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US-China tensions at center of fight over Philippine vaccine procurement

The availability and distribution of a vaccine for COVID-19 in the Philippines has become the subject of a fierce dispute bound up with the struggle over the geopolitical allegiance of Manila to either the United States or China. While the lives and health of millions are at stake, under conditions of mass hunger and pandemic, and with no prospect of a vaccine yet available in the country, the ruling elite are fighting over participation in the war plans of Washington.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte stated on December 26 that he would terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) unless the US provided the Philippines with vaccines. “If they are not able to deliver a minimum of 20 million vaccines, they better get out,” he told the press. “No vaccine, no stay here.”



A medical worker attending to a patient in Manila (Local Government of Manila)

The VFA, signed in 1998, governs the presence of US troops in the country and is a critical foundation for the joint military exercises conducted by Washington in the region. These military exercises have over the past decade turned to an ever-more openly aggressive targetting of China, in the name of maritime security. In 2019, the US military conducted over 300 such joint exercises under the auspices of the VFA.

Duterte’s threat of this past week is the continuation of an ongoing struggle over the VFA. On February 11, Duterte first announced that he would be terminating the VFA. Duterte was responding to the cancelation of Senator Ronald “Bato” de la Rosa’s US visa. De la Rosa,

former head of the Philippine National Police (PNP) and long-time ally of Duterte, was instrumental in the creation of the Duterte's murderous nationwide "war on drugs." Washington used the issue of human rights violations to attempt to pressure the Duterte administration away from its growing alliance with Beijing.

As the WSWS [wrote](#) at the time, the cancelation of the VFA was "the most serious rupture in relations between Manila and its former colonial master since the granting of formal independence on July 4, 1946."

The termination of the VFA was scheduled to take effect 180 days after the delivery of the notice to the US embassy in Manila, but in early June Duterte suspended the abrogation "in light of political and other developments in the region." A critical consideration in the suspension was Duterte's need to retain control over the Philippine military. The termination of the VFA had outraged a significant layer of the top brass and the possibility of a military coup d'état was the subject of public political discussion.

Then US Defense Secretary Mark Esper held a conference call with his Philippine counterpart, Delfin Lorenzana, in mid-June, in which he stated that the US would provide vaccines for COVID-19 to its "allies and partners." He expressed "appreciation" for the Philippine military's support for the government's decision to suspend the termination. He was not thanking the government but the military itself as instrumental in the decision.

Strongly implied in Esper's statement was the threat that if the VFA was terminated the US would no longer supply a vaccine to the Philippines, as it would no longer be a "partner."

The termination of the VFA was suspended for six months and, unless Duterte extends the suspension, the 180-day clock on termination will resume ticking at the beginning of 2021.

Duterte's renewed threat to the VFA was made in response to the fact that Singapore secured Pfizer-produced vaccines and would begin vaccinating the population, while the Philippines had received none. Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin Jr. announced in mid-December that someone in the Philippines government had "dropped the ball" and failed to sign a Confidential Disclosure Agreement (CDA) with Pfizer. As a result, he stated, discussions with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo broke down and no vaccine was forthcoming.

Department of Health chief Francisco Duque stated that his signature on the CDA, which was completed in mid-October, was not a factor in the supply of Pfizer's vaccine. Carlito Galvez Jr., head of the Philippine vaccination program, explained that the Philippines could expect to receive Pfizer's vaccine in the third quarter of 2021 "at the earliest." The Philippines was not a priority target, because "wealthy countries" would receive the vaccine first.

The Philippines is scheduled to receive 2.6 million doses of the UK-based AstraZeneca vaccine in the second quarter of 2021. For a country with a population of 109 million people, this does not begin to remedy the problem. While looking to secure vaccines from the United States with threats to the VFA, the Duterte administration is also attempting to procure 25 million doses of the Chinese-made Sinopharm or Sinovac vaccines.

Retired Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio, who has played a prominent role in pushing for Duterte to assert Philippine sovereignty over disputed portions of the South China Sea in opposition to China, weighed in with an op-ed column in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on December 31. China, he speculated, could make "make access to its own vaccine subject to the condition that the Philippines must set aside its arbitral victory in the West Philippine Sea (WPS)."

Eric Domingo, director general of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), stated that the FDA would rush approval of vaccines approved in the US and UK, but would be strict about vaccines from China.

Duterte revealed on December 26 that his own Presidential Security Group (PSG), comprised of military forces under the direct supervision of the president, had been vaccinated in

September and October despite the fact that no vaccine had yet been approved by FDA. A political firestorm erupted over this admission.

Defense Secretary Lorenzana stated that the vaccines administered to the PSG had been produced in China and were “smuggled” into the country. Menardo Guevarra, secretary of the Department of Justice, announced on December 30, that the National Bureau of Investigation would launch a probe of the alleged “smuggling.”

The working masses and poor of the Philippines are currently suffering the worst levels of hunger and malnutrition since the Japanese Occupation. Unemployment has skyrocketed under the conditions of extended lockdown. Indifferent to this suffering, the ruling elite see in the procurement of a vaccine a weapon in their fight over the geopolitical orientation of the country and their hold on power.

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