

COMPARATIVE

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US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

PHILIPPINE FOLLIES

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The rather bizarre behavior of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte dominated the news in late 2016. The former Davao mayor displayed his well-known anti-US feelings while aggressively pursuing his allegedly extrajudicial campaign against Philippine drug trafficking. Duterte's invective ran the gamut from accusations that the US still treated the Philippines as a colony to a vulgar epithet directed at President Obama. There were also threats to end all bilateral military exercises and to terminate bilateral defense agreements. Philippine officials tried to soften Duterte's remarks and US officials offered reassurances that the US would remain a reliable defense partner and planned to continue providing military assistance. Elsewhere, the US continued to focus attention on maritime security while avoiding direct involvement in the emerging controversy over treatment of the Muslim population in Rakine State, Myanmar.

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A new sheriff in Manila

Unlike previous Philippine presidents, Rodrigo Duterte is neither a member of the landed gentry nor a former military officer. He hails from Mindanao, the country's poorest region, where he was mayor of Davao and gained a reputation for his brutal enforcement of discipline and earned the title as the "enforcer" or "death squad mayor." A self-avowed leftist, Duterte studied political science with Jose Maria Sison, the long-exiled founder of the Philippine Communist Party, in the 1960s. His current notoriety rests with his nationwide campaign to eradicate drug trafficking, which an *Al Jazeera* investigative [report](#) claimed has resulted in a death toll of nearly 6,000 by mid-December. When the United States and the European Union raised concerns about extrajudicial killings and human rights violations, the Philippine president struck back calling them hypocrites whose "ancestors killed thousands of Arabs and other peoples," punctuating his remarks with an expletive and the display of his middle finger.

Frustrated that the Philippine government has not been able to eradicate its pervasive problem with organized crime and drug trafficking, President Duterte essentially authorized vigilante justice as a response, which led President Obama to caution that "the issues of how we approach fighting crime and drug trafficking is a serious one for all of us, and we've got to do it the right way." Duterte responded with a vulgar epithet. The eventual outcome was a canceled meeting between Obama and Duterte on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Laos. On Oct. 25, when US Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel asked him to tone down his fiery rhetoric, Duterte replied that the US had started the contretemps by threatening to cut off aid to the Philippines. In his typical colorful language, Duterte stated: "[Y]ou sons of bitches, don't treat me like a dog. Don't put us on a leash then throw us scraps we can't reach. Every time they threaten us ... you'd think they're brighter than we are. Then, they tell me, 'Be careful, we will put you in prison.' Son of a bitch, you try it!"

Meanwhile, President Duterte has also indicated the Philippines would shift its security efforts away from external threats, making it less dependent on the US for security assistance. In mid-September, Duterte stated that his administration would be less concerned with projecting a naval presence in the Philippine exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and focus on domestic drug traffickers and insurgencies: "We don't need *F-16* jets, that is of no use to us.... We don't intend to fight any

country. Let's content ourselves even with propeller-driven planes that we could use extensively in anti-insurgency." In early October, following up on President Duterte's statement, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said that "we can live without" military aid. In fact, the US provided \$441 million in security funding to the Philippines between 2002 and 2013. In late December, the US Embassy in Manila [reported](#) that the US provided the Philippines with \$127 million in security assistance in the 12 months ending in September, a 154 percent increase in military assistance from the 2014-2015 period and the largest annual sum since US forces returned to the Philippines in 2002.

Populist bluster has fueled Duterte's political success for three decades, and the fierce nationalism he has shown since taking office has strengthened his popularity with the Philippine electorate. Former US Ambassador to the Asia Development Bank Robert Orr has said over 90 percent of Filipinos "support this guy." According to a December [poll](#) taken by the Manila-based Social Weather Station, Duterte's net popularity was at 72 percent, a slight decline from the October poll that showed his net popularity at 76 percent.

Nevertheless, the US also remains very popular in the Philippines. A 2015 [Pew survey](#) found that 92 percent of those polled have a positive view of the United States. An October 2016 Social Weather Station [survey](#) shows the US with the highest net trust rating among countries with 66 percent, compared with a 34 percent rating for Japan and a negative 33 percent for China. The huge Philippine-American community in the US is the largest source of financial remittances and 4 million Filipinos and Filipino-Americans live in the US.

