

Duterte (Philippines) reverses decision to scrap US troop agreement, as South China Sea tensions rise

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- **President Rodrigo Duterte in February cancelled the Visiting Forces Agreement, which allows US troops to operate in the country on a rotational basis**
- **Analysts said the sudden U-turn may have been influenced by recent Chinese moves in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic**

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has suspended his decision to scrap a two-decade-old troop deployment agreement with the United States due to political and other developments in the region, his foreign minister said on Tuesday, as analysts expressed their belief that the sudden move was related to rising tension in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic.

The termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) [[1](#)], which is central to one of Washington's most important alliances in Asia, was due to take effect in August and was Duterte's biggest move yet towards delivering on long-standing threats to downgrade ties with the Philippines' former colonial ruler.

Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin said the news that the Philippines was no longer abandoning the pact was well received by the United States

The mercurial Duterte, known for his stinging rebukes of Western powers, has clashed with Washington over numerous issues and has been open about his disdain for his country's most important diplomatic ally and main provider of military hardware and training.

His embrace of historic rival China, a country deeply mistrusted by his US-allied defence apparatus, has attracted considerable criticism, with opponents accusing him of gambling with sovereignty in pursuit of massive investments that have not materialised.

The VFA provides the legal framework for which US troops can operate on a rotational basis in the Philippines and experts say without it, their other bilateral defence agreements cannot be implemented.

Duterte pulled the plug on the VFA on February 11 in an angry response to the revocation of a US visa held by a former police chief-turned-senator who led his war on drugs. The official reason for Duterte's withdrawal was to enable the Philippines to diversify its foreign relations.

The US Embassy in Manila welcomed the suspension. "Our long-standing alliance has benefited both countries, and we look forward to continued close security and defence cooperation with the

Philippines," it said.

Critics had said the suspension was a knee-jerk reaction that would weaken the Philippine military, denying it access to scores of annual training exercises, including expertise in tackling Islamist militants, natural disasters and maritime threats.

The official notice of the suspension said the decision was taken "in light of political and other developments in the region". It did not specify what those were.

Two analysts

expressed the belief that Duterte's sudden move had to do with rising tensions in the South China Sea

Maritime law expert Jay Batongbacal said Duterte's unexpected suspension of the repeal of the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement "may have been influenced also by the recent Chinese moves in the South China Sea against Vietnam and Malaysia, and Indonesia's diplomatic spat with China".

Batongbacal, who heads the University of the Philippines Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea, told the South China Morning Post the Armed Forces are currently vulnerable because of a shortage of ships to conduct patrols and resupply missions.

"Two of Philippines' largest ships are still in India, if I recall correctly, while other assets are being used for airlift or sea transportation of essential medical supplies and relief goods."

Philippine and US Marines take part in a beach assault exercise. Photo: AFP

Philippine and US Marines take part in a beach assault exercise. Photo: AFP

He saw it as "a welcome development" as it means military cooperation on matters such as HADR (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief) can continue if needed during the coronavirus pandemic

"The reference 'political and other developments in the region' surely covers the pandemic, but might also point toward other events that have not been publicised. It may also be the case that the two parties intend to carry out some form of cooperative activity like HADR that cannot be done if the VFA terminates as originally scheduled," he said.

Greg Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative of the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and Maritime Studies, said the abrogation of the VFA "has always been unpopular".

"Now China is behaving aggressively at the same time that Covid-19 has forced the cancellation of most high-level meetings between US and Filipino officials. Clearly someone has gotten through to the president arguing that for these and other reasons, they need more time," said Poling, who oversees research on US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

Meanwhile, lawyers and human rights activists in the Philippines have raised the alarm over a new anti-terrorism bill pushed by Duterte, warning of draconian and arbitrary provisions that could be abused to target his detractors.

Duterte, who has drawn international criticism for his war on drugs and his human rights record, is trying to expedite the passage of a law that expands the definition of terrorism and bolsters police powers of surveillance, arrest and detention.

Opponents of the bill fear it could be used to suppress free speech and harass those who challenge Duterte, who commands a legislative majority and influence within the judiciary and state institutions.

“We think this is against the constitution,” said human rights lawyer Jose Manuel Diokno. “Given the broader definition of terrorism, the administration’s critics could be tagged as suspected terrorists.”

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque dismissed the criticism and said elements of the bill were patterned on those used in countries that had dealt effectively with extremism. He said the five-month takeover in 2017 of the southern city of Marawi by militants loyal to Islamic State showed the extent of extremist influence in the country.

“Let us not forget, the remains of Marawi is still there,” Roque said.

Raissa Robles, Reuters

P.S.

- South China Morning Post. Published: 11:30pm, 2 Jun, 2020. Updated: 5:28am, 3 Jun, 2020: <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3087242/philippines-reverses-decision-scrap-us-troop-agreement>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3049996/philippines-gives-formal-notice-scrap-us-troop-agreement>