

Philippine foreign secretary says Manila will no longer be US “little brown brother”

By Joseph Santolan
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Relations between Manila and Washington continued to sour as Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay told a gathering at the US Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on September 15 that the Philippines would no longer be the United States’ “little brown brother.”

With Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte attempting to rehabilitate diplomatic and trade relations with Beijing, downplaying the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, Washington has begun using his murderous drug war, which the US initially funded, as a means of pressuring his administration back into line with the interests of US imperialism.

Duterte has responded by using nationalist rhetoric to defend his criminal policies. While he continues to insist that he supports the basing of US forces in the country under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), his conciliatory moves toward China and his demagogic opposition to the United States have resulted in tense relations between Manila and Washington.

Last week, US President Barack Obama canceled a scheduled meeting with Duterte at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Laos in a display of Washington’s displeasure. Yasay’s visit to Washington was meant to patch things up.

During the question and answer period after his speech at the CSIS, the first question was asked by Amy Searight, senior resident Southeast Asian specialist and former deputy assistant secretary of the US Defense Department. She pointedly questioned Duterte’s human rights record, citing the mounting number of extra-judicial killings.

Yasay responded: “You don’t go to the Philippines telling us, I will give you something, I will help you grow, but here is the checklist you have to comply with and we will lecture you on human rights ... We cannot forever be the little brown brothers of America.”

Yasay announced that the Philippines would send a formal special envoy to China to negotiate trade and diplomatic deals with China. He said the topic of the South China Sea would initially be excluded in order to facilitate discussion. He added, however, that the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) regarding the territorial dispute was, for the Philippines, an essential precondition to discussion on the South China Sea.

The same day, a Philippine Senate inquiry into the extra-judicial killings launched under the Duterte administration heard testimony from a witness, Edgar Matobato, who claimed to be a leading hit man in the Davao death squads that operated for years under then Davao Mayor Duterte.

Matobato claimed that, on Duterte’s direct orders, he carried out fifty executions from 1988 to 2003 in Davao and was witness to many more. He claimed Duterte personally executed people with an Uzi and that on occasion they had fed the victims’ corpses to crocodiles. “We killed people on an almost daily basis,” he told the Senate.

Washington latched onto this testimony. US State Department deputy spokesperson Mark Toner stated: “These are serious allegations and we take them seriously, we will look into them.” US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) called for a UN investigation. “President Duterte can’t be expected to investigate himself, so it is crucial that the United Nations is called in to lead such an effort,” Brad Adams, HRW’s Asia director, said in a statement on September 16.

This is sheer hypocrisy. Aside from lurid details about crocodiles and Uzis, there was nothing particularly new in Matobato’s testimony. Duterte himself has repeatedly affirmed in public statements that he headed Davao’s death squads. He told the press earlier this year that he oversaw nearly 1,500 killings in Davao during his terms as mayor.

Washington has known for decades that Duterte is a murderer. A confidential State Department cable from January 2005 published by WikiLeaks, reveals that Washington was fully aware that the Davao death squads were run by Duterte. Duterte took office as president on June 30, explicitly sanctioning state murder and launching police and vigilante killings that have thus far resulted in a death toll over 3,500 in the space of two and half months.

On July 30, as the body count crossed 500, US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Duterte in Manila and committed \$32 million to fund the new administration's so-called anti-drug crusade. As the death toll continued to mount, the international press, particularly the *New York Times*, was pointedly silent on the question of human rights.

The Senate revelations in Manila have changed nothing. The growing stream of negative press about extra-judicial killings in the Philippines is in large part an expression of the machinations of Washington, which will happily tolerate and fund murder if it furthers the geopolitical interests of US imperialism. Duterte is not sufficiently serving the interests of the US drive to war against China and so Washington invokes its concern for human rights. Washington claims that it is shocked to discover that this self-avowed head of death squads is, in fact, the head of death squads.

Manila has responded to this pressure by moving further away from Washington. Speaking on September 16 at the Philippine embassy in Washington, Yasay announced that Manila was looking to hold bilateral talks with China over the South China Sea dispute "without any preconditions." This further escalates tensions between Manila and Washington, as the phrase "without any preconditions" means that Manila would agree to refrain from mentioning the PCA ruling in its talks with Beijing.

The international media has claimed repeatedly that Duterte's killing spree enjoys mass popular support, often claiming that 90 percent of the population endorses these policies. No evidence is offered for what amounts to a slanderous accusation against the entire population.

The police and vigilante killings, as well as Duterte's declaration of a nationwide state of emergency authorizing military checkpoints and warrantless arrests, does enjoy the support of the majority of the ruling class and large sections of the petty bourgeoisie, who have come to serve as his vulgar cheer squads on the Internet.

A majority of members of the Senate committee

investigating the extra-judicial killings, dismissed Matobato's testimony as "irrelevant" and refused to provide him with state protection. The House of Representatives, meanwhile, launched an investigation, not into the death squads but into the alleged crimes of the leading political figure investigating the killings in the Senate, Senator Leila de Lima.

Senator Koko Pimentel embodied the gross hypocrisy of ruling class support for Duterte when he stated: "We don't know who is behind the killings." In speech after speech, Duterte has called for the murder of alleged drug criminals and granted immunity to the killers, yet the Senate is flummoxed as to who is responsible.

As Washington's displeasure with Manila grows, a section of the Philippines ruling class could emerge to stage Duterte's ouster. Duterte is carefully cultivating his control over the military to secure his hold over state power. He meets with and addresses troops on virtually a daily basis and has directly incorporated the military into his campaign of state murder.

Duterte declared on Monday that his anti-drug campaign had become a "war of the government against the government." Sections of the legislature, judiciary and local governance were part of the drug trade, he stated, and he would turn his forces against them. He previously declared that Senator de Lima is a key figure in the drug crime syndicates. Duterte announced that due to the influence of drugs he would postpone the upcoming local government elections indefinitely.

Preparations for martial law in the Philippines are far advanced. The military and police kill with impunity; arrests are carried out without warrant; elections have been postponed; and there is a bill in the Senate authorizing the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus. Significantly, Duterte is proposing to formally rehabilitate former dictator Ferdinand Marcos by giving him a state burial in October.

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