

Philippines' Duterte says didn't really mean 'separation' from US

MalaysiaKini.com

Oct 22nd, 2016

Neil Jerome Morales, Reuters

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday he was not severing ties with his country's long-time ally the United States, but merely pursuing a more independent foreign policy by strengthening relations with China.

A day after he provoked fresh diplomatic alarm by announcing his "separation" from Washington, Duterte struck a more conciliatory tone as he arrived back in the Philippines after a four-day visit to Beijing.

"It is not severance of ties. When you say severance of ties, you cut diplomatic relations. I cannot do that," the Philippine leader told reporters at a midnight news conference in his southern home city of Davao.

"It's in the best interest of my countrymen to maintain that relationship."

On Thursday, Duterte had told Chinese and Philippine business people at a forum in Beijing's Great Hall of the People that America had "lost now", as he sought what he calls a new commercial alliance with China. "I announce my separation from the United States," he had said, to sustained applause, adding he would also seek closer ties with Russia.

Clarifying his comments yesterday, he said that what he meant was that Manila's foreign policy need not always "dovetail" with Washington. "As in separation, what I was really saying was separation of foreign policy," he said. "In the past, and until I became president, we always follow what the United States would give the cue."

The White House, which had responded to the "separation" speech by saying there had been "too many" troubling statements from Duterte recently, was quick to welcome the apparent shift in tone.

"Based on his extensive, colourful previous comments, there is greater clarity that we would like to get about the intent of President Duterte and his government," White House spokesperson Josh Earnest told a daily news briefing.

"But based on what you've read me that seems to be a change in tone that is more consistent with the seven decade-long alliance between the United States and the Philippines."

'What the president meant...'

Earlier officials in Manila were left scrambling to explain the latest comments from Duterte, whose broadsides against the United States have grown increasingly frequent.

“In terms of economic (ties), we are not stopping trade, investment with America,” Trade Minister Ramon Lopez told CNN Philippines. He said the Philippines was “breaking being too much dependent on one side”.

Duterte’s spokesperson, Ernesto Abella, said the president had been making a “restatement” of his bid to chart an independent foreign policy.

Duterte wanted to “separate the nation from dependence on the US and the West, and rebalance economic and military relations with Asian neighbours” like China, Japan and South Korea, Abella said in statement.

Underscoring that, the Chinese and Philippines defence ministers met in Beijing on the sidelines of Duterte’s visit, and pledged to restore security ties, China’s Defence Ministry said.

Anti-US protest

Duterte’s efforts to engage China - months after a tribunal in the Hague ruled that Beijing did not have historic rights to the South China Sea in a case brought by the previous administration in Manila - mark a reversal in foreign policy since the 71-year-old former mayor took office on June 30.

It has also been in stark contrast to the language he has used against the United States after being infuriated by US criticism of his bloody war on drugs.

He has called US President Barack Obama a “son of a bitch” and told him to “go to hell”. On Wednesday, about 1,000 anti-US protesters gathered outside the US Embassy in Manila urging the removal of US troops from a southern Philippine island.

Hundreds of left-wing demonstrators burned a replica of the US flag at a rally in Manila on yesterday as they urged an end to US military agreements.

The United States, a former colonial power, has seen Manila as an important ally in its “rebalance” to Asia in the face of a rising China. The US Embassy press attache in Manila, Molly Koscina, said Duterte’s statements were creating uncertainty.

US Defence Secretary Ash Carter said Washington intended to keep to its alliance commitments to the Philippines.

“Obviously any relationship is one of mutuality and we will continue to discuss that with our Philippine counterparts,” he told reporters on a flight to Turkey.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, asked in Beijing about Duterte’s comments, said countries should not resort to win-lose mentalities. “We should not have Cold War thinking; it’s either you or me, you win I lose, that kind of zero-sum game,” she told a regular press briefing.

Wrangling over territory in the South China Sea, where Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims, has consumed China-Philippines relations in recent years.

China claims most of the waters through which about US\$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes every year, and in 2012 it seized the disputed Scarborough Shoal and denied Philippine fishermen access to its fishing grounds.

Arriving home, Duterte said he had discussed Scarborough Shoal with the Chinese, but did not elaborate.

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