Duterte swings back and forth

Since his election to the presidency last summer, Rodrigo Duterte has condemned the US as a colonial and imperial power, insisted that joint military exercises have only benefited Washington, that the United States was providing the Philippine armed forces with inferior weapons, that modern American equipment was not compatible with Philippine equipment, and that the Mutual Defense Treaty did not guarantee US support in a crisis. In October, Duterte pledged to expel US troops from his country and chart a new, independent foreign policy because "America has failed us." Going beyond the rhetoric, sympathetic Philippine analysts have interpreted President Duterte's remarks to mean that despite a 65-year old mutual

defense treaty, the US would not be willing to defend the Philippines over South China Sea features claimed by Manila in the same way that it has declared an obligation to defend the Senkaku Islands for Japan in the East China Sea.

Later, Duterte threatened to cancel Philippine-US joint exercises, claiming, "The US will not fight to die for us." He told Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, "Do not make preparations for next year." It was also announced that the joint Philippine-US naval patrols in the South China Sea would be suspended. None of these verbal lashes elicited US criticisms in kind. Rather, on Oct. 4, a US embassy spokesperson stated: "We will continue to honor our alliance commitments, and we expect the Philippines to do the same."

In fact, despite President Duterte's shrill anti-US complaints, the net impact so far appears to be minimal. He told his hosts in Beijing: "We will maintain our military alliances because I said we need it for our defense." Nor has Duterte scrapped the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) under which US forces have access to five military bases, two of which face the South China Sea. As for business ties, presidential spokesman Ernesto Abella emphasized on Oct. 24 that, "There are no ties that are being broken, so there's no need to be pulling out businesses." Indeed, in late November, Duterte appointed Donald Trump's business representative in the Philippines, Jose Antonio, as the Philippine government representative for business relations to the US.

Despite Duterte's bluster, Defense Secretary Lorenzana reassured Washington in early November that all US-Philippine security commitments would continue with the exceptions of the *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* exercise, which focuses on naval force interoperability and the *Philippine Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX)*, which is marine training designed to defeat an invasion of the Philippines. The largest Philippine-US exercise, *Balikatan*, will continue but will deemphasize combat missions and concentrate on humanitarian, engineering, and civic action activities. This understanding was formalized in early December at a meeting of the Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board co-chaired by Philippine Armed Force Chief of Staff Ricardo Visaya and US Pacific Command Commander Adm. Harry Harris. Following the meeting, Visaya told reporters that US officials "respected the Philippines' proposal" to reduce the number of bilateral drills to 258, five less than in 2016, and confirmed that the exercises will focus on

humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and counterterrorism.

Along comes Trump and another bump

A brief seven-minute chat in early December between President-elect Donald Trump and President Duterte suggested signs of a budding bromance between two characters that have been categorized by some analysts as having similar inclinations. The call was described as "very engaging, animated, and encouraging." Duterte said that "he felt a rapport between them" and that Trump was "sensitive" and assured him that he was conducting his drug campaign "as a sovereign nation, the right way. And he wishes us well. And I said that, well, we assured him of our ties with America."

But in mid-December a new bump appeared when the US announced that the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) had deferred a vote on the reselection of the Philippines for development assistance, pending further review of concerns about rule of law and civil liberties. President Duterte responded with a new tirade saying "bye-bye America" and that the US should "prepare to leave the Philippines, prepare for the eventual repeal or the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement." After receiving clarification that the decision on the assistance had been delayed and not officially canceled, Duterte seemed to retract a bit saying that "I will let Obama fade away and if he disappears, then I will begin to reassess." And so the saga continues.

The US side of the story

With President Duterte demonstrating a degree of unpredictability, excoriating US foreign policy toward his country and sending olive branches to China, Washington has tried to be a calm center, reminding Manila of US dependability as a security partner and the significant aid it has provided in recent decades. While visiting Manila on Oct. 24, Assistant Secretary of State Russel assured his audience of US reliability while emphasizing concern about the rule of law: "The US respects the Philippines sovereignty and independence. In fact, US training, capacity building, equipment, these are all crucial to protecting the economy and promoting the self-reliance of the Republic of the Philippines.... And, as I candidly shared with the Foreign Secretary, your friends are concerned about the high loss of life in connection with the counter-narcotics campaign."

