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Philippines: Towards China And Away From USA

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Since the end of WWII, the power structure in Asia-Pacific has been primarily dominated by the United States. With the turn of the twenty-first century, the center of gravity of global balance of power has shifted from Europe to the Asia-Pacific, mainly caused by the rise of China. The longstanding American influence in the region has been faced with a severe challenge. The US Asia Pacific pivot appears to have failed as the America's influence in the region is waning. The Philippines is a good example to illustrate this trend.

The Philippines has been considered a staunch ally of the United States and has supported many points of American foreign policy. The US and the Philippines are treaty allies, but under the previous Aquino administration, Washington and Manila signed a new bilateral defense pact in 2014 to make US security assistance to the Philippines rise markedly.

It is changing now. With a still robust relationship to the United States, the Philippine foreign policy has been going through changes since President Rodrigo Duterte came to power in June. There is growing reason to expect a potentially drastic shift in Philippine foreign policy under the new administration that has emphasized preference for a more independent foreign policy with less reliance on America. With the election campaign won, the country's new

president said, «*I will be charting a new course for the Philippines on its own and will not be dependent on the United States*».

The new president's approach to the US has certainly evoked concern in Washington. Duterte has put into doubt the US commitment to come to the Philippines' aid in an event of conflict in the South China Sea. He has shown his discontent with perceived lack of US military support amid the maritime spats.

The Philippine president has publicly insulted the American ambassador.

Duterte has broached the issue of introducing new restrictions on the movement of American military personnel deployed in the country.

At the same time, he has extended an olive branch to China, deploying former president Fidel Ramos to conduct backdoor negotiations with the Asian powerhouse.

The parties are discussing a joint fisheries agreement in the Scarborough Shoal, which is consistent with The Hague ruling, a potential breakthrough to boost economic cooperation.

China has offered large-scale investments in Philippine infrastructure.

The Philippine president is expected to visit China later this year. With Rodrigo Duterte in power, the Philippines is going through gradual recalibration in relations with America and China.

The Philippines is not the only big regional country the US has problems with. For instance, the relationship with Thailand, an old US ally, has been flat-lined since the Thai military seized power in a 2014 coup.

Washington has so far lacked power to influence ASEAN member states and make them support its anti-China stance.

People across the Asia-Pacific think American clout is dwindling and that China will dominate the region over the next decade, according to a recent survey by the University of Sydney's United States Studies Center.

Another survey says roughly six-in-ten Japanese (61%) say the US has declined in importance over the past 10 years.

Enthusiasm for a strong U.S. role in the Asia-Pacific is low in Australia.

The US administration plans to ratify the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the lame-duck session of Congress are hitting snags on the way.

The chances to ratify the agreement before the presidential election are slim. There will be hardly a chance afterwards as the deal is opposed by the Democratic and Republican candidates. The failure to push the deal through Congress will be a great setback undermining the US credibility in the region. «For America's friends and partners, ratifying the trade pact is a litmus test for your credibility and seriousness of purpose», Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said during his recent visit to Washington, speaking in the name of Asia Pacific signatories.

In its turn, China, the country excluded from the TPP, is offering another pact – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement comparable to the TPP, but led by Beijing. The RCEP does not include the United States. Besides, China is also pledging more regional loans through its new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and a \$40 billion Silk Road fund. Without the TPP, the nations of the region will look to Beijing seeking foreign trade and investment. The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is expanding to Asia Pacific.

Moscow and Beijing are working at the trade and economic agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China.

The parties are in talks on the participation of the EAEU in the Chinese Silk Road project. The creation of a common economic space has been defined as the key target.

The Asia Pacific region is witnessing a shift to an emerging multipolar order to cause new security alignments and re-alignments among countries in the region. The US clout in the region is hopelessly waning while other actors are gaining strength.