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A Rupture in Philippine-U.S. Relations: Geopolitical Implications

ALFRED W. McCOY

"YOUR HONORS, IN THIS venue, I announce my separation from the United States … both in military, but economics also," said Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte to a burst of applause from an audience of officials in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, the symbolic seat of China's ruling Communist Party. At the Philippine-Chinese trade forum that same day, October 20, 2016, Duterte opened his speech by asking, "What is really wrong with an American character?" Americans are, he continued, "loud, sometimes rowdy, and they have this volume of their voice … not adjusted to civility…. They are the more forward commanding voice befitting obedience." Evoking some deep Filipino racialist tropes, Duterte then mocked the flat, nasal American accent and rued the time he was questioned at the Los Angeles airport by a "Black" officer with a "black" uniform, "black shoes," and a "black" gun. Moving from rhetoric to substance, Duterte quietly capitulated to Beijing's relentless pressure for bilateral talks to settle the dispute over the South China Sea, virtually abrogating Manila's recent slam-dunk win on that issue before an international court (Demick and Wilson 2016; DU30 News 2016).

China reciprocated. Between Beijing's usual rituals of smiling girls with flowers and marching soldiers with bayonets, President Xi Jinping proclaimed: "China and the Philippines are neighbors across the sea and the two peoples are blood brothers." Sealing that bond with cash, Beijing signed deals giving Manila $22.5 billion in trade and low-interest loans (Demick and Wilson 2016).

Half a world away in Washington, D.C., State Department spokesman John Kirby seemed surprised, saying: "We are going to be seeking an explanation of exactly what the president meant when he talked about separation from the U.S. It's not clear to us exactly what that means in all its ramifications" (Demick and Wilson 2016).

Yet this surprise should not have been all that surprising. In the four months since elections elevated Duterte from tough-talking mayor of Davao City, the country's death squad capital, to the Philippine presidency, diplomatic relations had turned from close to chilly (Marshall and Mogato 2016). At the ASEAN conference in Laos that September, Duterte had reacted profanely to Obama's oblique criticism of the thousands of extrajudicial killings during his ongoing drug war, saying: "Who does he think he is? I am no American puppet. I am the president of a sovereign country and I am not answerable to anyone except the Filipino people. *'Putang ina mo'* [Your mother's a whore], I will

Alfred W. McCoy (awmccoy@wisc.edu) is Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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swear at you." That outburst led Obama to cancel their bilateral meeting, opening a breach between the leaders that has resisted repair (McKenzie and Liptak 2016).

A month later, as U.S. and Philippine marines landed on a rain-swept Luzon beach in one of the twenty-eight joint military maneuvers held every year, Duterte stated: "This year would be the last. For as long as I am there, do not treat us like a doormat because you'll be sorry for it. I will not speak with you. I can always go to China." Within days, Philippine defense secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that joint naval exercises in the South China Sea were henceforth suspended and the Americans operating drones against Muslim rebels on southern Mindanao island would leave once the Philippines acquires comparable capacity. Ever optimistic, the U.S. State Department noted that there still was no formal abrogation of mutual defense agreements and, critically, no suspension of American access to five Philippine bases proximate to the South China Sea (Associated Press 2016).

Even so, the breach in the seventy-year Philippine-U.S. alliance was simultaneously both breathtaking and confusing. Unlike many of his predecessors, Duterte is an enormously popular president, with approval ratings that have soared to 90 percent (Agence France-Presse 2016; Almendral 2016). Unlike many peoples around the globe, Filipinos have an abiding affection for America, with 92 percent expressing approval in a 2015 Pew poll—by far the highest of any country in the world, including America itself (Pew Research Center 2016). Over 30 percent of remittances from overseas workers, the country's largest source of foreign exchange, totaling nearly $30 billion in 2015, comes from Filipinos in the United States (iMoney Philippines 2015; Torres 2015). How can a leader enjoy 90 percent approval after lambasting an ally approved by 92 percent of his people?