As indicated earlier, the Obama administration has sent the Philippines hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign and military aid in recent years, making it the third largest recipient of US military aid after Afghanistan and Pakistan and by far the largest in Southeast Asia. This record has led to increased support for US military presence both within the Philippine armed forces and the general population. Moreover, the EDCA provides for significant upgrades to Philippine military facilities, puts US air and naval assets within striking distance of the disputed Spratly Islands, and provides for the prepositioning of US supplies. The question is does that increased capability matter more to the US than to the Philippines.

As ISIS loses territory in Iraq and Syria, the radical Islamist organization has sent many of its foreign adherents back to their home countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines, where a small number of US Special Operations Forces – currently a little over 100 – have been advising Philippine troops for 14 years. The mission is regarded by many Filipinos as a success with Abu Sayyaf – the local radical affiliate of both Al Qaeda and ISIS – severely weakened over the decade-plus engagement. US commandos track the militants using drones and other surveillance aircraft, reporting Abu Sayyaf locations and dispositions to Philippine forces. However, President Duterte has said that the US support mission in Mindanao will soon be terminated and that Philippine forces will be on their own. Given the emerging potential for radicalization, termination of the mission is seen as an unfortunate development by the US.

Emerging partnership with Vietnam

US relations with Vietnam began a new era in 2013 when the two countries entered into a comprehensive partnership. When Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong visited Washington in July, he became the first Vietnam communist party leader to set foot on US soil. In a follow-up visit in late October, Dinh The Huynh, executive secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, went to Washington to meet Secretary of State John Kerry. Following the meeting, Kerry stated that, “The US values its relationship with the Communist Party of Vietnam and considers this an increasingly important channel to enhance relations with Vietnam.” Bilateral defense ties have also been upgraded with Washington lifting its longstanding arms embargo on Vietnam earlier this year.

Hanoi has also demonstrated support for US freedom of navigation (FON) patrols in the South China Sea as an expression “of their rights ... in accordance with [the Law of the Sea] convention’s regulations....” Thus, Vietnam approved the Oct. 21 FON operation of the *USS Decatur* near the Paracel Islands. According to Vice Defense Minister Senior Lt. Gen. Nguyen Chi Vinh, “Vietnam will support the US and other partners to intervene in the region as long as it brings peace, stability, and prosperity. Emphasizing this welcoming attitude, the *USS Frank Cable* and the *USS John McCain* became the first US warships to visit Cam Ranh Bay since the Vietnam War in October.

Trouble in Myanmar?

The Obama administration has been shepherding Myanmar’s (Burma) democratization for several years, gradually lifting sanctions along the way. A major step in this process was made in September when Aung San Suu Kyi, chief counselor and foreign minister of Myanmar, visited the US. President Obama used the event to announce the lifting of all remaining economic sanctions on the Nay Pyi Taw government in recognition of its progress in democratization. In a letter to US House and Senate leaders, Obama stated that “I have determined that the situation that gave rise to the national emergency ... has been significantly altered by Burma’s [Myanmar’s] substantial advances to promote democracy, including historic elections in November 2015.” The letter continued that, “While Burma faces significant challenges, including the consolidation of its democracy, the United States can, and intends to, use other means to support the government and people of Burma in their efforts to address these challenges.”

The lifting of sanctions did not apply to military assistance and military leaders from Myanmar continue to be barred from receiving visas to the US. Nevertheless, limited military-to-military cooperation and development aid are on the agenda. Myanmar needs transportation projects, an expansion of its electrical grid, and agricultural assistance, particularly in rice production. However, leaders of some human rights groups do not agree with a total removal of sanctions. The deputy Washington director of Human Rights Watch in mid-September claimed that the lifting of remaining sanctions sacrificed US leverage for better behavior by the Burmese military.

Meanwhile, renewed military violence against Muslims in Rakhine State along the border with Bangladesh following an attack on a police post has led to new

allegations of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and human rights abuses. These accusations have been countered by Myanmar government claims that the region has been infiltrated by international terrorists. US and other Western diplomats in mid-November asked Aung San Suu Kyi, who now leads the Myanmar government, to conduct an independent investigation. So far, she has declined, insisting that the Rakhine State Advisory Commission can investigate. Former UN chief Kofi Annan, who is the chairman of the Commission, said that the accusation of genocide is a charge that requires “legal review and judicial determination” and should not be “thrown around loosely” at a Dec. 6 news conference in Yangon after he and his eight-member commission wrapped up their week-long visit to Rakhine. The commission, which is made up of six Myanmar nationals and three foreigners, was appointed in August to make recommendations on how to promote reconciliation and resolve conflicts between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Thus far, the US has been remarkably silent on the subject.

