

The Duterte Phenomenon in the Era of the U.S. Pacific Pivot

By Gary King



The U.S. military's Pacific Pivot includes the use of Philippine military bases, increasing tension with China.

Far across the world, two recent court rulings regarding the Philippines may seem of little significance to us in the United States, but in fact there are major repercussions. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014, which allows the U.S. access to Philippine military bases, was upheld by the Philippine Supreme Court on June 30, 2016. And, on July 12, under the Law of the Sea, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines versus China in a case involving sovereignty over disputed waters. The rulings ease the way for more U.S. military build-up in the region, increasing tension with China. The cases that these rulings resolved were initiated under the former Philippine President Benigno Aquino, who is no longer in office. How can the newly installed president of the Philippines be expected to deal with the United States in the situation he inherited? Gary King provides insight.

The newest Philippine president is Rodrigo "Rody" Roa Duterte, age 71. He is one wild and crazy guy. His marriage was annulled after he and his wife had three children. He fathered children with several other women. All of the women and children were invited to his inauguration on June 30.

Famous for making extraordinary statements, he has acknowledged that "sometimes my mouth can get the better of me." This is just one example: in the lead-up to the presidential election he said such things as: "Forget the laws on

human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as a mayor. You drug-pushers, holdup men and do-nothings: you better go out because I'll kill you. I'll dump all of you in Manila Bay and fatten the fishes." As the mayor of Davao City, he had bragged that he was supportive of extrajudicial killings for habitual drug users and dealers (Human Rights Watch paints him as having been responsible for over 800 deaths), but at the same time he helped build a \$260,000 drug rehab and treatment center providing 24-hour services, and also offered monthly support for drug addicts to kick their habit.

For 22 years, Duterte had held the office of mayor of Davao City, a large city in Mindanao, the southern most island in the archipelago nation of the Philippines. He was elected seven times with a two-year interval during which he served in the Philippine Congress. As mayor, he set a precedent by appointing Lumad (indigenous persons) and Moro (Muslims) as deputy mayors.

He was noted to have encouraged peace over war. He went to prisons in revolt and negotiated settlements. He has gone to NPA (New People's Army/communist) camps, and talked with the people. He has worked with Lumad and Muslim people to settle issues. Back in 2008, when Rebelyn Pitao, the daughter of an NPA leader, was taken by the military, raped, and murdered, he allowed a press conference by religious and human rights leaders in Davao City Hall. (The writer of this article was interviewed to give a statement for Amnesty International.) Later, when the victim's father was also killed, Duterte allowed NPA persons to come to town, without hassle, for the funeral.



*The new president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte
Photo: Malacaang Pool File Photo*

But at the same time, he has said insane things as mayor: He made outrageous sexual statements about servicing brides at a mass wedding and also an Australian missionary woman who was murdered. Responding to the release of a drug lord in Manila, he said, “Here in Davao, you can’t go out alive. You can go out, but inside a coffin. Is that what you call extra-judicial killing? Then I will just bring a drug lord to a judge and kill him there, that will no longer be extra-judicial.”

More recently, Duterte had a meeting with Imelda Marcos, the widow of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos who was driven from office in 1986 by a popular uprising reacting to human rights abuse and corruption. After Duterte met with the former first lady, he came out with the idea that Marcos’s body should be buried in Heroes Cemetery in Manila where Filipino soldiers and dignitaries are interred. It was rumored that Imelda Marcos gave Duterte (president-elect at the time) one billion pesos (\$21 million). Later, he said that he had that much money left

over from campaigning, and would use it for bounties for people to murder drug dealers.

Virtually all my contacts in the Philippines, ranging from house servants to human rights attorneys to NPA supporters of varying degrees, support him. They like his acknowledgements and actions that the poor need a break, farmers need land, Lumad and Muslims need to be left alone. They are willing to overlook his infamous words, and hope he will make long-needed changes. He has appointed Silvestre Bello III, a known human rights lawyer in Davao who defended rebels, to head the Department of Labor and Employment; Judy Taguiwalo, from the Department of Women and Development Studies at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, to head the Department of Social Welfare and Development; Rafael Mariano, a peasant leader favored by the National Democratic Front (NDF), to head the Department of Agrarian Reform; and Leoncio “Jun” Evasco Jr., a former rebel priest, arrested and tortured by Marcos and great friend of farmers in Bohol and Davao, to be his right hand as Cabinet Secretary.

