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The Asian Realignment

By Andre Vltchek
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Philippines, for decades a limping invalid, poor and suffering from countless ailments, is now suddenly finding itself at the vanguard, reshuffling the entire Asia Pacific, sending Western imperialists packing.

In Manila, where the US used to roam unopposed, now Russian warships are calling on goodwill and symbolic visits.

On January 6 2017, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte boarded the Russian anti-submarine combat vessel Admiral Tributs, chatted with its officers, and then declared, loudly and clearly: “Friends, long live! That’s from the heart; I hope you can come back more often.”

Definitely, Russians will be happy to come back!

Associated Press (AP) reported on January 6:

“Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, who accompanied Duterte on the ship tour, expressed optimism about “the start of a partnership” between the two countries’ defense establishments when he met with Russian navy officials Thursday night.

“May our common aspirations for regional and global peace and security enable us to become good partners, cooperating and coordinating towards tranquil and safe seas for all,” Lorenzana said on board the Admiral Tributs.

He said during his trip to Russia in early December, he agreed with Russian defense officials to finalize a memorandum of understanding that will be the basis of future military engagements, including joint military exercises, so it can be signed during Duterte’s planned trip to Russia...”

President Duterte openly admires Russian President Vladimir Putin. He is planning to visit Moscow in April and he has already expressed his hope that Russia would become his country’s ‘ally and protector’.

The Philippines is also rapidly moving closer to China. There is significant improvement of bilateral relationships. Tension over disputed territories in the South China Sea is being gradually defused, and Manila is increasingly considering Beijing as its new and powerful ally, investor and partner, definitely not as an enemy.

While he is lashing at the US, the EU and the UN, (calling President Barack Obama “son-of-a-whore”, and telling him to “go to hell!”), Mr. Duterte defines China as “the kindest nation”.

This sort of rhetoric, let alone policies, can never be overlooked or forgiven by the West.

A couple consisting of leading Philippine Academics, Eduardo and Teresa Tadem, explained the new direction of their country’s foreign policy:

“The trend is clear: away from the West, towards China and Russia. We think that he [Duterte] will soon reach a territorial agreement with China. Plenty of goodwill is now coming from President Xi Jinping. Things are done quietly, but some great concessions are already visible: our fishermen are allowed to return to the disputed area. China is pledging foreign aid, investment, and it is promising to make our railways work again.”

However, Dr. Reynaldo Ileto, a leading Filipino historian, is concerned about Duterte’s survival, should he move too quickly with the regional realignment:

“He cannot break up with the United States too abruptly... he’d be killed.”

For a while, in Manila, we were discussing the pattern established; the way the West treats the ‘rebellious’ countries and their governments: Ukraine, Brazil, and even the former President of the Philippines, Gloria Arroyo.

“Arroyo moved closer to China”, explained Dr. Ileto: “They got her indicted for corruption. Only Duterte managed to release her.”

Antagonizing China, even provoking it into a military conflict, has been the mainstay of US foreign policy in Asia, at least during the later years of the Obama administration. This

dangerous trend will most likely continue, even accelerate, after Donald Trump takes over the Presidency of the US.

President Duterte's stubborn determination to reach a peaceful arrangement with China may put him squarely on the hit list of the Western Empire.

Prof. Roland Simbulan from the Department of Social Sciences of the University of the Philippines confirms what Dr. Iletto suggested above:

“If Duterte moves too fast, he will be overthrown, by the military. He is an outsider. Police and army hold grudges against him. Many top military commanders here were trained by the US, and often even corrupted by the US. Duterte's anti-US and anti-imperialist policy goes beyond rhetoric; it is real. He is confrontational, he is against the US foreign policy towards the Philippines and the world.”

However, President Duterte is not only a self-proclaimed socialist, he is also a pragmatist.

For him, this is the best time to take advantage of confusion caused by the upcoming administration of Donald Trump and its frequent anti-Asian outbursts.

Japan's MP, Shinzo Abe, is looking for new allies in the Asia Pacific and beyond. His country is in disarray, horrified by Trump and his doctrines.

China and Russia may be Mr. Duterte's two new soul mates, but the deep pockets of Tokyo cannot be fully neglected either.

During his two-day visit to the Philippines, Mr. Abe pledged to provide 1 trillion yen (\$8.7 billion) in funding and investment. He also promised to assist with deteriorated infrastructure, and to help the Philippines with the maritime security vessels and aircraft. Japan is the Philippines' largest provider of aid, a substantial source of remittances.

Japan's help is not expected to be altruistic. It is clearly understood by the analysts that Mr. Abe is now using his subtle diplomatic skills and financial incentives in order to seduce President Duterte into returning back to the US-Japan camp, and even abandoning the new alliance that is being presently forged between the Philippines, China, Russia and possibly Vietnam.

It is a complex and dangerous game, which at the end of the road may lead to a war, even to a global conflict. There is absolutely no doubt on which side Japan has been standing.

Both Japan and the Philippines have territorial disputes with China, but while the Philippines is lately opting for compromise and peaceful settlement, Japan is increasingly choosing a confrontational path.

PM Shinzo Abe is well aware of the fact that later this year, the Philippines will be hosting the ASEAN meeting and therefore in a position to control the focus and influence the language of the joint communiqués. That is why he is willing to eat simple cakes and (at least metaphorically) sing his sweet and seductive songs in Duterte's humble home in Davao.

It is highly unlikely that President Duterte would scale down his cooperation with Beijing just in order to get his hands on a few more secondhand coastguard vessels, or for an extra dose of foreign aid. However, he is likely to continue maintaining his close relationship with Tokyo, as his country has been doing for decades. To emphasize it, he declared during his meeting with the PM Shinzo Abe:

“In Tokyo, I said that Japan deserves its own rightful place in the constellation of the Philippines' friends... Tonight, let me reiterate that Japan is a friend closer than a brother. That means that Japan is a friend unlike any other.”

Perhaps, or maybe not...

This is an extremely critical moment for Asia. China and Russia are rising, while old allies of the West, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are either in decline or in distress. The Philippines and Vietnam are calculating their next moves. Thailand, Malaysia and even Indonesia are suddenly uncertain about their previously staunch pro-Western stands.

Father of the imperialist 'Pivot to Asia', President Barack Obama, is stepping down. Aggressive and anti-Asian leader Donald Trump is ascending to the throne. When it comes to the Empire and its involvement in Asia, things are getting from bad to worse.

It is clear that the West is not willing to tolerate the leadership of Beijing even on China's own continent.

Now Washington has to deal with one more obstacle to its complete rule. Once fully obedient and submissive, a poor former US colony, the Philippines, is suddenly roaring, flexing its muscle, negotiating independently for the best deals available, and searching for its own destiny. Just one year ago all this would be unimaginable, but it is happening now.

The entire Asian continent is watching and so is, most likely, the entire political, military and intelligence establishment of the West.

The process is very quick (dangerously quick, say many in Manila), and Washington can hardly keep up with the changes. President Duterte is governing his complex country for only six months, and there are already many fundamental developments.

Russian warships are visiting Manila and future joint exercises are being discussed, even planned. China and the Philippines are talking peace, friendship, cooperation and even railways.

Vietnam and the Philippines are moving closer. Japan is suddenly coming as a humble friend, not as an economic bully.

For the Philippines, 2017 will be decisive: the country will establish itself as one of the main catalysts of the changes in Asia, or it could collapse, be destroyed, from outside or from inside, with substantial external 'help'.