Malaysia on the edge

Although protective of its nonaligned posture, Malaysia maintains close security ties with Western states, including the US. Lengthy membership in the Five Power Defense Arrangement places Malaysian armed forces alongside those of the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore in annual air and naval exercises. Regular training with US forces includes *CARAT* between navies and *SEACAT* with an anti-terrorist objective, involving land, sea, and air forces. The US Navy also operates *P-8A* surveillance aircraft over the South China Sea from Malaysian bases in Borneo. There is no indication that these security activities are in jeopardy.

However, Kuala Lumpur’s relations with Washington are increasingly strained as result of a US Department of Justice investigation of the Malaysia 1MDB, a state investment fund from which Prime Minister Najib Razak is accused of pilfering nearly \$1 billion – a charge he denies and insists that he is fully cooperating with Malaysian authorities in their examination of the fund.

Southeast Asia’s security profile

The Obama administration’s rebalance strategy toward Southeast Asia has been characterized as a three-legged stool. The first leg is military repositioning toward Asia from Europe and the Middle East, represented by the fact that by 2020, 60 percent of US air and maritime

forces are scheduled to be deployed in the Asia-Pacific. The second leg is diplomatic relations, based on Washington’s commitment to supporting ASEAN with its various offshoots (ARF, EAS, and ADMM) and APEC. The third leg is (or perhaps was) economic as embodied in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) described by Washington as the “gold standard” of economic agreements, covering trade, investment, labor and environmental issues. Unfortunately, the TPP now appears moot with the election of Donald Trump as the new US president.

Among the broad goals of the rebalance was to foster greater security collaboration among Southeast Asian states as well as between ASEAN member states and the United States. However, several states have been focused increasingly on internal matters. Thailand is faced with a royal transition with King Bhumibol’s passing and a ruling military junta concentrating on its own future. Malaysia faces a political crisis over the 1MDB investment fund. Indonesia, too, is more concerned with domestic issues than external cooperation. Where the Philippines is headed under President Duterte is becoming a conundrum. Singapore continues to be a bright spot, but it is a city-state. Myanmar remains focused on unifying its ethnic groups. Laos and Cambodia are too small to be ASEAN’s strategic engine. Finally, Vietnam, though certainly willing to work more closely with Washington on security matters, is uninterested in becoming a full-bore US ally. All desire the US to continue the rebalance, but with the pending transition in the US to the Trump administration, there are more questions than answers. Will he continue the rebalance? Will he rebrand it as his own? Will he disavow it? Will he replace the economic leg with bilateral trade agreements?

The strongest case for US engagement continues to center on military cooperation. At an early October joint exercise between the US Navy and the navies of several ASEAN states off the Hawaiian coast, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter reassured the ASEAN military leaders: “The US will continue to sharpen our military edge so we remain the most powerful military in the region and the security partner of choice.” Carter also outlined plans to make US attack submarines more lethal and to build underwater drones for the protection of shallower coastal waters. Meetings with ASEAN defense ministers are scheduled to continue next year in Florida for talks on surveillance.

Indicative of the augmentation of US Navy deployments to East Asia was the mid-October participation of the San Diego-based *USS Decatur* in an FON patrol near the

Paracel Islands occupied by Beijing. This deployment to East Asia was the first by a ship from the Third Fleet since World War II and demonstrates that the US Navy can conduct simultaneous operations in both Northeast and Southeast Asia with the Third and Seventh Fleet in partnership. The Seventh Fleet, with headquarters in Yokosuka Japan, possesses 80 ships, including the only forward deployed US aircraft carrier, the *USS Ronald Reagan*. The Third Fleet consists of more than 100 vessels, including four aircraft carriers.

