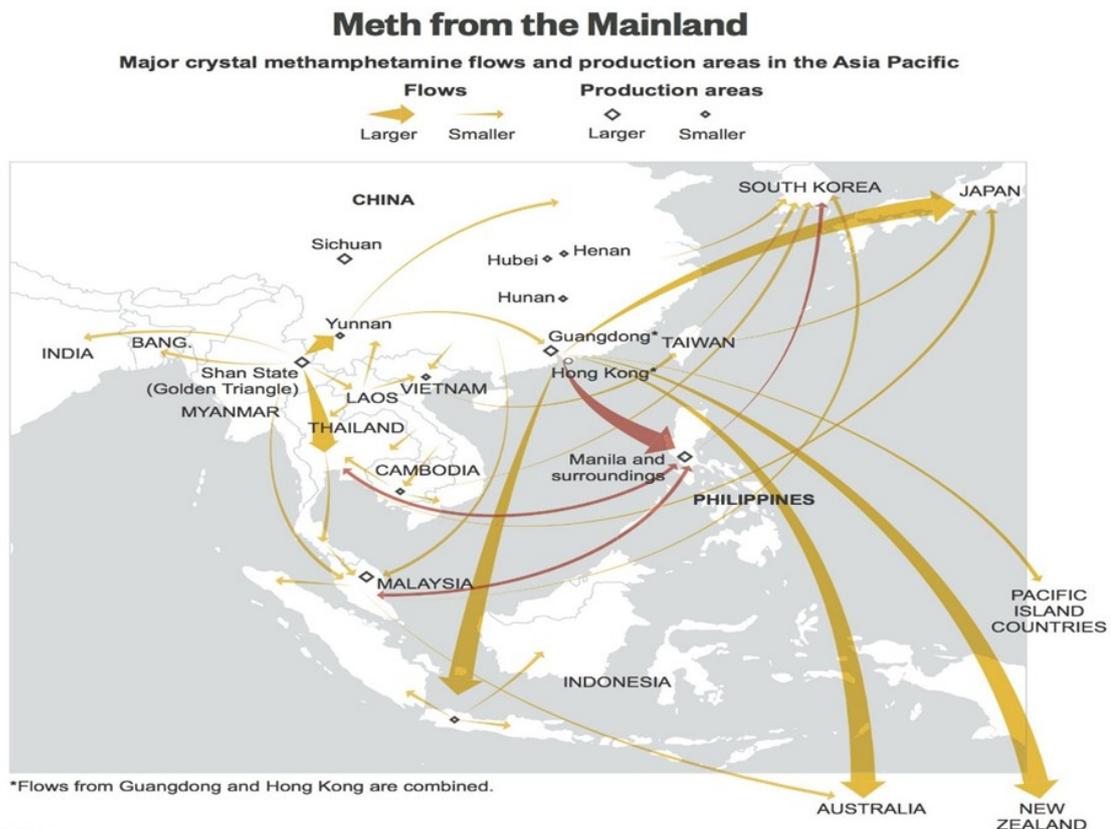


## COOPERATION WITH CHINA ON THE PHILIPPINES' WAR ON DRUGS

by *Jeremy Dexter B. Mirasol*

President Rodrigo Duterte launched the *war on drugs* at the beginning of his term, a high-profile campaign against illicit drug trade that serves as the cornerstone of domestic policy. The Philippines seeks to eradicate drug dealing and addiction, which are seen by the present administration as major obstacles to the country's economic and social progress.

Amidst the polemics against President Duterte's anti-drug campaign, the Philippines found an ally in China, which expressed [understanding](#) of the government's efforts to eliminate illegal drugs. President Duterte [said](#), "China is the only country to come out freely and [*sic*] a firm statement that they are supporting the fight against drugs in my country." China would reportedly help in the [construction of four mega drug rehabilitation and treatment centers](#) – two in Luzon and one each in the Visayas and Mindanao. Furthermore, China is giving [RMB100 million \(₱714.57M\) grant](#) to implement projects for anti-illegal drugs and law enforcement security cooperation.



The illustration shows the Philippines as a major transshipment point and destination country for methamphetamine (shabu).

