

War on Drugs & geopolitics - Donald Trump tells Duterte: 'You're doing a great job', Philippines claims

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Despite thousands of deaths in controversial war on drugs, US president praised his counterpart in Manila, a spokesman says.

Donald Trump has told Rodrigo Duterte that he is “doing a great job” despite knowing about the Philippine president’s controversial war on drugs.

The US president’s invitation to Duterte to visit him at the White House unleashed a storm of criticism in Washington because of the drugs campaign, which has killed thousands of people over the past 10 months.

The White House defended the invitation made during a phone call on Saturday, acknowledging that though human rights were an important issue, Washington needed allies in Asia to address the global threat of North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons.

On Tuesday, Duterte’s spokesman, Ernesto Abella, said Trump was very much aware of the criticism of Duterte, but had praised him for “doing a great job considering the weight and the enormity of the conditions in the Philippines”.

It was not clear if Abella was quoting Trump as praising the anti-drugs campaign specifically, or Duterte’s performance as president in general.

“I’m sure he’s aware of all these considerations,” Abella added, referring to Trump.

“However, from his point of view, it seems like the president of the Philippines is doing a sensible job.”

Duterte has received widespread condemnation in the west for failure to curtail the killings and address activists’ allegations of systematic, state-sponsored murders by police of drug users and dealers, which the authorities reject.

Duterte has also received praise, however, for his handling of one of the world’s fastest-growing economies, and a policy agenda geared towards supporting farmers and small businesses, developing infrastructure and fighting poverty in a country where a fifth of the people live on less than \$1 a day.

Critics said Trump had gone a step too far with an invitation that was tantamount to an endorsement of Duterte’s bloody approach to law and order.

Duterte is also known for his foul language in lambasting the United States on a near-daily basis for what he calls a history of hypocrisy. He last week called the New York Times “assholes” for its coverage of his anti-drugs campaign.

Ben Cardin, a ranking member of the foreign relations committee of the US Senate, said he was “deeply disturbed” by the invitation, and said he would introduce legislation to send a warning to Duterte, which would include a ban on arms sales to the Philippine police.

“This is a man who has boasted publicly about killing his own citizens,” Cardin said in a statement. “Ignoring human rights will not advance US interests in the Philippines or any place else. Just the opposite.”

Abella also reiterated that Duterte had acknowledged Trump’s invitation, but had not accepted it.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/03/trump-tells-duterte-youre-doing-a-great-job-philippines-claims>

How to stop Donald Trump from embracing strongman Rodrigo Duterte

The US president often closes an eye to autocrats. But there are ways to prevent him from drawing too close to leaders like Duterte.

Donald Trump’s invitation for Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, to visit the US further reveals his tendency to embrace authoritarian strongmen abroad. The main question, though, is not whether Duterte should be invited (he should not). Rather, the real question is how should the US under Trump – who himself holds traits of the strongman – deal with an allied country that has democratically elected an autocrat like Duterte?

Since taking office, Duterte has embarked on a widespread anti-drug campaign in the Philippines that has resulted in the killing of thousands of Filipinos, often carried out by the police or groups affiliated with the authorities. Human Rights Watch claims that at least 7,000 people have died as a result. A lawyer in the Philippines has accused Duterte of crimes against humanity. Duterte has bragged about personally gunning down people when he was a mayor.

But the Philippines is an important US ally in a strategically vital region. Presidents Barack Obama and Benigno Aquino III – Duterte’s predecessor – revamped the alliance partnership in part because of growing Chinese assertiveness that threatened the Philippines’ and US’s interests in the South China Sea. The Philippines and the US have also worked together to fight an Islamic terrorist insurgency in the southern part of the country, where US special forces have operated alongside Filipino counterparts for years.

This complicated dynamic is nothing new to the US. For decades it has tried to balance strategic interests in partnering with autocratic regimes while trying not to condone the domestic policies of

those partners. This is perhaps even more complicated in a democracy like the Philippines, which elected Duterte freely and fairly, and where Duterte draws high levels of support.

Trump's election, however, has added a new twist. Trump often criticizes aspects of the American democratic system, including calling our system of checks and balances "a bad thing for the country". He has twice attempted to implement his Muslim ban, and attacked judges who have intervened to block the ban. Trump's chief of staff said the administration is looking into ways to curb the media's right to criticize the president, including potentially through changes to the first amendment of the constitution.

While an average US president would set a tone across the government to downgrade engagement with the Philippines, it's clear Trump is unwilling to do that. Instead, Trump is praising Duterte's violent campaign.

So, what to do?

First, Trump's staff needs to keep the two leaders apart. The invite to the White House should not go forward. And when Trump goes to Manila in the fall for the annual Asean summit - something he should do to advance important US interests in Asia - the White House should avoid a bilateral portion of the visit, limiting Trump and Duterte to a short, closed-door meeting. This may be a tall order when the president's instincts go the other direction, but it's when good staff work is most necessary.

Second, the US should begin withholding certain types of assistance, and should continue the trend that the Obama administration started to move law enforcement assistance to other areas such as maritime security and human rights training for police. The US should also scrupulously enforce the Leahy law, which prohibits security cooperation with individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses.

Third, Congress must make its voice heard. If the president wants to embrace an autocratic leader like Duterte without any costs, Congress should assert its oversight authority. This means not only criticizing the Trump administration, but also potentially legislating restrictions on how the US engages with the Philippines.

Fourth, the US needs to manage alliance issues at lower levels. The importance of the US-Philippines alliance will outlast the terms of both Trump and Duterte; weathering this storm with the alliance intact is crucial. Maintaining maritime security cooperation, coordination within regional institutions and work on counterterrorism and trafficking can be done below the cabinet level. And US officials should voice concerns over human rights violations publicly and privately.

Fifth, civilians in the US and the Philippines need to speak up and act. Concerned constituents in both countries can play an important role in getting their governments to care about human rights abuses in the Philippines.

The US has dealt with leaders like Duterte before, but not when led by a president that possesses a similarly undemocratic strongman streak. The problem goes beyond the Philippines: Trump congratulated Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on his success in eroding Turkish democracy, praised Egyptian dictator Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and invited Thai coup leader Prime Minister (and general) Prayut Chan-ocha for a White House visit. Blunting Trump's worst instincts will require a motivated and savvy US bureaucracy and a vocal and active Congress.

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