Filipino admiration of America coexists with layer upon layer of antagonism, even resentment, arising from this long alliance, discussed in my other essay in this issue. The relentless U.S. colonial pacification during the Philippine-American War (1899–1902) ravaged the countryside and killed 200,000 out of a population of just seven million, leaving a "postmemory"—that is, a "trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge"—marked by strong nationalism inflected with resentments ready to surface at any slight (Hirsch 2008; Wolff 1961, 360). As America's bastion in the Western Pacific on the eve of World War II, the Philippines became a twice-fought battleground, suffering the utter devastation of its capital Manila and one million deaths out of a population of just sixteen million (Rottman 2002, 318; Steinberg 1967, 113–14).

During the forty years of the Cold War, the presence of the massive U.S. bases at Subic Bay and Clark Field produced recurring incidents with poor Filipinos—shootings and sexual assaults—that highlighted the country's compromised sovereignty (Bengzon and Rodrigo 1997, 19–21). Throughout his authoritarian rule from 1972 to 1986, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos played upon these installations to mute Washington's reservations over his abysmal human rights record, angering the democratic opposition, who concluded that the bases only served U.S. interests and invited an attack (A. de Dios 1988, 270–72; E. de Dios 1988, 75–78; Diokno 1988, 152–58; Tiglao 1988, 50–52). After a ten-year hiatus in the alliance, when the Philippine Senate cancelled the bases agreement in 1991, both nations renewed the relationship during the Global War on Terror. That generally effective collaboration ended dismally in January 2015 when one of the CIA's countless counter-terror strikes, targeting a suspect believed to be responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing, sent Filipino commandos into a murderous ambush by

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Muslim militia, leaving forty-four of these troops dead. Though utterly ignored by the U.S. media, this tragedy sparked a profound outpouring of grief that absorbed the Philippines in deep national mourning, with undertones of anger toward the author of this covert operation (De Jesus and De Jesus 2016).

Although a simple clash of executive egos sparked this diplomatic rupture, the geopolitical consequences are potentially profound. For nearly seventy years, U.S. global hegemony has rested, in large part, on its control over the axial points at both ends of the strategic Eurasian land mass. While NATO has long provided a strong multilateral anchor at the western axis, the eastern end along the Pacific littoral has rested on separate bilateral ententes with Japan, the Philippines, and Australia. And alone among these three, the Philippines sits astride the South China Sea, providing the optimal strategic position to check China's claim to those international waters.

In more immediate terms of U.S. national security, Washington's defense posture in the Pacific has rested, for nearly 120 years, on island bastions—first Hawaii from 1898 to 1940, and then Japan and the Philippines since 1945. President Duterte lacks the authority, and probably even the ambition, to completely abrogate the strong Philippine-U.S. ties built so painstakingly and painfully over the span of a century. But he can produce a six-year hiatus in the alliance that will allow China to consolidate its military position in the South China Sea and make its de facto territorial claim an undeniable geopolitical reality.

But even more significantly, this diplomatic contretemps indicates a critical, so far unnoticed element in the waning of U.S. global power—the loss of control over a global network of so-called subordinate elites. As British imperial historian Ronald Robinson (1972, 138–39) famously argued, the British Empire grew for two hundred years to encompass half of humanity through alliances with local leaders in countless colonial districts, and then unraveled in just twenty years when their collaboration turned to "non-cooperation." Following the dissolution of a half-dozen European empires after World War II, power levitated to the capitals of one hundred emerging nations where presidents and prime ministers became Washington's new subordinate elites. Those who harbored nationalist, anti-American sentiments were the target of CIA-sponsored coups; electoral manipulation; or, like Philippine senator Claro Recto, assassination plots (Bonner 1987, 41–42; Reilly 2009).

But now America's empire has proved, like Britain's before it, to be a "self-liquidating concern," as bipolar power becomes multipolar and developing nations develop, allowing once subordinate elites to become unimaginably insubordinate (Brendon 2010, xviii–xx, 660–62). Setting aside President Duterte's obscenity-laden outbursts, this serious diplomatic breach may yet become, at multiple levels, a marker, even a landmark for the decline of U.S. global power, both in the Pacific and beyond.

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