

Philippines: Yes, to 'separation' from US, but an economic anti-imperialism is also needed

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President Rodrigo Duterte's statement declaring his intentions to "separate" from the United States in both military and economic relations should be welcomed, but it's easier said than done. Hence the President's constant 'backtracking' on his statements. Given the President's inconsistency, the question is posed: What does it mean to be an anti-imperialist government today? And is lining up with China (and to a lesser-extent Russia) an anti-imperialist positioning?

Since the formation of the Philippine republic every single Philippine President has visited the US seeking 'assistance' and 'guidance'. This has been an indication of the Philippines being subservient to US interests in both foreign and domestic policy and the successive elite-controlled governments acting as proxy for US interests, from Korea (1950-1955) to Vietnam (1964-1968), when Philippine troops fought with or assisted the invading US forces. Duterte, despite the backtracking, is the only President who has declared, on several occasions, his intentions to pursue a foreign policy independent of the US, thus signifying an important and even historical shift. This significance has not been lost on the trapo elite, those both allied with and opposing Duterte, who have come out criticizing the President's statement. This includes former President Fidel Ramos, who is considered to be an ally of the President.

Neoliberal globalization has increased the importance of economic imperialism vis-à-vis political/military imperialism. Neoliberalism has consolidated imperialist domination of Third World economies. Regimes that have been politically independent from Western imperialism, have been part of the Western-dominated neoliberal economy, such as Syria and Libya (2000-2011) and Vietnam (since the early 2000s). Interestingly, in the case of Vietnam this has led to a state that fought a 30-year war for independence against the US increasingly becoming a US ally.

The Cuban revolution and the Hugo Chavez project of 21st Century Socialism in Venezuela sit in contrast to these examples. The Cuban revolutions anti-imperialism began in the domestic front when Fidel Castro declared in 1960 that the revolutionary government would expropriate US corporations "down to the nails in their boots" and then started a program of nationalization of the key sectors of the Cuban economy, such as sugar and tobacco. Likewise, Hugo Chavez's anti-imperialism was primarily waged on the economic front, further socializing the country's oil assets and embarking on an anti-neoliberal economic program with the stated intention of transitioning towards socialism, despite the current challenges faced in the consistency of the implementation of this program. In both cases, key to the success of this economic and subsequent political anti-imperialism of these revolutionary governments was the mobilizing of the masses around an 'all-sided' anti-imperialist program.

If Philippines remains a neoliberal economy, and especially if it remains dependent on export of labor as a major income-generator, it will be easy for the US to either pressure a backdown from Duterte or effect regime change. The country will be at mercy of international financial institutions and vulnerable to economic sanctions, official and unofficial. The pro-US elite, which is the overwhelming majority, will be a 'fifth column' supporting US interests, along with the top echelons

of the AFP loyal to the US high command. Whether the masses will line up behind a popular President when the going gets tougher, is a question mark. As we know from our own historical experience and can observe in the case of the progressive governments in Latin America today, the US has a long history of manipulating the class struggle for its own ends

An economy dependent on the export of labor is extremely vulnerable to international pressure. US Ambassador Philip Goldberg's statement on the importance of OFW remittances to the Philippine economy and the decline in the value of the peso in the last few weeks are indicators of the government's economic vulnerability. Economic independence, therefore, would have to end the export of labor as a major sector of the economy. This would necessitate serious development of the means of production, that is, a sustainable industrialization of the economy. The campaign by the labor organizations against contractualization needs to be viewed in this light. It's an important part of the struggle to end neoliberal economic dependence. It should be viewed as a key part of the struggle for an economic anti-imperialism.

The rise of neoliberal imperialism or global capitalism has also involved the rise of China as an economic power. This is extremely contradictory because the US still controls the world economy and China's economic growth is intertwined with neoliberalism. Chinese manufacturing is dependent on Western markets, which is why after 2008 financial crisis China did all it could to stabilize global capitalism. Therefore, the President aligning himself with China, while indicating a direction towards an independent foreign policy in the political arena, is not an indication of an anti-imperialist policy in the economic arena.

Obama's "pivot to Asia" was the idea that surrounding China with countries willing to maintain a US military presence or relationship with the US would be a more effective way of projecting power than Middle East wars which can get out of control and end up having an effect opposite to what was intended, i.e., Bush's fiasco in Iraq ended up damaging US military and political prestige. China had to do a bit of military projection of its own to respond. Hence the increase in assertiveness over territories claimed by other nations in the region. The US is upset about Duterte's 'defection' to China because this sabotage of "pivot to Asia" would weaken US in its global competition with China.

President Duterte's 'political' anti-imperialism has to be matched, both with the scrapping of the military agreements such as the VFA, the EDCA, and the RP-US Military Treaty, and an 'economic' anti-imperialism. This requires pursuing an anti-neoliberal program and mobilizing the masses around such a program. Supporting the struggle for a comprehensive end to contractualization will be an important step forward in this regard.#

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