

China's execution of Filipino drug couriers highlights mounting regional tensions

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On March 30, three Filipinos—Elizabeth Batain, Sally Ordinario-Villanueva and Ramon Credo—were executed by lethal injection in China on charges of drug trafficking. Their executions occurred amid escalating political tensions between the Philippines and China. All three maintained their innocence, claiming that they had been duped by predatory recruiters into carrying goods into China without being aware that they were transporting drugs.

The executions of the prisoners generated a strong emotional response in the Philippine populace, many of whom closely identified with their plight. Interviews conducted with their family members revealed dilapidated homes of corrugated tin roofs and ramshackle plywood walls. All three were responsible for the provision and education of their siblings or children. They were unemployed.

Much moral froth has filled the editorial pages of leading Philippine papers. Filipinos lack discipline it is claimed; the executions were justified. Columnists have argued back and forth about the purported innocence or guilt of the three. What are not discussed are the iron conditions that drove these three human beings to leave their spouses and children in rundown homes among the squalid backstreets of Metro Manila and seek their survival outside their country.

It is these circumstances, shared by the vast majority of Filipinos, which account for the outpouring of sympathy among ordinary people. Ten percent of the population of 100 million has been compelled to seek work abroad. The Philippine economy depends upon the remittances that these migrant workers send home.

The Filipino working class has expressed anger at the impotent and stolid-faced appeals of the Aquino administration on behalf of the three prisoners. This outrage has been manifested in media interviews, protests and online social networks.

As the looming fate of the three alleged drug mules occupied the Philippine press for the past several months, they became pawns in a vast geopolitical game involving China, the Philippines, the United States and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

During the first nine months of his presidential term, Philippine President Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino has shifted the foreign policy of the Philippine government sharply in the direction of the US and away from China. The United States has played a key role in his attempt to consolidate power at the expense of his local political rivals by means of a corruption scandal. Aquino replaced his secretary of foreign affairs, Alberto Romulo, who had been attempting to balance Philippine foreign policy between the conflicting interests of the US and China, with Albert del Rosario, a staunchly pro-US figure. Upon assuming office, del Rosario stated that the US was the Philippines' "sole strategic partner".

There are escalating tensions in the South China Sea. On March 2, a confrontation occurred between Philippine military planes and Chinese patrol boats in the Reed Bank, a natural gas- and oil-rich region in the eastern portion of the waters around the sharply contested Spratly/Nansha islands. Aquino had given permission to Philippine billionaire and strong political ally, Manny Pangilinan, and his company Forum Energy, to begin drilling in the disputed waters.

In the week after the confrontation between the Philippines and China over the Spratly Islands, Aquino travelled to Indonesia and Singapore. He discussed the multilateral development of the Spratly Islands with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This initiative would involve the various ASEAN claimants to the disputed waters and exclude China and Taiwan. Discussions were held proposing joint oil drilling in the region. A March 9 article

in the *Asia Sentinel* dubbed this “a common front against China”

This move is precisely what US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed at the ASEAN summit in Hanoi last July. She called for a multilateral initiative over the South China Sea to resolve disputes, with the United States working as a mediator. China rejected this call in favor of a series of bilateral initiatives between China and each of the rival claimants, clearly excluding the US from negotiations.

According to an article in *Asia Times*, Clinton called the new Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary del Rosario on March 14 to express her concern over the confrontation in the South China Sea, to support the new initiative and to again propose that the United States function as mediator in the disputed waters.

The Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, Liu Jianchow, held a press conference stating that US mediation would “magnify” the dispute and that there was “no excuse” for US involvement in the South China Sea.

On March 24, Beijing issued a statement declaring: “Any activities by countries or companies to explore for oil or gas in the sea waters in China’s jurisdiction without the permission of the Chinese government will constitute a violation of China’s sovereignty and ... will be illegal and invalid.”

On March 28, Aquino declared that he had committed 8 billion pesos (\$US183 million) to developing military capacity and installations in the Spratly/Nansha Islands. The Philippines would purchase new boats to patrol the region, an airstrip on the islands would be developed and permanent military facilities would be installed, with radar towers on all the islands. This is a direct, US-backed provocation against China.

In this context, the fact that Batain, Ordinario-Villanueva, and Credo were all executed on the same day, at the same time, at separate facilities in China, can be clearly construed as China sending the Philippines a warning.

In December 2010, Aquino had ordered the Philippine boycott of the politically motivated awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo. Aquino stated in the Philippine press that the decision was an attempt to appease China, in return for which China had agreed to reduce the sentences of the three condemned drug couriers. In February, China disputed this claim and declared its intent to carry out the

executions.

Desperate to save face, Aquino dispatched his Vice President Jejomar Binay to China, where the authorities granted a temporary stay of execution. Aquino refused to further appeal, or even to inquire how long this stay would last. Binay declared that he did not inquire as to the duration of the stay because he was afraid that it would anger China.

After one month, as the tensions in the South China Sea reached a new pitch, China proceeded with the executions. Aquino did nothing. He called upon the population to pray, but he did not issue a protest to China. His previous appeal was purely a matter of appeasing the mounting anger of the Philippine working class.

The United States has joined in this charade. The US Assistant Secretary of State in East Asia, Kurt Campbell, stated that the executions were something the US “wants to support our Filipino friends on.” This is a clear attempt by Washington to further insinuate itself into regional hostilities.

Like all governments in the region, Aquino’s is compelled to perform a constant balancing act between the competing interests of the military and political might of the United States and the rapidly growing economic power of China. China has recently displaced the United States as the Philippines’ second largest trading partner.

Aquino is attempting to exploit this geopolitical rivalry, using US backing to advance Philippine claims to oil in the South China Sea. He is reluctant, however, to offend Beijing and risk the Philippines’ constantly increasing economic ties with China. He would certainly not risk these ties on behalf of three Filipino workers on death row in China, and so kept silent when they were executed.



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