In the late-September ASEAN-US defense ministers meeting in Hawaii, participants agreed to enhance maritime security cooperation for keeping the SLOCs open and to work together to counter terrorism as more ISIS personnel return to the region from the Middle East and South Asia. A new agreement was announced at that gathering by Indonesian Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti that US and Indonesian ships would carry out joint patrols around Indonesia's outer maritime boundaries in an effort to combat illegal fishing and human trafficking.

Looking ahead: whither the new US administration?

Over the eight years of President Obama's presidency, Southeast Asia was the centerpiece of his Asia policy. The administration saw ASEAN as the focal point for Asian regionalism. Thus, Obama visited ASEAN countries seven times and met the organizations' leaders 11 times. The United States has endorsed ASEAN's majority position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea as enunciated in the Association's Declaration of Conduct.

While President Obama has demonstrated through US Navy and Air Force deployments in Southeast Asia that freedom of navigation and overflight is a core US interest, he has been unwilling to extend to the Philippines and Scarborough Shoal the same security guarantee he has pledged to Japan with respect to the Senkaku Islands. In Tokyo, Obama pledged that Article Five of the US-Japan Security Alliance applies to the Senkakus. No such pledge has been made to the Philippines in application of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to Scarborough. It is unlikely that President Trump would alter that position given his insistence as a candidate that the United States should not be involved in conflicts that do not affect US vital interests.

President Obama's Southeast Asia policy focused on institutionalizing US relationships in the region bilaterally with comprehensive and strategic

partnerships and multilaterally through the appointment of a US ambassador to ASEAN and a new Office of Multilateral Affairs in the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. The Obama administration believed that institutionalization is important because it helps ease regional concerns about the sustainability of the US presence. The recent US-led Southeast Asian Maritime Security Initiative is a first step toward a long-term goal of developing a common operating picture in the region. It would ultimately create a set of procedures for using allied and partner capabilities – including coast guard assets.

Whether the Trump administration will follow up on these initiatives is an open question. As a prominent businessman and property developer, Trump speaks of his ability to make deals. This suggests that his approach to international politics will be transactional rather than values-based. The primary concern becomes how the US can benefit from its relations with any given country, particularly economically, but also politically. He is less interested in broad principles: promoting democracy, human rights, and a stable international order than in specific deals. If the United States provides military assistance and a security guarantee, what does a partner country offer in return? If this *modus operandi* is accurate, the world will experience a very different US profile in Southeast Asia than the one that prevailed over the past eight years.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2016

Sept. 5, 2016: President Barack Obama cancels a planned meeting with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte after Duterte makes a vulgar reference to him on learning Obama would raise the issue of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines at the meeting.

Sept. 6-8, 2016: President Obama becomes the first sitting US president to visit Laos in conjunction with his participation at the East Asia Summit and other ASEAN-related meetings. He pledges several million dollars to help clear unexploded ordnance in Laos and announces the upgrade of relations to a comprehensive partnership.

Sept. 12, 2016: President Duterte states US Special Forces in Mindanao must leave the country.

Sept. 13, 2016: President Duterte states the Philippines will no longer conduct joint patrols with the US Navy in the South China Sea. Philippine forces will only deploy within their own territorial waters because Duterte says the country should not “be involved in a hostile act.”

Sept. 13-15, 2016: Aung San Suu Kyi, chief counselor and foreign minister of Myanmar (Burma), visits the US. President Obama announces the lifting of all remaining economic sanctions on the Nay Pyi Taw government in recognition of its progress in democratization.

Sept. 15, 2016: Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay speaks at CSIS in Washington, reassuring his listeners that the Philippines remains committed to its alliance with the US.

Sept. 16, 2016: Japanese Defense Minister Inada Tomomi in Washington states that Japan will join the US in South China Sea training exercises.

Sept. 29, 2016: In a commentary on US relations with ASEAN states, the rightwing Thai newspaper *Naeo No Online* criticizes the US for “imperialism” by interfering on human rights issues in the Philippines and Cambodia. The commentary also notes that Washington seems to be accepting the Thai government's electoral referendum.

Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 2016: Meeting in Hawaii, US-ASEAN defense ministers emphasize maritime security and counterterrorism, including intelligence sharing for both.

Oct. 2, 2016: *USS Frank Cable* and the *USS John McCain* become the first US warships to visit Cam Ranh Bay since the Vietnam War.

Oct. 3, 2016: President Duterte calls for a review of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States.

