

# Philippines - On Duterte's strategy: Why diplomacy can't be a one-man show

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KYOTO - Just into his fourth month as head of state, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has managed to become one of the most controversial actors on the global stage, rivalling if not eclipsing Donald Trump. His war on drugs, marred by the extra-judicial execution of drug users and peddlers, won him the title of "serial killer" on French television. More recently, his telling US President Obama to "go to hell" and his declaration of "separation" from the United States and "alignment" with China and Russia during a state visit to Beijing has alarmed and befuddled governments in the East Asian region.

Foremost among these is the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Japan, which has been tightening its ties with Washington and considers the Philippines a vital element in the US-Japan strategy of encircling China and limiting its capability of projecting its maritime power. A visit to Tokyo by Duterte earlier this week did little to reassure the Japanese. Coming out of a meeting with Duterte, a top foreign policy official of the Japanese government told me that he found Duterte "unnecessarily provocative" towards the United States.

## Breaking down Duterte

What exactly is Duterte up to and why are the Philippines' neighbors so alarmed?

If I were to break down the complex political animal that is the President, I would probably highlight the following elements:

First, one must not underestimate his personal history and psychology. He is likely to have retained the anti-American sentiments that were prevalent during his student days in Manila in the 1960s. He is also a very thin-skinned person, and he took US criticism of the extra-judicial killings that has been the trademark of his war on drugs personally. Also, he does not see a distinction between himself and the state and thus views criticism of himself as an assault on national sovereignty. *L'état, c'est moi* [1] may well be the most fitting description of the way he views his relationship to the Philippine state.

One must also point out that he is attracted to China because its authoritarian system appeals to his own strongman personality. China's telling off the US that domestic policies, including the state's

stance towards individual rights, are none of Washington's business, is something that appeals to Duterte. This political psychological affinity towards Beijing is something that must not be underestimated.

Second, being a lawyer, Duterte knows that, despite its military treaties with the Philippines, Washington's position is that it is not legally obligated to support and protect the Philippines' territorial claims in the South China Sea or West Philippine Sea. Indeed, the US has been explicit that it "does not intervene" in sovereignty issues.

Third, Duterte knows that all that the US-Philippine Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014 did was to put the Philippines on one side of a superpower struggle, with all the costs and few of the benefits that go with being a junior partner of such an alliance. Despite his penchant for "ideological" statements (when he is not uttering curses), he is a foreign policy "realist" who knows that Washington's strategic goal is to contain China, scorns its rhetoric about it being a benevolent hegemon, and is impatient with claims that there is a coincidence of interests between Washington and Manila.

His pragmatic streak is also evident in his ambiguous statements on the future of the defense treaties with the US. Although he might be bent on pushing for a more independent policy for the Philippines and distancing Manila from Washington, he is not likely to immediately scrap the existing military treaties with the United States. He may, however, put them in cold storage.

### **Duterte versus the System**

In any event, whatever may be the motivations for his distancing himself from Washington and declaring his alignment with China, Duterte's behavior constitutes a profound challenge to the post-World War II system of regional security in the Asia-Pacific. That system has had three basic assumptions.

First assumption: the countries of East Asia cannot be relied to on to create a system of regional peace and security by themselves.

Second assumption: only US military power and a system of US-dominated bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia can maintain regional peace and security, not a multilateral system like North American Treaty Organization or a collective security agreement incorporating rival countries.

Third assumption: the interests of Washington and the interests of the Asia Pacific countries coincide, making the US not a coercive but a benevolent hegemon.

Whether he realizes it or not, Duterte is putting a spanner not only in US-Philippine relations but on a whole system of regional security, and this is why the elites of Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and a number of Southeast Asian countries that are wedded to this system are worried about him and the example he poses to other peoples in the region. From their point of view, he is a destabilizing element.

From the perspective of many others like myself, on the other hand, he has the potential of unfreezing the glacial structure of security left over from the Cold War and opening the way to a new regional system of peace and security that does not rest on an increasingly volatile balance of power strategy promoted by Washington and supported by dependent elites.

## **Washington's response and Duterte's options**

But key questions remain: Is this all bluff and bluster? If not, will Duterte's disengagement from the US continue to be a volatile one-man show or will it be pursued systematically? In moving away from Washington, will Duterte be able to forge a strategy that would avoid making the Philippines a dependency of China? And, of course, one cannot discount how Washington would react should it come to the conclusion that Duterte really means business.

The US and Philippine military and intelligence establishments have very close ties that go back to the colonial period. The US supported Ferdinand Marcos, and it played a key role in deposing him when he became a liability. Washington knows that it stands not only losing the Philippines but also seeing a whole edifice of regional hegemony that has been in place since the end of the Second World War seriously compromised.

Diplomatic isolation of Duterte could be the US response, which is why Duterte's patient cultivation of neighbors like the ASEAN countries and even core US allies like South Korea and Japan—if not to win them over to a new paradigm of regional security, at least to neutralize them—is a must.

But the US response could be more ruthless, that is, destabilization on the domestic front. This is an approach that a hawkish Hillary Clinton, should she be elected president, might not be averse to taking. This is why, if not an effective consensus, Duterte needs a critical mass behind him, especially since pro-American feelings remain widespread in the population. That critical mass remains to be forged.

Many potential supporters fear that his unplanned, indeed haphazard, way of going about his project may derail it and provide the US with the opportunity to destabilize his administration. Others who would otherwise get behind him are put off by what they see as his indiscriminate embrace of China, seeing this as exchanging one master for another. To win them over, Duterte needs to show a hardnosed approach towards the Chinese, like using a phasing out of the US military presence in the country as a bargaining chip in exchange for China's demilitarizing its presence in the South China Sea.

Another significant number of supporters of a nationalist course are reluctant to lend active support since they are repelled by his murderous ways of imposing law and order on the domestic front. To gain their backing for his realignment, he may have to do nothing less than stop the killings.

Rodrigo Duterte has indeed kicked up a storm. It remains to be seen whether Typhoon Duterte will gather strength or peter out in the foreseeable future. The outcome will greatly depend on Duterte himself. One thing is certain: if he continues to conduct his diplomacy as a bombastic one-man show, he is bound to fail.

**Walden Bello**

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\* Special to InterAksyon.com. The online news portal of TV5. October 29, 2016 1:51 PM:  
<http://www.interaksyon.com/article/133809/analysis--on-dutertes-strategy-why-diplomacy-cant-be-a-one-man-show>

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## Footnotes

[1] The state is myself.