

Philippine president in China seeks to cement closer ties

By Peter Symonds
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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte arrived in China yesterday for a four-day state visit seeking a massive boost to his country's economy from Chinese aid, loans and investment. In the lead-up to the trip, he bluntly told the media that he was intent on "reconfiguring" foreign policy away from the United States and towards China and Russia.

Beijing is certainly laying out the red carpet for Duterte. He will meet with top Chinese leaders including President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang and National People's Congress chairman Zhang Dejiang, as well as representatives of the Bank of China. The Philippine president is travelling with an entourage of more than 400 business leaders, including some of the country's wealthiest tycoons.

The *Philippine Star* cited trade secretary Ramon Lopez as saying that the visit to China will deliver up to \$3 billion in loans and grants. Duterte, a fascistic populist, will be seeking billions of dollars in Chinese investment in infrastructure projects, including rail. He declared in a speech last week that he had "a good feeling" that China "really wants to help us in a big way" and promised hospitals and schools.

The visit marks an abrupt shift. The previous Philippine President Benigno Aquino functioned as the point man in South East Asia for the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," aggressively pressing Philippine territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. With US assistance, he mounted a legal case in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to challenge China's maritime claims.

Relations with China deteriorated markedly as Aquino strengthened military ties with Washington including the signing and implementation of a new basing arrangement—the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which has already

opened up five Philippine military bases to US forces.

Since coming to office in June, Duterte has called US military ties into question, ended joint US-Philippine naval patrols in the South China Sea, called for the removal of US troops from Mindanao and initiated a review of EDCA. He has also delivered several tirades against Washington over its growing criticism of his murderous anti-drug war that has claimed more than 3,600 victims in extra-judicial killings by police and vigilantes. Most recently Duterte told President Obama to "go to hell" in response to critical US remarks.

Duterte has signalled that he is open to closer military ties as well as economic relations with China and Russia. He told Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television on Monday that he would consider military drills with China or Russia. "I have given enough time for the Americans to play with Filipino soldiers," he said, reiterating that recent joint exercises with the US would be the last.

The Philippine president also said that he would seek to buy military equipment from China during his visit, though not in large amounts. He said that he wanted small, fast-attack boats to fight "terrorism."

In an interview with China's state-owned Xinhua news agency, Duterte set the stage for beginning negotiations with Beijing over the South China Sea disputes. "There is no sense in going to war," he said. "There is no sense fighting over a body of water. It is better to talk than war. We want to talk about friendship, we want to talk about cooperation and most of all, we want to talk about business."

Resolving the longstanding territorial disputes will not be straightforward, however. Beijing is acutely sensitive to any mention of the ruling by The Hague court in July which overwhelmingly favoured Manila—and thus Washington. Any reference to the

legal decision will undoubtedly take place behind closed doors.

One of the key issues is the status of the Scarborough Shoal which China has effectively controlled since 2012 after the Philippine navy attempted to eject Chinese fishing boats from the area. Both countries claim sovereignty. Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio warned last week that conceding the Philippines' rights in disputed waters would be grounds for the president's impeachment.

In a bid to fend off domestic critics, Duterte declared this week that he would not sell-out to China. "I will not bargain anywhere, we will continue to insist that is ours," he insisted.

Duterte's tilt towards Beijing has provoked growing fears in Washington that he is undermining both the US diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China across the region. The Obama administration had clearly been hoping to ratchet up the pressure on China after The Hague decision and is relying on Philippine bases to intensify its military operations in the South China Sea.

More broadly, the US is concerned that any move by its long-time ally and former colony into the camp of China would encourage other strategic partners and allies to follow suit. Andrew Shearer, an adviser at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), told the *New York Times* this week: "If China succeeds in peeling the Philippines away from the United States, it would be a major win in Beijing's long-term campaign to weaken US alliances in the region. It will feed fears that the right mix of intimidation and inducements could influence other partners to distance themselves from Washington."

Bonnie Glaser, another CSIS adviser, pointed out that a downgrading of the alliance with the Philippines could damage the US if it was no longer able to fly its military surveillance planes out of Philippine bases. However, in remarks to the *Guardian*, she pointedly added: "I just don't think the people in the Philippines are going to support an end to this alliance or a weakening of our cooperation."

The comment, which undoubtedly reflects the closed-door discussions in US military and intelligence circles, is a thinly-veiled threat. Glaser is not referring to the Philippine people in general, but to sections of

the military, the state apparatus and corporate elite with close ties to Washington, which are quite capable of engineering Duterte's removal—through one means or another—if he seriously endangers American interests.

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