

Pivoting in the Philippines

WASHINGTON, D.C., Nov., 17, 2016

The US delivered a C-130T Hercules transport aircraft to the Philippines in October, the second such C-130 transferred last year. US Ambassador Philip Goldberg said the deliveries symbolize the strong partnership between the two nations.

“Stalwart countries like the US ... will always [support] our aspiration to build a vibrant, peaceful, and progressive Philippine nation,” said Lt. Gen. Edgar R. Fallorina, Philippine Air Force commanding general, at the airplane’s formal acceptance ceremony.

About a week later, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte launched into a televised tirade because the US canceled a sale of 26,000 rifles.

“Look at these monkeys. The 26,000 firearms we wanted to buy, they don’t want to sell,” Duterte said Nov. 2. “Son of a bitch. We have many homemade guns here. These American fools.”

These two events, nine days apart, seem incongruous but are actually typical of US-Philippine relations over the past six months.

Duterte took office in June 2016 as a controversial firebrand populist who relishes inflammatory comments. He has vulgarly insulted President Obama, flamboyantly asked China for military support, and foolishly called for an end to US-Philippine cooperation.

But Duterte speaks off the cuff. His comments frequently surprise his own government, and officials have repeatedly tried to clarify what the president really meant to say. Most of his directives toward the United States have not been implemented, and officials in both nations are clearly in the dark about what is policy and what is bluster.

Duterte says the US treats the Philippines like a colony. He is especially thin-skinned about a brutal anti-drug campaign that has left thousands of alleged drug dealers and users dead without trials. “Don’t treat us like a doormat because you’ll be sorry for it,” Duterte said. “You don’t go around reprimanding a head of state.”

The two nations share a long history, dating to 1898 when the US acquired the Philippines from Spain. The archipelago became America’s first colony. The Philippines were famously captured by Japan in World War II and reclaimed by the US later in the

war. The nation obtained its freedom and independence in 1946, and the countries have maintained an up-and-down but close relationship ever since.

The two nations signed a mutual defense treaty in 1951, with each nation pledging to come to the other’s assistance if under attack.

The US maintained large military bases in the Philippines, including the Subic Bay naval station and Clark Air Base, until the early 1990s when the Americans were kicked out during an earlier wave of Philippine nationalism.

The two nations signed a new, 10-year Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2014, pledging exactly what its name implies—including US access to five Philippine bases. The countries conduct 28 bilateral military training exercises every year.

USAF works well with the Philippine military. Will it be allowed to continue?

“I think it’s just going through these bumps on the road,” said Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana of the current tensions. “Relationships sometimes go to this stage, ... but over time it will be patched up.”

US officials are cautiously optimistic. “The tremendous popularity of the US-Philippine alliance, and the very significant benefits that accrue to the Philippines through that alliance ... make it improbable that any leader of the Philippines would, in a systematic and sustained way, distance themselves from the United States,” said Daniel R. Russel, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs. Duterte “will find [the US] is a steadfast and reliable partner.”

The Air Force has spent decades cultivating relationships throughout the region. Nations such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia work closely and regularly with the Air Force. These nations—including the Philippines—partner to secure peace, prosperity, and common interest.

The US and the Philippines conducted several combined exercises just this fall, and operational relations are solid.

Filipinos had “never worked with their air force for an exercise like this,” said USAF Lt. Col. Courtney Finkbeiner, casualty evacuation mission commander, of a September mass-casualty training event.

“I hope the US will continue to give support [for] exercises like this,” added Philippine Army Capt. Melvin Hiponia.

Duterte may choose to walk away from more than a century of shared history with the United States. But the US is the Philippines’ third largest trading partner, in general the US is admired and well-respected by Filipinos, and the mutual defense treaty is clearly to the Philippines’ advantage. Losing access to the Philippines would be a loss and an inconvenience for the Air Force, but there is plenty of work to do elsewhere and many other partners to work with.

Hopefully it will not come to that.



Philippine Air Force photo

The C-130 delivered to the Philippines in October.