

Duterte's diplomacy: not hostility, but discomfort with US values by Saya Kiba

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Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, has dramatically announced his country's "separation" from the United States. It is easy to misinterpret him. He does not simply "hate" his country's longtime ally and will not be joining China in an anti-American bloc. Rather, his attitude reflects changing values in some of Asia's emerging democracies.

Duterte paid an official visit to Japan in October, where he was warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and the two leaders held a summit. The Joint Statement released at the end of their meeting confirmed Japan's strong support for Philippines' capacity building, particularly in the area of maritime security. The two leaders also exchanged an official document assuring Japan's support for construction of two large patrol ships to be used by the Philippine Coast Guard, and Japan suggested the launch of bilateral maritime security dialogues between the two countries.

Prior to visiting Japan, Duterte was in Beijing to meet with President Xi Jinping. They signed a Joint Statement, which has 47 key points, and 13 documents such as a Memorandum of Understanding mainly focusing on economic cooperation. (It appears that the Chinese government often uses bilateral and multilateral meetings with Southeast Asian countries to sign many documents that lack substance.)

In both Japan and China, Duterte clearly announced his military and economic "separation" from the United States. "I want them out," he stated bluntly in Tokyo.

What is Duterte doing? Is he weighing Chinese aid against US aid? Is he anticipating US withdrawal from the region and hedging between China and Japan? Some analysts believe that he is playing China off against Japan. While he was in Tokyo, Japanese media were so focused on comparing the amount of economic aid announced by China and Japan that they didn't report the contents and outcomes of the Summit meetings. I was asked by several Japanese TV stations if Duterte showed more favor to Japan or to China.

These questions are wrong. The appropriate focus is not the amount of economic assistance and Duterte is not debating choices among these three countries. His complaint is the conflict in values between his policies and those of the United States.

The United States has long put democracy and respect for human rights at the center of its foreign policy. It has been assisting newly formed democracies to implement democratic

principles. By contrast, China's foreign policy is predicated on noninterference and respect for the sovereignty of others. Recently, Beijing has proposed a new order in Asia, using its economic strength to win diplomatic influence over smaller countries in Southeast Asia. The US-China competition is about values, not economic influence.

Some new democracies in Southeast Asia are in tough and complicated positions. To nurture democracy supported by the US and the international community, these countries have prioritized the rule of law, human rights, and freedom. This has sometimes forced them to abandon autocratic order-building and economic growth based on rent-seeking, which are considered undemocratic. The leaders of these countries are not comfortable when they talk with the US.

President Duterte started showing open hostility toward the US after his violent crackdown on drug users attracted international condemnation. US support for human rights and its interference with Duterte policies made him uncomfortable. I observed candidate Duterte campaign in Manila in May. He said that he would try to prevent intervention by "the US, Japan, and Vietnam" in the South China Sea or the West Philippine Sea. For him, the US and Japan are potential trespassers on Philippines' sovereignty.

This stance is not unique to Duterte. Similar frustration can be observed around the region. The Thai government after the May 2014 coup has voiced open displeasure at US interference. Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the former army chief and head of Thailand's ruling junta, said "what I care most is that we should not allow foreigners to interfere with our country... Some ambassadors can speak Thai but do not understand [Thailand], so they file false reports."

Historically, leaders of emerging democracies have to manage their discomfort with Western values in exchange for economic and military assistance. As they have been bound by such values, they feel very comfortable with a new counterpart, China, which has very different values.

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The Philippines still respects the fundamental values of its former colonial power. Washington and Manila have not formally discussed policy changes. Interestingly, the Japan-Philippines Joint Statement clearly states "Japan and the Philippines as two maritime countries bound by shared basic values..." and "strengthening the Strategic Partnership based on such common values as freedom, democracy, the rule of law, respect for basic human rights, and a free and open economy."

The Philippines-China Joint Statement also includes the phrases "in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law," and "reaffirm the importance of

maintaining and promoting peace and stability, freedom of navigation in and over-flight above the South China Sea.” Though the judgment by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the International Court of Justice is not mentioned in the China-Philippines statement, China has shown a willingness to compromise, and not use its military power.

Duterte is neither an anti-US nor pro-China president, and using either label doesn’t help understand him. The Philippines is not “balancing” between the United States and China, or Japan and China, in terms of economic and military power. Manila is not simply comparing the scale of economic assistance from different countries.

The US and Japan must understand that it is getting more difficult to impose their values on Asian partners. Nevertheless, it is important that both continue to prioritize those values in their foreign policies. Too much emphasis on economic and military assistance may overshadow longtime strategic engagement including combating terrorism or fighting the war against poverty, particularly given Japan’s unique peacebuilding commitments in Mindanao, as Dr. Lam Peng Er of the National University of Singapore points out. Long-range plans and strategies are essential so that our diplomatic partners appreciate the importance of shared values.

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