Japan to Join China and US in Contesting Rodrigo Duterte

The election of Rodrigo Duterte the President of the Philippines last May was seen as a landmark event in the tricky and dangerous contest unfolding in the waters of the South China Sea and in the Southeast Asia as a whole. Though this event has not overwritten the initial scenario of the geopolitical game played in the region, it certainly has altered it.

The main contestants, i.e., the US, China and Japan, cannot ignore the changes, as they might be indicative of a potential shift in the foreign policy of the country, the territory of which defines the eastern border of the South China Sea.

The geopolitical location of the Philippines renders its foreign policy trends strategically important. Has there been a shift in the country's policy, and if so, in what direction?

This question seems quite relevant in the context of strong statements delivered by newly elected President Duterte. They look much like a demonstration of the President's determination to dissolve a military and political alliance with the US, sealed with a number of bilateral agreements, and make a shift toward China, i.e., America's main geopolitical opponent.

At first glance, this conclusion seems well grounded since among all countries, non-members of ASEAN, President Duterte chose China and not the Philippines' military and political ally (the US) as the destination for his first (and quite successful) October 18-21 official foreign visit.

However, a closer look at the situation reveals that all these (quasi) shifts in the Philippine foreign policy are not quite what they appear to be.

The "Commentaries" provided by President Duterte's cabinet following his public statements are rather suggestive. According to them, the new Philippines' leadership is not planning to break up with its main ally. Rather, it is going to pursue a policy focused on the country's national interests.

Besides, after his departure from China, President of Philippines stressed that the statements he had made while in Beijing did not imply he was looking to sever diplomatic relations with the United States.

On the one hand, China, knowing the constraints imposed on the Philippine leadership, assesses President Duterte's anti-American rhetoric quite realistically. On the other—why not take advantage of the situation and play up to the new leader of the Philippines, the country, which for decades housed the regional military base of China's chief geopolitical opponent.

"President Duterte needs investments in the Philippine economy, doesn't he? Well, let's pretend we bought into his critical remarks about the US and let's give him over $13 billion. After all, you never know in which direction the regional conquest will develop."
The real value of the aforementioned President Duterte’s rhetoric was demonstrated during his visit to Japan, i.e., the key regional US ally and the second most powerful China's geopolitical challenger.

Timed to the 60 anniversary of establishment of Japan-Philippines diplomatic relations, this visit was undertaken just a few days (25-27 October) after President Duterte had departed from China.

Personal contacts with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had been established a month earlier, during Philippine President's trip to Vientiane, where he participated in a series of international events hosted by ASEAN. Then Mr. Duterte thanked Japan duly represented by its current Prime Minister for the contribution to the development of Davao (the second largest Philippine city), where he had served as a city Mayor for over 20 years.

Having barely set his foot in Japan, Mr. Duterte immediately took steps to remedy PM Abe's “headaches” caused by his earlier anti-American attacks. Speaking at the meeting with leaders of the main Japanese business community Keidanren, Mr. Duterte stressed that he was pursuing purely economic objectives in China. However, he also made a point that his country would no longer play the role of "a dog on a leash" and would reconsider the format of military cooperation with the United States within next two years.

Following the October 26 talks with the Japanese Prime Minister, Mr. Duterte and heads of the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs made a number of statements loaded with connotations. Commenting on the results of the talks in Japan, the Kyodo News Agency noted that both leaders confirmed they were "on the same side in the face of China's military expansion in the seas".

Addressing public, PM Duterte said precisely the following, "The Philippines will continue tackling regional problems, including in the waters of the South China Sea, in close cooperation with Japan basing its actions on shared values of democracy, respect for law and peaceful resolution of disagreements."

Apparently, the leading Japanese news agency had some insider information (concerning the "Chinese expansion" any way) allowing it to make the above conclusion.

But if it turns out that during the meeting with Japanese PM Abe Philippine President indeed said that he would base his decisions regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea on the international law and, in particular, on the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration of July 12, 2016, his words would have a sobering effect on China. So far, only the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs has approved of The Hague Court’s ruling.

It is beyond doubt that Beijing will be alarmed by President Duterte's eagerness to conduct military exercises in alliance with Japan. And even more so, since he gave a positive answer to the question of nosy journalists "Including in the territorial waters?" The issue of ownership of the territorial waters lies at the heart of ongoing disputes between China and the Philippines.

The content of a brief joint statement articulated based on the results of the Abe-Duterte negotiations demonstrates that both countries are determined to pursue the long existing trend toward the development of comprehensive bilateral relations, including in the domain of defense.

It goes without saying that China was closely following the progress of the President Duterte's visit to Japan and was anxiously waiting for its results. Beijing still hopes that Tokyo "will not be able to retard the emergence of an independent foreign policy," of the Philippines.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the main regional and global player (Washington) continues to keep its "finger on the pulse" of the situation in the Southeast Asia. The US made it clear when it conducted an operation in the South China Sea on October 21, i.e., on the final day of Philippine President's stay in China. Of course, Beijing was alarmed to see the American destroyers Decatur sailing past two currently contested by Vietnam and Taiwan islands in the Paracel Archipelago it had been controlling since 1974.

And this was not the first provocation by the United States Navy in the region. All US Navy operations had been devised to demonstrate the United States' disregard for China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Yet, the destroyer Decatur's mission was meant to send a clear message to the leaders of China and Philippines meeting in Beijing. "No matter what resolutions you adopt in relation to the South China Sea disputes, they will not limit our freedom of movement in these waters."

Two points should be made in the conclusion of this coverage. For one, when assessing the Philippine foreign policy, one should not rely solely on emotional (sometimes conflicting) statements of the new Philippine President.
For two, President Duterte, still a rooky on the international political stage, should be aware that he is engaging in a risky regional contest, where each of the three main participants (and the three leading global powers)—the United States, China and Japan—is pursuing its geopolitical ambitions. Less powerful parties competing in such contests should keep in mind that they have only one chance.

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