### *Drug trafficking network*

In the drug trafficking network, the Philippines is considered a critical transshipment point and destination country for large shipment of illegal drugs, particularly methamphetamine, locally known as *shabu*. This is due largely to the country's geostrategic location with its enormous coastlines and porous borders. Against this backdrop, the country is [being used](#) as a recreation place, an investment and money laundering haven, and a hiding place for international drug syndicates, some of which envision the country as a regional headquarters. President Duterte revealed that Chinese drug trafficking organizations known as [Triads](#), who collude with the [Sinaloa](#) drug cartel from Mexico, dominate the narcotics trade in the country.

A recent Congressional investigation substantiated the existence of drug supply sourced outside the country when convicted drug lords confessed that their supply came primarily from China and North Korea. In particular, weak regulation of China's vast chemical and pharmaceutical industries has made that country an ideal source for precursor chemicals intended for illicit drug production. The Chinese government has also openly acknowledged that they are facing mounting problems of illicit drug use in its milieu. Like its burgeoning economy, China has witnessed the increase in the number of identified and registered drugs users from 2.47 million in 2013 to 2.95 million in 2014, but according to [news reports](#) the number is estimated to be in excess of 14 million.

### *Reinvigoration of Philippines-China relations*

Even before assuming office, President Duterte had underscored the need to cooperate with China on other issues. As the war on drugs continues to unravel Chinese links in the overall drug trade, it is indispensable for the Philippines to work with China to effectively handle the menacing situation. Cooperation in the war against drugs has opened a window for the Philippines and China to thaw ties that have been adversely affected by lingering territorial and maritime disputes.

The Philippines is keen to enhance cooperation in combating drug trafficking with China. During President Duterte's four-day state visit to China in October 2016, one of the bilateral agreements signed was the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Protocol on Cooperation between the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) and the Narcotics Control Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security of China. In their [joint statement](#), both the Philippines and China recognized that the problem of illicit drugs poses severe threat to the health, safety, and welfare of the people of both countries. The MOU stipulates the enhancement of exchange of intelligence, know-how, and technology sharing on fighting drug crimes, preventive education, and rehabilitation facilities. Both countries agreed to establish an operational mechanism for joint investigation on special cases and intelligence collection purposes.

In furtherance of the MOU, representatives from the Bureau of Customs (BOC) and the PDEA agreed to share information and technology with the Fujian Provincial Drug Enforcement Agency as part of the initiatives to stop the smuggling of illegal drugs. In the area of maritime cooperation, both the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the China Coast Guard (CCG) reached an agreement to implement the MOU on the establishment of a Joint Coast Guard Committee on Maritime Cooperation. Both sides also agreed to cooperate in preventing and combating drug trafficking and other transnational crimes.

### *What is actually needed?*

The paramount goal of the MOUs is to establish concrete actions and attain tangible results. This behooves the Philippines and China to enact legally binding and detailed bilateral agreements on illegal drugs. These agreements should compel both countries to adopt immediate and effective measures to ensure efficient material, financial, and personnel resources for averting drug trafficking. Government bureaucracies must meet the growing challenges of drug trafficking so that state policies will yield positive results.

While the MOUs and declarations provide an initial basis for cooperation, they are inadequate. The formulation of short-, medium-, and long-term plans of action should be prioritized. To make sure that these plans will actually

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materialize, specialized task force teams should be established in both countries. Likewise, operational plans should also be advanced to cover [alternative development](#) (i.e., elimination of illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotics and psychotropic substances), drug chemicals and production equipment, personnel and drug police training, and rehabilitation and social integration.

One important consideration is cooperation on police operations and investigations, including sharing of real-time information, arrest of drug criminals and closure of clandestine drug laboratories both in the Philippines and China. A more comprehensive judicial and law enforcement cooperation on apprehension, prosecution, verification, and extradition of drug criminals should also be considered.

Given these proposals, it is clear that international cooperation and a strong commitment by both countries are needed to alleviate the illegal drug situation. China welcomes the foreign policy gambits of the new Philippine government. The current war on drugs is an opportunity to deepen the bilateral functional cooperation. For the Philippines, dealing with China entails clearing webs of misperceptions by pursuing the low-politics route (i.e., drug trafficking). China must demonstrate its willingness to engage relentlessly with the Philippines in addressing the illicit drug trafficking prevailing in the region. After all, addressing the illegal drugs issue is a shared responsibility of countries worldwide; it is a transnational concern. 🌸

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