

Philippines: Duterte's foreign policy remains subservient, not independent

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President Duterte's recent pronouncements regarding the country's relationship with the United States, China, and Russia do not signal an "independent foreign policy."

While the President's criticism of our subservient and mendicant relationship with the US is of course welcome, the President himself has made it clear that his criticisms were only a response to US officials' concerns about the President's brutal "war on drugs."

This in itself does not constitute "independence."

Independence does not mean having the freedom to, in the President's words, "happily slaughter" thousands of drug pushers or dependents. Independence does not mean renouncing our duties and obligations to humanity as responsible members of the international community.

Secondly, despite his repeated threats and bluster, the President has not actually abrogated the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Visiting Forces Agreement, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, and other onerous deals that constitute the basis of our unequal and mendicant relationship with the US.

Despite his provocative words, he and his alter egos have repeatedly backtracked on his announcements that the Philippines will no longer conduct military exercises or cut our ties with the US altogether.

Clearly, if the President were serious about breaking with the US, he would have set the ball rolling for the repeal of the treaties mentioned earlier and stuck to his word regarding the military exercises.

But the fact that the President has not done so only lends credence to our fears that, first, he is only instrumentalizing legitimate concerns about our unequal relationship with the US in order to obscure and delegitimize criticisms of his violent, anti-poor, and ineffective "war on drugs"; and that, second, he is merely trying to extract even more concessions from the US while appearing to be critical of imperialism.

Finally, we do not believe that the President actually favors an independent foreign policy because he only seeks to replace the "alliance" with the US with an alliance with other rising powers, namely China and Russia. Indeed, in line with this, he has even announced that the government would not press the Philippines' claim to the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Instead of signalling an 'independent foreign policy,' this actually signals the beginning of yet another era of subservience—only this time, to a different or to a more varied set of masters.

For not only is China's commitment to human rights and international law questionable at best, China has also adamantly opposed just and peaceful solutions to the disputes in the region.

In this context, Duterte's refusal to even discuss the country's claim to the Scarborough Shoal is tantamount to sending China the message that it can just use its might and throw its weight around to bully everyone else into submission.

This will not only undermine efforts to arrive at a just and peaceful settlement to the dispute, such as proposals for equitably sharing the resources of the disputed area among the region's peoples, it could also effectively lock in the Philippines to a subordinate position vis-a-vis China.

Instead of breaking with the past and inaugurating a new era in our relations with other countries, then, Duterte seems to be paving the way for more of the same: Rather than independence, we see subservience; rather than sovereignty, we discern surrender.

In order to achieve real independence, we demand, among others, the immediate abrogation of the MDT, the VFA and the EDCA. We demand peaceful but just solutions to the disputes in the region. And we demand equal relations with all countries based on the spirit of genuine international brotherhood, cooperation, and mutual benefit.

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P.S.

* Posted on October 12, 2016:

<https://manggagawangpilipino.org/2016/10/12/dutertes-foreign-policy-remains-subservient-not-independent/>