

Daily Memo: Duterte's Threats, Pakistani Attacks

by Geopolitical Futures - December 28, 2020

Philippine threats. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is **threatening**, yet again, to scrap Manila's pivotal Visiting Forces Agreement with Washington if the U.S. doesn't deliver at least enough COVID-19 vaccines to inoculate 20 million Filipinos. Without a VFA, the two countries' **Mutual Defense Treaty becomes almost meaningless**. Duterte is under pressure at home for failing to ink contracts with Western vaccine-makers after making a big show of support for China's vaccine programs.

Pakistani resistance. Pakistani militant groups opposed to Chinese-backed Belt and Road Initiative projects appear to be **expanding attacks on Chinese nationals** in the South Asian country. This could have **dramatic implications** for the Chinese-Pakistani defense relationship.

Quad flex. Tokyo is reportedly planning to **increase its fleet** of large coast guard vessels by nearly half by spring 2023 to bolster its presence around its Senkaku Islands, where **China has been increasingly aggressive** about asserting its own claims to the archipelago. Meanwhile, **Japan has invited Germany to send a warship** to take part in joint exercises in the South China Sea – just as **Indian and Vietnamese warships** are planning to do this week. Finally, the **Japanese and Indian naval chiefs held talks** on countering coercion in the Indo-Pacific.

Life after Brexit. The **U.K. and Turkey will sign a free trade agreement** as soon as Tuesday, Britain's trade minister said. The agreement will only roll over the two countries' existing trade terms, but it's the first for the U.K. since reaching a free trade agreement with the European Union at the end of last week. The U.K. is Turkey's second-largest export market, and the absence of an agreement has sparked anxiety among Turkish manufacturers.

Speaking of Brexit... EU ambassadors on Monday signed off on the provisional application of the U.K.-EU agreement beginning Jan. 1. This means the deal can take effect before the European Parliament officially approves it, a step expected in late February. The British Parliament will meet on Wednesday, and passage is almost guaranteed.

Russian reinforcements in Syria. **Russia sent more military police** to stabilize the Ain Issa area of northern Syria, where Turkish-backed fighters have clashed recently with Kurdish forces. Moscow noted that agreements were previously reached with Ankara on the establishment of joint Russian-

Syrian observation posts. This comes ahead of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's trip on Tuesday to Sochi, where he will meet with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. The two will conduct a **comprehensive review** of bilateral relations and regional cooperation in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Moving pieces in Libya. A **delegation of Egyptian officials arrived in the Libyan capital** on Sunday for the first time since 2014. The delegation met with officials from the Government of National Accord to discuss security issues and the return of the Egyptian Consulate in Tripoli. At the same time, Turkey continues training the Libyan armed forces. The **Turkish military provided Libyan naval forces** with five weeks of submarine warfare training, explaining it as a part of Turkey's commitment to Libya based on bilateral agreements. **Turkey's defense minister also warned** that any attack by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army would be met with force.

Friends in space. The U.S. Space Force and Japan's Office of National Space Policy **signed a memorandum of understanding** to enhance space domain awareness, protect space operations and improve general bilateral space cooperation.

Sudan latest. Sudan's 6th Infantry Brigade **retook control of 11 Amhara settlements** near the border with Ethiopia. There were also reports that Eritrea, which is suspected of supporting Ethiopia, was moving troops toward its border with Sudan. Sudan's Defense Ministry announced its border with Ethiopia was secure and that it regained 70 percent of the disputed al-Fashqa area between Sudan and Ethiopia. Days earlier, leaders from both countries met to discuss the border dispute but reached no conclusions.

Drama-free oil. Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko said Belarus had **signed oil contracts** for next year with several major Russian suppliers, with other deals still being negotiated. This is an improvement from last year, when the two sides could not agree on pricing.

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