

Confirmed: US Enters Fight Against ISIS in the Philippines

Can American 'assistance' ever be fully trusted?

By [Adam Garrie](#)

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The Philippine military has confirmed that the United States has started to offer limited support to President Rodrigo Duterte's battle with ISIS.

Duterte had said that the US is unreliable as an ally insofar as they impose ideological conditions as a prerequisite for any kind of assistance. Duterte contrasted this with Russia and China which operate in a more straightforward and businesslike manner.

The recent announcement of US forces aiding the Philippine struggle against ISIS may largely be due to the fact that Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte seem to have developed a good relationship. Duterte continues to speak positively about Trump in spite of his broader negative views on America's colonial attitude towards post-colonial Philippines.



1st Infantry Division spokesperson Lt. Col. Joar Herrera presides a press briefing at the provincial capitol in Marawi City on Wednesday, 31 May 2017. MindaNews photo by H. MARCOS C. MORDENO

Philippine Lieutenant Colonel Jo-Ar Herrera spoke at a press conference in the ISIS besieged city of Marawi and stated,

“They (US forces) are not fighting. They are just providing technical support”.

According to [Reuters](#), the US Embassy in Manila has confirmed that they are supporting the

Philippine fight against ISIS at the request of the Philippine government but did not release any further details.

Unlike in Syria or Libya, the United States does have a legal mandate and even a moral one to genuinely help Philippines. However, the dangers of mission creep are ever present.

President Duterte's [opposition](#) have been trying to remove him from office after questioning his decision to put the southern Philippine island of Mindanao under martial law. Opposition leaders, many from the Liberal Party of Philippines tend to take a much more traditional view of Philippines as a US ally/dependent than does Duterte who has engaged in historic positive bilateral relations with both China and Russia.

There remains a danger that the United States could co-opt forces still loyal to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and use them as 'moderate rebels' who fight ISIS on behalf of their own local interests as well as America's wider geo-political interests which are keen not to let Philippines slip out of the American orbit and into the Chinese sphere of influence.

That being said, MILF has engaged in a ceasefire with the government in Manila dating back to 2014. The ceasefire still generally holds and furthermore, unlike his neo-liberal and right-wing opponents, President Duterte had promised autonomy to Muslim regions of southern Philippines from which Duterte (whose background is Roman Catholic) himself hails.

It is important for Duterte to make sure that Islamist groups in southern Philippines remain focused on doing any future deals directly with Manila in exchange for participation in the united front against ISIS which Duterte has proposed. There exists a manifest danger of such groups working with the United States to unilaterally re-shape the political sovereignty of Philippines.

Although the situation in Philippines is not yet as internationalised as that in Syria, there remains a danger that the US could seek to use the crisis as leverage against Duterte's sovereignty minded policies which remain highly popular among Philippine voters.

In this sense Philippines has a more fortunate geographical disposition than Syria. Syria shares borders with multiple hostile countries including Turkey, Israel and Jordan. The often unsafe border with Lebanon and the at times open border with ISIS controlled Iraq have made things difficult for Syria during its long war against terrorism.

For Philippines, because ISIS is for now limited to the island of Mindanao, a Philippine naval blockade could help to prevent ISIS fighters from making the journey to Philippines from neighbouring states with a small but significant radical Salafist population, Indonesia in particular.

Philippines needs support from its allies and partners, but one must always be cautious of the kind of military support which the United States tends to give. There tends to be a great deal of extra baggage that accompanies this support and President Duterte is well aware of this. There is only so much that Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte's good personal relationship can do to change this long term historical trend.

UPDATE: Duterte did NOT approach US for military assistance in the Philippines

This could mean that elements of the Philippine military have approached America

unilaterally, without permission from their commander in chief.

Yesterday, Reuters broke a story calming that the US has agreed to a Philippine request to assist Philippines in the war against ISIS, a story confirmed by both a military spokesman for Philippines and the United States. The story has now been directly contradicted by Philippines President Duterte, also according to Reuters. Duterte claims that he “never approached U.S”.

Duterte further stated,

“I am not aware of that (any request for US assistance) until they (US forces) arrived”.

This could likely mean that elements of the Philippine military have gone rogue and requested assistance from the United States, which America confirmed it is giving, without the permission of the Philippine President.

If this escalates, it could mean that the United States has decided to take matters into its own hands along with elements of the Philippine military. This represents a deeply dangerous and undemocratic precedent that could be developing in Philippines.

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