

Duterte has repeatedly said he intends to honor the EDCA treaty obligations, but his volatile nationalist posturing calls these statements into question.

Greg Poling of the influential US think-tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) told the *Wall Street Journal*: “There are two camps in Washington—one that thinks Duterte is about to push the alliance off a cliff and there is nothing US policy makers can do about it, and one that continues to argue that the alliance is just too important to both countries

and so a way forward must be found. But that latter group is losing the argument day by day as Duterte continues this anti-American rhetoric.”

Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay arrives in Washington tonight to meet with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and speak before the CSIS. Doubtless he will attempt to patch things up in the wake of Duterte’s latest statements. It is noteworthy, however, that he is not scheduled to meet with Secretary of State John Kerry.

Defense Secretary Lorenzana is scheduled to be meeting US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in Hawaii before the end of the month.

Poling’s remarks make clear that a growing section of US policy makers sees Duterte “pushing the alliance off a cliff.” The “alliance” is the long-established ties between a former colonial master and its colony. The Philippines has, for over a century, served as Washington’s stepping-stone to the Asia Pacific.

As Washington ratchets up its drive to subordinate China by military means to US economic and political dominance, it will not tolerate the loss of this stepping-stone. There has not been a single political transition during the last hundred years in the Philippines in which Washington did not play a direct role. If Duterte’s nationalist posturing continues and relations further sour, his term in office may prove to be short one.

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