Oct. 4-11, 2016: US and Philippine forces engage in the annual *Philippine Bilateral Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX)*. President Duterte states that joint exercises could be terminated.

Oct. 6, 2016: Indonesian military chief Gatot Nurmontyo announces his country will not carry out any joint exercises in the South China Sea with another country [read: the United States].

Oct. 7, 2016: Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana states “we can live without” US assistance.

Oct. 7, 2016: President Obama formally announces the lifting of US sanctions on Myanmar by terminating an emergency order that deemed the policies of the former military government a threat to US national security.

Oct. 7, 2016: Philippines suspends its South China Sea exclusive economic zone (EEZ) patrols.

Oct. 10, 2016: US provides a fifth *C-130* military cargo aircraft to the Philippines.

Oct. 11, 2016: Philippine Foreign Secretary Yasay says his country needs to chart a new, independent foreign policy because “America has failed us.”

Oct. 12, 2016: President Duterte, speaking at an anniversary of the Philippine Coast Guard states there will be no more exercises with US forces in 2017 and that the Philippines will chart a new “independent foreign policy.”

Oct. 13, 2016: US State Department sends a condolence message to Thailand on the death of the world's longest serving monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadij. The message notes that the Thai king is the only monarch in history to be born in the US.

Oct. 21, 2016: *USS Decatur* conducts a freedom of navigation patrol near the Paracel Islands.

Oct. 20, 2016: White House says it is “troubled” by President Duterte’s statement made while visiting China that the Philippines will effect a “separation” from the US.

Oct. 24, 2016: US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel in Manila states that the US stands by its commitments to the Philippines and respects the country’s autonomy and sovereignty while expressing concern about human rights in Manila’s counter-narcotics campaign.

Oct. 24-30, 2016: Dinh The Huynh, executive secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, visits the US and meets Secretary of State John Kerry in Washington. Discussions focus on the rule of law in the South China Sea and counterterrorism.

Oct. 26, 2016: Adm. Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, visits Hanoi.

Nov. 2-11, 2016: US and Indonesia conduct *Cope West* military exercises off Sulawesi, the first joint exercise in 19 years.

Nov. 13, 2016: Writing in *The National Interest*, US National Security Advisor Susan Rice urges the next administration to maintain the Obama administration’s rebalance to Asia because of the region’s economic importance.

Nov. 14-18, 2016: US and Brunei conduct the 22nd iteration of *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* naval exercises involving shore-based and at-sea training events.

Nov. 15, 2016: Philippine Army announces that despite President Duterte’s statement that joint Philippine-US military activities will be discontinued, *Balance Piston 16-4*, involving 16 US soldiers and 56 Philippine counterparts.

Nov. 19-20, 2016: The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) holds its annual summit in Peru with President Obama in attendance along with a number of Southeast Asian leaders.

Nov. 21, 2016: US-Philippines Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board (MDB-SEB) is held in Manila. A [joint statement](#) says that “We look forward to continued, close cooperation in areas central to both our national and security interests including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and maritime security.”

Dec. 1, 2016: Newly appointed US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim arrives in Manila.

Dec. 2, 2016: President Duterte and President-elect Trump talk by telephone. Duterte describes the call as “encouraging” and gives assurance that ties are intact, despite recent problems.

Dec. 14, 2016: Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Xuan Phuc telephones President-elect Trump to congratulate him on his election win. They agree to “work together to continue strengthening the relationship between the two nations.”

Dec. 14, 2016: A commission set up by Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi to investigate attacks on border posts and the army’s response in a Muslim-majority area of northwestern Rakhine State states that security forces had abided by the law.

Dec. 14, 2016: CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) reports that satellite imagery shows China has apparently installed “significant” defensive weapons on a series of artificial islands it built in the South China Sea.

Dec. 15, 2016: Philippine government invitation to the UN special rapporteur to visit Manila and conduct its own investigation on the alleged extra judicial killings is put on hold pending the rapporteur’s agreement to accept unspecified “guidelines set by the Philippine government.”

Dec. 15, 2016: US announces that the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) defers a vote on the reselection of the Philippines for development assistance, subject to a further review of concerns around rule of law and civil liberties.

Dec. 17, 2017: Responding to the MCC board decision, President Duterte says the US should “prepare to leave the Philippines, prepare for the eventual repeal or the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement.”

