

US tightens the military noose around China

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30 January 2012

The bilateral talks between Washington and Manila on January 26 and 27 to negotiate the expansion of the US military presence and the deployment of US warships and surveillance aircraft in the Philippines are another step in the Obama administration's strategy of encircling China.

The discussions involve the greater use of military bases, including the hosting of American warships and the rotation of more US troops through the Philippines. While an agreement is not due to be finalised until March, the outline resembles a deal with Canberra, announced last November, to station US Marines in northern Australia and provide American access to Australian air and naval bases.

Well aware of strong public opposition in the Philippines to the US military presence, American and Philippine officials have tried to play down the talks. Nevertheless, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert Del Rosario confirmed last Friday that the two countries were exploring "a rotating and more frequent presence" by the US military. The US was forced to pull out of its huge Subic Bay naval base after the Philippine Senate, amid widespread popular opposition, voted in 1991 not to extend the lease.

Last week, the *Washington Post* reported not only on the Philippine-US military talks but also "feelers the Obama administration has put out to other South East Asian countries, such as Vietnam and Thailand, about the potential for bolstering military partnerships." The US is in the process of strengthening alliances and strategic ties throughout Asia—including arrangements with Japan and South Korea, large arms sales to Taiwan, the stationing of new littoral combat ships in Singapore, and a key strategic partnership with India.

Washington's claims that it is not seeking to "contain" China are absurd. In the two years since US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the US was "back in South East Asia," Washington has brought the enormous weight of its political, economic and military might to undermine China's growing diplomatic influence and economic clout throughout the region and internationally.

The US military "pivot" into Asia goes hand-in-hand with a drive to expand the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an economic bloc designed to organize trade in the Pacific on US terms at China's expense. In his State of the Union speech last week, Obama singled out China, declaring that he would establish a new "Trade Enforcement Unit" to accelerate formal trade complaints against goods made "in countries like China."

The US military build-up in Asia has a dangerous logic of its own. A massive expansion of manufacturing has made China heavily dependent on the import of energy and raw materials. About 80 percent of all oil brought into China crosses the Indian Ocean from the Middle East and Africa, and enters the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca.

Under the rubric of "freedom of navigation," the Pentagon is repositioning military assets to maintain its strategic dominance in the South China Sea and over key "choke points" such as the Strait of Malacca. The deployment of troops and ships to the Philippines, in addition to those stationed in Australia and Singapore, enhances the US ability to shut down China's imports of energy and raw materials, and cripple its economy.

The motive force behind the provocative deployment of the US military in the region is the relative economic

decline of the United States and the rise of China. In conditions of deepening global financial crisis, Washington is compensating for its economic weakness by recklessly wielding its military power to undermine China and pre-empt its rise as an economic and military rival.

The strategic regional deployment of US forces recalls Washington's oil blockade against Japan in 1941, which set in motion a sequence of events that led to the Pacific War. As the United States encircles China and poses the threat of a potentially crippling blockade, the options left open to the Chinese ruling elite become increasingly limited. Factions within Beijing who advocate a more aggressive defense of China's interests will necessarily come to the fore, further accelerating the drive to war.

The January 29 editorial in the Chinese state-run paper *Global Times* advocated economic sanctions against the Philippines in response to Manila's military talks with Washington. The editorial warned: "One step forward in military collaboration with the US means a step backward in economic cooperation with China. In the long run, China may also use its economic leverage to cut economic activities between ASEAN countries and the Philippines."

The Obama administration's confrontation with China is turning Asia into a tinder box. The region already has many potential flash points, from North Korea and Taiwan to long-standing territorial quarrels in the South China Sea and India's border disputes with China. Regardless of the intentions of Washington and Beijing, the aggressive US military posture heightens the danger that a relatively minor incident can become the spark that sets off a catastrophic global conflagration between two nuclear powers.

The drive to war has its root cause in the private profit system and its outmoded division of the world into rival capitalist nation states. Only the working class can prevent the slide into the barbarism of a third world war by abolishing capitalism and establishing a world planned socialist economy to meet the pressing social needs of the vast majority of humanity. The International Committee of the Fourth International is

alone capable of leading this struggle.

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