



The US-Philippine alliance is stronger than you think by Gregory Poling

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The US-Philippine alliance is not an agreement between the government of the United States and President Rodrigo Duterte. It is a compact between the peoples of our two countries. Alliances are built on shared interests, but they are strengthened by shared history and values. The Philippines and the United States have all three in spades.

The alliance, formalized in the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, was forged in the shared sacrifices of World War II and continued through wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, as well as the global fight against jihadist terrorism. It evolved from its Cold War roots, through the lean years between the ousting of US forces from bases in the Philippines in 1992 and the signing of the Visiting Forces Agreement in 1998, to a decade-and-a-half of joint operations against terrorists in the southern Philippines, and now a shared commitment to counter the maritime coercion Beijing has brought to bear against Filipino troops and civilians in the South China Sea.

As such, it is understandable that when Duterte announced a “separation” from the United States, both in economic and security relations, most Filipinos were as shocked as their US counterparts. I was in Manila at the time sharing in the disbelief that greeted his proclamation. A break from the United States is not what the people of the Philippines want – a poll published just days before Duterte’s announcement in Beijing found that 76 percent of Filipinos have “much trust” in the United States, more than any other country in the poll, while 55 percent have “little trust” in China. Polling by Pew last year found that an astounding 92 percent of Filipinos have positive views of the United States – higher than any other citizenry in the world – and 71 percent support a greater US military presence in Asia.

The United States is the third-largest trading partner of the Philippines, after Japan and China. It is the number-two investor in the country, providing over one-fifth of foreign direct investment in 2013 while investment from China is negligible. It is also the largest source of remittances to the economy, thanks to the huge Filipino-American community, and a major provider of development assistance. Little wonder then that Duterte’s economic team issued a statement within hours contradicting his pledge of economic separation from the United States.

Within 24 hours of Duterte’s speech in Beijing, he had been publicly rebutted by Philippine senators, respected statesmen, and prominent experts. Almost immediately upon returning to Manila on Friday, he walked back his statement, but the fallout continues. In addition to spooking his own people, Duterte has other international partners deeply worried, including Japan, which said it was seeking clarification from Duterte during his visit to Tokyo last week.

For over three months, the new government in Manila has blindsided US counterparts with a verbal barrage that is clearly at odds with the realities of the US-Philippine alliance. This has caused confusion, hurt feelings, and, in some quarters, anger. But the Obama administration deserves credit for recognizing that, despite the noise, most in the Philippines do not share Duterte’s foreign policy views and will not support an abrogation of our alliance. The United States has responded with calm in the face of the storm, choosing only to reiterate US commitment to the Philippines.

That doesn’t mean that the United States can be complacent. Duterte and his foreign secretary Perfecto Yasay have tried to dredge up historical animosity by referencing inequities during the US colonial administration of the Philippines. Borrowing an offensively paternalistic line from then-governor of the Philippines William Howard Taft, they accuse the United States of treating Filipinos as America’s “little brown brothers.” US officials should take the opportunity to address the darker aspects of our colonial past, recognizing pain caused while refocusing on future cooperation, much as President Obama did in recent speeches in Laos and Vietnam. They can remind both our countries of the obvious – that just as the Philippines has evolved dramatically in the last century, the United States that elected Barack Obama is much changed from the United States of Taft and Roosevelt.

The United States should also recognize that in the face of consistent Chinese threats, the Philippines has reason to want reassurances about the US commitment to its defense. Duterte has repeatedly questioned US willingness to defend the Philippines. In this he is not representative – the same Pew poll found that 66 percent of Filipinos were confident the United States would come to their aid if they were attacked. And a majority of Americans said the United States absolutely should do so, while only one-third disagreed. Article V of the Mutual Defense Treaty is clear – the United States bears a legal and moral commitment to respond to attacks on Filipino troops or public vessels, whether in the Philippine archipelago or in the disputed waters and reefs of the South China Sea. Nevertheless, it wouldn’t hurt to say so aloud.

The United States shouldn’t be complacent. The Duterte government’s decision to cancel all joint exercises with the US military – roughly 30 a year – will weaken our ability to

respond together to external threats and natural disasters in the Philippines. But neither should the United States write off the Philippines by underestimating the strong commitment of its people to our alliance. Democracies are messy by design, and leaders are elected on domestic, not foreign, policy. Rodrigo Duterte was duly elected with almost 39 percent of the vote. That is a lower vote share than will likely be cast on November 8 for a US candidate deeply skeptical of our alliances. Neither result is in line with the deep-held commitments of our peoples.

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