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THE CURRENT: Why is Duterte canceling the US-Philippines military cooperation agreement?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte gave official notice this week that his country will withdraw from a military agreement with the U.S. which allows U.S. forces to train and conduct joint exercises there.

With us to discuss why this is happening now and what it means for U.S. security concerns in the Indo-Pacific is Lindsey Ford, David M. Rubenstein Fellow with the Center for East Asia Policy Studies here at Brookings. Lindsey, thanks for being here.

FORD: Hi Adrianna, thanks for having me.

PITA: Maybe you can start by telling us a little bit about this Visiting Forces Agreement. What was covered under this, what role did it play in the U.S. -Philippines relationship?

FORD: Sure, first I think it's important to clarify that the Visiting Forces Agreement is different than the mutual defense treaty that we have with the Philippines. So, the mutual defense treaty is the foundational document that says we have an alliance with the Philippines and that respectively, we would come to their aid in the event of a conflict. That alliance is not broken simply because of President Duterte's decision to pull out of the Visiting Forces Agreement. The Visiting Forces Agreement is really a supplementary document that is important because it allows us to implement that alliance. What it does is, it sets the terms under which the U.S. military can operate temporarily in the Philippines. Without that agreement, we are unable to do things like training and exercises that are a really important aspect of the military cooperation between our two countries.

PITA: So why is this happening now? Did Duterte say what precipitated this decision?

FORD: So the proximate cause here was the U.S. decision not to give a visa to one of his close political allies, Senator dela Rosa, who the U.S. has concerns about human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings that occurred under his watch. Formerly the chief of the Philippine National police forces. As part of President Duterte's larger war on drugs that has been going on in the country for the last few years. That's the immediate and proximate cause that kicked off this crisis, but it's really important to note that this is part of a longer pattern that we've seen under the Duterte administration where President Duterte has been quite eager to maybe – I guess we'd call it a reverse rebalance, away from the United States and really weaken the alliance ties with the United States and really shore up his ties with Beijing, with Russia instead.

PITA: There is, I understand, a 180-day wind-down built into the agreement, but there's also some question in the Philippines about whether President Duterte has the ability to just take this decision unilaterally and not involve the Philippines Congress. What can you tell us about this, whether this might

mean some likelihood of this withdrawal being suspended or called off altogether? Is any response required from the U.S. in order for the Philippines to break off this agreement?

FORD: So in terms of what's next, there is this 180-day period between the notification of their intent to withdraw – which is what just occurred – and the actual cancelation of the agreement. What I expect that you will see in the meantime: this decision has been quite unpopular in many quarters in the Philippines, particularly in the armed forces. A lot of national security, armed forces individuals, have very long-standing, warm, close ties with the United States. The relationship with the United States remains actually extremely popular in the Philippines, so I think you will probably see in some quarters an effort to convince Duterte to change his mind. And we've seen this occur before in other instances where he's threatened to weaken cooperation with the United States in various places, and behind the scenes people have worked to convince him to change his mind.

Now whether that occurs or not in this situation remains to be seen. I expect that you will see probably – again, behind the scenes – efforts on the U.S. side to have conversations, see if there's a way to turn this around. Whether or not that's true, I don't know. President Duterte as well as some other Philippine officials have talked more recently over the last week about things like perhaps negotiating a new Visiting Forces Agreements with other countries: Japan, Indonesia, they've even thrown China, Russia into the mix. I think that's going to be much harder to actually execute than it sounds, so we're going to have to wait and see how this plays out, but it's certainly going to be pretty precarious.

PITA: Defense Secretary Esper said that this move was “unfortunate;” on the other hand, President Trump has often spoken warmly of Duterte, in the past. He said on Wednesday that he doesn't mind the move because, quote, “We'll save a lot of money.” Can you talk about the role of this move, the effects of this on the broader US-Philippine relationship?

FORD: Yeah, sure. Clearly, the president's remarks were, unfortunately consistent with how he often frames U.S. alliances, which is simply in a transactional, dollar and cents kind of way. Which is not – if you look at the U.S. defense budget, what is driving costs in the U.S. defense budget is not the cost of exercises with the Philippines. So in terms of this as a giant cost-saving measure, that's not something that I would be touting.

The broader consequences for the alliance relationship are, I think, potentially significant. On the U.S. side, I think seeing a U.S. treaty ally really take a step like this that indicates a severe lack of confidence in the United States and an interest in seeking other partners instead really reinforces a narrative that's out there that U.S. influence and leadership is declining in the region. I think it sows seeds of doubt about the U.S. as an ally.

However, that being said, on a day-to-day basis, I think the real loss here, when you look at what's really lost from the Visiting Forces Agreement, who loses the most in this situation is honestly the Philippine people. And that's what I think is really disappointing about this situation. And the Philippine armed forces. What's going to be lost here is training and exercises and U.S. assistance for things like counterterrorism operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These are things that speak squarely to the safety and security of the Philippine people, and this is where the U.S. armed forces have provided such friendship and support for so many decades to the Philippine armed forces.

We conduct over 300 training engagements a year; that's a significant loss for the Philippine armed forces in terms of practical expertise and opportunities to train with another military. I don't see Beijing suddenly stepping into the gap to fill that in the near term. You're looking at things like the U.S. forces being present because of operations, allowing us to respond more quickly in a disaster situation like Typhon Haiyan that happened several years ago. U.S. Marines were in the area; we could immediately move in and provide logistical assistance and help Philippine forces get to the affected areas. Not being there makes a big difference. When you saw in 2017 ISIS-affiliated forces take over the town of Marawi in the southern Philippines, the U.S. provided training assistance again, special

operations forces, to advise the Philippine forces on how to take back and secure that area. Those are significant losses. So yes, it's a blow in terms of the symbolism of the broader alliance, but again, I think the real loss here on a day-to-day basis is to the Philippine people, and that's what's really disappointing about this move.

PITA: Can you explain just a little bit more about how this affects the actual U.S. forces' physical presence – the U.S. hasn't had standing military bases in the Philippines since 1992. Can you explain the logistics of that, how this Visiting Forces Agreement affects – all these things you were just talking about, the ability to physically be there?

FORD: Sure, so yes, we don't have standing forces, but this agreement sets the terms for how we can temporarily operate in the country. So, on the front end, things like not having to go through normal visa procedures in order for U.S. forces to come in and do exercises. So if they were going to be there for a period of time longer than you might be able to be there under a normal visa, this means you don't have to try to apply for normal visa procedures for all of the servicemembers to do these kinds of exercises and engagements. The second thing is it sets the terms for things like military justice. IN the event that you might see something unfortunate happen, like a U.S. servicemember is accused of a crime, which certainly we don't want to happen; it's not a frequent occurrence, but on rare occurrences, it does happen. We saw this in 2015. There was a terrible case where a U.S. servicemember was accused of murder. Because the Visiting Forces Agreement is in place, it actually set the terms for how that person would be brought to justice. And it's important to say that he was, through Philippine courts. I find it hard to believe that if the Philippines had a similar arrangement with Beijing that you would see Chinese servicemembers accused of crimes being tried in Philippines courts. I think it's an important contrast.

PITA: Lindsey, thanks for being here.

FORD: Thanks.