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OPINION

Philippines: Duterte is a mass murderer, but I support his terminating the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US

Wednesday 19 February 2020, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 27 January 2020).

'Here goes that knee-jerk anti-Americanism again, some folks may say. But really, entering these two agreements were two of the most irresponsible foreign policy decisions made by our heads of state,' writes Walden Bello

President Rodrigo Duterte is, in my view, a mass murderer, but I would support his move to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States [1]. The man may be the devil incarnate but, hey, I won't quibble about his motives [2].

Here goes that knee-jerk anti-Americanism again, some folks may say. But really, entering these two agreements were two of the most irresponsible foreign policy decisions made by our heads of state - Joseph Estrada in the case of the VFA, and Benigno Aquino III in that of EDCA. Indeed, one of the reasons I broke with Aquino and resigned from Congress in 2015 was his succumbing to US pressure to ensnare us into EDCA.

Coming into force almost a decade after the Americans gave up Subic and Clark, the VFA reflected the US's move from a position of regarding China as a "strategic partner" under the Clinton administration in late 1990's to its defining Beijing a "strategic rival" under George W. Bush in the early 2000's. [3]

What made the Pentagon change its mind? It was China's major push to improve its missile defense emplacements on its long southeastern and eastern coastline and in the East and South China Seas, following Beijing's realization of how vulnerable to US attack its coastal urban industrial infrastructure was when Washington sent two carrier task forces to the region to intimidate China during the Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1996.

Over the next few years, the Pentagon carried out an aggressive upgrading of its capabilities to penetrate China's improving anti-ship and anti-missile defensive shield (A2/AD) in the area. The result was the institutionalization of a warfighting doctrine focused on China: the AirSea Battle Strategy. According to the most important elaboration of AirSea Battle, its aim was "to overcome China's A2/AD defenses" because failure to do so would result in the "United States [finding] itself effectively locked out of a region that has been declared a vital security interest by every administration in the last 60 years." Key to AirSea Doctrine was obtaining bases in the Philippines to provide fire and logistical support to American air and naval efforts to swamp Chinese coastal and island defenses.

Concluded with the Obama administration in 2014, EDCA can be described as nothing less than a gift to Washington. It allowed the US to set up military bases for troops and war materiel in nominally Philippine bases. And Washington could have these bases without paying rent – the sticking point in the 1990-91 base renegotiations! [4]

But what was worrisome was not only that we were making a major cession of our sovereignty, but geopolitically and geographically, we were caught in the worst of all worlds. The bases here would serve as one of the springboards for a US offensive to overcome China's A2/AD defenses on its coasts and the West Philippine Sea. At the same time, they would be within range of intermediate range Chinese missiles in the event of a conflict. Aquino enlisted us in a dangerous military alliance against China without a formal alliance!

We had stupidly allowed ourselves to be suckered into a runaway arms and strategic race on the side of the United States, and, as I pointed out to Aquino's advisers at the time, EDCA undermined the legal and moral case we had against Beijing's island grab in the West Philippine Sea. [5]

Under the Trump and Duterte administrations, the situation of the Philippines has gotten worse. Trump has taken the US out of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and his Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has made it clear that Washington will now set up intermediate range nuclear missile emplacements directed at China in the Western Pacific. It is not unlikely that the Philippine bases are being considered to serve as hosts for these weapons systems.

Duterte, for his part, has rhetorically inveighed against the United States, but he has done absolutely nothing so far to interrupt the flow of US troops and war materiel in the country. Washington is willing to put up with his curses, so long as he does nothing to limit the freedom of action that his predecessor Aquino, a man devoid of any strategic sense, gave the US.

So, yes, I support the president's expressed intention to withdraw from the VFA and would urge him to also include leaving EDCA and that useless relic of the Cold War, the Mutual Defense Treaty. The big question is: will he follow through, defying both his generals and their real boss – the Pentagon? This man is, as I said, a mass murderer, and I will continue to hold him accountable for his violations of human rights. But when it comes to ending VFA and EDCA, he can count on my support.

Walden Bello

P.S.

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 - Walden Bello served in the House of Representatives from 2009 to 2015, during which he authored the House Resolution renaming the South China Sea the West Philippine Sea as well as opposed the Aquino administration's entering the Enhanced Defense Cooperation with the United States. He made the only recorded resignation on principle in the history of Congress in March 2015.
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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/250054-duterte-threatens-scrap-visiting-forces-agreement-january-2020>

[2] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/250172-visiting-forces-agreement-termination-effects-edca-mutual-defense-treaty-separate-study>

[3] READ: DOJ: Effects of VFA termination on EDCA, Mutual Defense Treaty have to be studied: <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/222309-analysis-us-military-gains-forward-base-philippines-duterte-rhetoric>

[4] READ: [ANALYSIS] Despite Duterte rhetoric, US military gains forward base in PH: <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/222309-analysis-us-military-gains-forward-base-philippines-duterte-rhetoric>

[5] READ: Lorenzana says it's within PH right to scrap defense pact with US: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/250147-lorenzana-says-within-philippines-right-scrap-defense-pact-us>