

# Washington boosts military ties with the Philippines

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The Philippine administration has, since the election of President Benigno Aquino last year, has aligned its foreign policy more and more closely to the United States. Under Aquino's leadership and at the instigation of Washington, the Philippines has emerged as a leading US proxy in Southeast Asia. The Philippines is serving as a wedge through which Washington provocatively reasserts its presence in the region and openly confronts China.

Since the beginning of 2011, there have been nine naval confrontations between the Philippines and China in the disputed South China Sea. Until March, each confrontation was occasioned by a protest from the Philippine government to the United Nations or to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the past four months, however, Aquino's administration has been petitioning directly to Washington for support.

Most recently, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario travelled to the United States to meet with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Gates, and other key political figures. He repeatedly articulated the Philippine claim that in the event of armed conflict between the Philippines and China, the United States was obliged by its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines to come to its aid.

Clinton stated in a joint press conference with del Rosario, that the United States would honor the Mutual Defense Treaty, and added that the treaty "continues to serve as a pillar of our relationship and a source of stability in the region."

Del Rosario also sought to acquire new military equipment. Clinton stated that the US "is determined and committed to supporting the defense of the Philippines, and that means trying to find ways of

providing affordable material and equipment that will assist the Philippine military to take the steps necessary to defend itself."

The Philippine naval fleet is dilapidated and antique. When in mid-June, China sent its 3,000-ton Haixun 31 patrol ship through the South China Sea to Singapore, the Philippines responded with much fanfare by launching the destroyer Rajah Humabon. The boat was sent into the disputed waters in an attempt to ratchet up nationalist fervor against China, and several journalists were along for the ride to insure that the public was privy to the saber rattling.

The Humabon was decommissioned by the United States in 1945, transferred to Japan in 1955, and retired in 1975. The Philippines acquired the ship in 1978. The decrepit ship has large rust holes stopped up with rags to prevent rain from entering the ship. The Humabon is the Philippines largest warship.

The military aid and equipment which the United States is offering to the Philippines takes a variety of forms. US National Director of Intelligence James Clapper met with del Rosario and promised increased sharing of intelligence with the Philippines, heightened surveillance of the disputed waters and the deployment of an early warning radar system off the Philippine littoral to detect "intrusion." These proposals were initially raised by US Senator John McCain in a speech he gave to the Center for Strategic and International Studies on June 20.

Del Rosario also sought to purchase items as Excess Defense Articles (EDA) under the US Foreign Military Finance program. This is a method which Washington uses to dispose of obsolete equipment by selling them to its proxies and allies throughout the world. Del Rosario stated that given the rapidly rising tensions with China, the Philippines needed the military

equipment immediately and the EDA system often takes several years to process equipment requests. He added that the Philippines needed newer equipment to confront China and not just the obsolete materials available under EDA.

Del Rosario submitted what he called a military equipment “wish list” to Gates, including radar, fighter jets, patrol vessels, and several submarines. Aquino transferred 8 billion pesos (\$US215 million) from the Department of Energy for the purchase of military equipment. This money can hardly buy anything on del Rosario’s wish list. There is a proposal currently being discussed in the Philippine senate to add an additional 80 billion pesos (\$US1.8 billion) for the purchase of arms.

In his meeting with Gates, Del Rosario proposed that the Philippines would lease US military equipment. He invoked the United States practice of leasing military equipment to the Philippines in the 1950s through the Cold War body—the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). It is this proposal that lurked behind Clinton’s statement that the US was “trying to find ways of providing affordable material and equipment.”

US Defense Undersecretary for Policy Michelle Fluornoy stated that the Washington would “oblige the request” and that she would “have our team look into the full range of requirements.” She added, “We should not allow the perception that you are alone and we are not behind you.”

The invocation of SEATO, an alliance to ensure the regional domination of US imperialism and the containment of China during the Cold War, is a clear indication of the direction of US policy in the Asia Pacific. SEATO consisted of two Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines and Thailand. Its other members were Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States. SEATO provided the fig-leaf of international support for unilateral US military actions in Southeast Asia.

Following the precedent established by SEATO any military equipment leased by the United States to the Philippines would have US military personnel on board. These would be US ships carrying American military officials whose presence in hotly contested waters was justified via a leasing arrangement with Washington’s leading client in the region.

Should actual hostilities occur between the

Philippines and China, this leasing arrangement would mean that shots had been fired on American personnel on board US vessels. This could mean a war with China.

However, even without the leasing arrangement, leading US diplomats have been making increasingly aggressive statements regarding China in an attempt to bolster the provocative posture of the Aquino administration. At a recent press conference a Philippine professor of law cited article 4 of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty which states that each country will respond to “common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.” The reference to constitutional processes, he argued, meant that President Obama had to consult Congress prior to any act of war.

US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas responded by citing the United States’ ongoing illegal war in Libya as evidence that Obama could react to hostilities with China “at a minute’s notice.” He continued, “We have the finest military in the world. We will honor our treaty obligations.”



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