

China Has Lost the Philippines Despite Duterte's Best Efforts

Beijing's growing aggressiveness is forcing Manila back into Washington's camp.

By Derek Grossman

Since his election in 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has time and again underscored his anti-U.S. and pro-Chinese orientation. On his first trip to Beijing in 2016, he announced it was “time to say goodbye to Washington”—much to the delight of his host, Chinese President Xi Jinping. He has welcomed Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investments, has threatened to suspend joint military exercises with the United States, and calls China “a good friend.”

But in the course of a year, Duterte appears to have done an about-face on China, frustrating Beijing's attempts to pull Manila out of Washington's strategic orbit. On Sunday, Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin Jr. unleashed an expletive-laced Tweet on Beijing, telling it in no uncertain terms to get out of the South China Sea, where the two countries have been embroiled in a dispute. “You're like an ugly oaf forcing your attentions on a handsome guy who wants to be a friend; not to father a Chinese province,” he wrote.

Locsin's Twitter storm is only the latest indication that Beijing's rising assertiveness—especially its challenge to the Philippines' internationally recognized maritime claims—has finally forced Manila's hand. Duterte now recognizes, in spite of his continued rhetoric to the contrary, that China is no friend, and the Philippines needs its long-standing security ally—the United States—after all.

Duterte's realization will have significant geostrategic implications between now and the end of his term in June 2022, when the Philippine Constitution requires him to step down.

Duterte's ire with Washington peaked on Feb. 11, 2020 when he decided to terminate the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Among other things, the VFA enables U.S. troops to seamlessly deploy to the Philippines to address potential contingencies, including against China. According to the VFA's rules, the agreement remains in effect for 180 days after an announced intention by either side to cancel it, allowing time for renegotiation. Since terminating the VFA, Duterte authorized two temporary extensions—in June and again in November 2020—that essentially restarted the clock on the termination process.

Last June, Locsin first signaled Manila's shifting attitudes, arguing that “in a time of pandemic and heightened superpower tensions,” it would be wise to keep the VFA in place. Then, on July 12, 2020—the fourth anniversary of the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that rejected Beijing's claims to the disputed waters—the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs finally acknowledged the ruling publicly. The Duterte administration had previously avoided being so explicit to preserve positive ties with China.

Duterte's Sept. 23, 2020 speech at the United Nations General Assembly was another indication he had turned the corner on China. He directly addressed the issue of South China Sea disputes by noting the 2016 ruling was “beyond compromise,” adding “we firmly reject attempts

to undermine it.” It was the most direct confrontation with Beijing Duterte ever risked, and it showed his position against China was hardening.

The shift back to the United States’ camp logically followed from there. On Nov. 11, 2020, Locsin cited great-power competition in the South China Sea as a reason for suspending VFA termination. Making this connection clearly implied Manila trusts and sides with Washington—Locsin highlighted the traditional ally’s “clarity and strength”—rather than Beijing, not least because of the latter’s aggressively expansionary regional stance. Locsin further stated the suspension of termination would “enable us to find a more enhanced, mutually beneficial, and more effective and lasting arrangement on how to move forward in our mutual defense.”