

THREATENING CHINA: U.S. to expand military presence in the Philippines

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An article in the *Washington Post* on January 26 revealed that a delegation from the Philippines was engaged in bilateral talks in Washington to negotiate the expansion of the American military presence in the country. The provocative move is a key step in US imperialism's strategy to contain China.

The bilateral talks were announced during the visit of US Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman to the Philippines last week, although the subject to be discussed was simply termed 'maritime security.' Higher-level talks are scheduled to take place in March between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and their Philippine counterparts. These negotiations are scheduled to culminate in talks between President Barack Obama and Philippine President Benigno Aquino in the White House in May.

The *Washington Post* stated: "Among the options under consideration are operating Navy ships from the Philippines, deploying troops on a rotational basis and staging more frequent joint exercises. Under each scenario, US forces would effectively be guests at existing foreign bases." The Philippine officials, who spoke under conditions of anonymity, told the *Post* the Philippines was willing "to host American ships and surveillance aircraft."

This arrangement would not involve a permanent US military base but rather the long-term deployment of US forces at a major local facility. Pentagon officials referred to this policy as 'maintaining a light footprint.' In essence, the 'light footprint' policy is a means of passing much of the economic cost of deployment onto the host country, and of circumventing the constitutional issues and political controversy involved in establishing a major permanent base.

The deployment of US vessels and forces in the Philippines would be a further ratcheting up of the Obama administration's confrontation with China in the Asia Pacific generally, and particularly in the South China Sea.

Concerned at the rising economic power of China, US imperialism has asserted its 'national interest' in the vital waterways of the South China Sea. Over the past two years it has backed up this claim with diplomatic maneuvering, political machinations within each country in the region, and increased military deployments.

Washington has stationed Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, guarding the crucial Strait of Malacca; conducted numerous joint war games with regional powers, each scenario increasingly provocative; and, most importantly, has signed basing arrangements for stationing 2,500 US Marines in northern Australia, as well as access to Australian naval and air bases. The deal being concluded with the Philippines follows this pattern.

The South China Sea and key waterways such as the Strait of Malacca are central to Washington's ambitions to control China's shipping lanes for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. The influential think tank *Center for a New American Security* released a position paper on the South China Sea on January 9 that explained: "To the extent that the world economy has a geographical center, it is in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is where a militarily rising China is increasingly challenging American naval preeminence—a trend that, if left on its present trajectory, could upset the balance of power that has existed since the end of World War II."

Among the cornerstones of American military preeminence in the 20th century were its bases in the Philippines—the Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Force Base. During their operation, they were the largest overseas US bases anywhere in the world. Established in the aftermath of the US colonial occupation of the Philippines, the bases were a mainstay in asserting the interests of US imperialism during the Cold War.

An eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991 devastated Clark Air Force Base. The US government declared the base a 'total loss.' In late 1991, in response to intense popular pressure and against the strongly expressed wishes of President Corazon Aquino, the Philippine Senate voted not to extend the US lease on Subic. Washington's refusal to disclose the presence of nuclear warheads at the naval base, in flagrant violation of Philippine law, was a key issue in the debate.

The loss of both Subic and Clark was a sharp blow to US interests. In 1999, the Philippine government signed a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with Washington that laid the groundwork for renewed US troop deployment in the Philippines under the auspices of training exercises. The VFA allowed the US military to retain jurisdiction over US military personnel accused of committing crimes in the Philippines, effectively granting them immunity from prosecution.

Under the auspices of the VFA, Washington began a series of 'temporary military exercises' against the Muslim insurgency in the Southern Philippines termed Balikatan - 'shoulder to shoulder.' January 2012 marks the 10th year of the uninterrupted Balikatan deployment of 1,200 US soldiers in the Philippines. Balikatan underscores what Washington means when it negotiates the 'temporary' stationing of military forces.

During the 2001-10 decade, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo maintained the country's military alliance with the US, but sought closer economic and political relations with China. President Benigno Aquino has, since assuming office, sharply reversed this trend. Washington has backed his consolidation of political power, and supported, both militarily and diplomatically, his increasingly confrontational stance toward China in the South China Sea.

The stationing of US ships and forces in the Philippines will likely occur again at Subic Bay. In April 2011, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported on negotiations between visiting US diplomats and the Aquino administration on the US military's possible use of Subic.

China has not taken the Obama's stance lying down. At every turn, China has expressed its displeasure. The South China Sea is vital to China's geostrategic interests. In 2011, People's Liberation Army Navy commander Wu Shengli, when asked at a forum in Singapore about China's outrage over the US role in the South China Sea, responded: "How would you feel if I cut off your arms and legs? That's how China feels about the South China Sea."

The United States also has its eye on Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam. The *Washington Post* report stated: "The strategic talks with the Philippines are in addition to feelers that the Obama administration has put out to other Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam and Thailand."

Obama's policy of asserting US military might in the South China Sea through the deployment of forces in Australia, Singapore, the Philippines and possibly Vietnam and Thailand is an open attempt to encircle China. It is a reckless policy that has the potential to lead to war on a global scale.

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