These are very exciting appointments, and might give that country a chance to do things far from the usual oligarchic wishes. Duterte believes that the mining industry should not be displacing mountain people, and wrecking their environment and very lives. These mines, half foreign-owned, half owned by Philippine oligarchs, give 38 percent return per year, yet the government receives only 2 percent. The military has been guarding the mines from local opposition.

But Duterte does not seem to care about money or fame, and very likely will not get along with the rich of Manila. And not surprisingly, he offers no leniency for police or military who cooperate with drug dealing (especially at the national penitentiary at Muntinlupa in the greater Manila area where the criminals deemed most dangerous are held).

Duterte has a history prior to becoming president as a big critic of the U.S. He expressed skepticism of the U.S. wanting access to Philippine military bases in Obama’s “pivot” to Asia, and of U.S. interest in building boundaries, politically and militarily, around China. Duterte has also said things such as that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was illegal, and the entire mess in the Middle East now is caused by the U.S.—e.g., “It is not that the Middle East is exporting terrorism to America, America imported terrorism.” “They forced their way to Iraq—look at Iraq now. Look what happened to Libya. Look what happened to Syria. People are being annihilated there, including children.” He told Muslim leaders in Mindanao, “They [the U.S.] destroyed the Middle East.”



Judy Taguiwalo of the Department of Women and Development Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman, was appointed as the new head of the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development. She promises to show compassion for the poor.

Photo: College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines.

He has said that the Philippines do not need more guns or more war. Using excuses of needing access to Philippine bases during our “pivot,” and a need to confront China, the U.S. has been boosting its yearly military aid from \$30 million to up to \$79 million, offering a smattering of boats and aircraft, and endless guns and bullets. [Although this was an increase, analysts say that the U.S., which gives far more in military aid to other countries, shows restraint when it comes to the Philippines so that the Philippines is dependent on the U.S. for defense.] But the U.S. is not looking far ahead. The Philippines may have started a “pivot” of its own, and some of its leaders very well might be less interested in kowtowing to the U.S. empire and its capitalistic demands in a changing country.

On July 25, as president, Duterte declared a unilateral cease-fire with the Communist Party/ New People's Army/ National Democratic Front, which has been at war with the Philippine government since the Marcos days—a conflict that has resulted in 30,000 fatalities. He vowed to work for a “permanent and lasting peace” during his term: “...That is my goal, that is my dream. To the CPP-NPA-NDF: let us end these decades of ambushes and skirmishes. We are going nowhere and it is getting bloodier by the day.” He considers the nominal NPA leader in exile in Holland, Jose Maria Sison, a friend: Duterte was once a student of Sison at San Beda College of Law in Manila. For these rebels, and the Muslims, Duterte said, “All of us want peace. Not the peace of the dead but the peace of the living.” He has already had informal talks in Manila with Muslim and Lumad leaders, to hear their complaints, and begin a process to address them.

On July 28, 2016, Duterte delivered his State of the Nation address. He was dismissive of international work to abate climate change, if it stunts their industrialization. He promised to kill thousands of drug lords and dealers; and about 500 of them, or persons so-labeled for the bounty, have already been dispatched since his election. He promised no quarter for Abu Sayaf, a ragtag kidnapping group that has been hoping to ride terrorist claims to achieve higher ransoms. But mostly the Philippine president talked of ending corruption, bribery, extortion, resource exploitation, red tape, environmental damage for profits, and injustices in the courts, on the streets, and in the countryside.

In his State of the Nation speech, he had no words about relations with the U.S.—something Philippine presidents always mentioned. He omitted entirely the U.S. “Pivot to Asia/Rebalancing” plans, despite a ruling that same day by the Philippine Supreme Court that the military bases sharing agreement between the U.S. and the Philippines is legal because it was signed by a Philippine president. [The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed in 2014 by President Aquino.] Duterte's speech, and other speeches he has made, have dismissed all the plethora of arms and military cooperation the U.S. has offered. He just doesn't see how these help any problems within the Philippines.

But human rights advocates are greatly concerned about Duterte's massive extrajudicial killings of suspected drug offenders. Human Rights Today reported on August 8 that “civil society groups from across the globe, including prominent human rights NGOs, have called on United Nations drug control authorities to urge an immediate stop to the extrajudicial killings of suspected drug offenders in the Philippines.”

Gary King, Ph.D., is a retired neuroscientist and former leader of Amnesty International Chapter 37, Minneapolis. He is a member of the WAMM committee, Tackling Torture at the Top (T3.) He recently returned from the Philippines, which he has visited often. He and his wife, Glen King, a retired public-school math teacher,

who was born in Cebu, Philippines, are active in numerous Filipino groups in Minnesota, including the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota.