South China Sea tensions mount as Manila prepares to drill for oil

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Tense rivalry in the South China Sea escalated over the past week. The Philippine government announced it would go ahead with plans to open several quadrants of the disputed waters for oil drilling in coming months. The Vietnamese government denounced the Chinese naval forces for conducting "an assault" on 11 fishermen seeking refuge in a storm. The Chinese foreign ministry rejected Manila's right to drill for oil and denied Hanoi's allegations.

Behind all these tensions lie the machinations of Washington, which has ratcheted up its pressure on Beijing militarily, economically and politically throughout the region.

On Tuesday Jose Almendras, Secretary of the Philippine Department of Energy, announced that the Philippines had invited major foreign oil corporations to invest an estimated $US7.5 billion in exploration. Two of the proposed sites are in the vicinity of the Reed Bank and are also claimed by China. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, seismic data indicates that there are 3.4 trillion cubic feet of gas-in-place and 440 million barrels of oil in the area.

The Reed Bank was the site of a serious confrontation between China and the Philippines in March 2011, when an oil exploration ship operated by Forum Energy was confronted by two Chinese gunboats. The Philippine government dispatched a bomber and light aircraft to respond. This confrontation has been used repeatedly by Pentagon officials and the US State Department as a justification for an increased US military presence in the region.

In his statement on Tuesday, Almendras revealed that Forum Energy, a UK-based firm which is 65 percent owned by Philex, the largest Philippine mining corporation, would return to the Reed Bank and spend $US80 million to begin drilling for oil.

Washington announced last month that it would hold joint military exercises with Philippine forces in the South China Sea, focussed on the storming of oil rigs. These exercises will now occur while Forum Energy begins to drill in the Reed Bank. A military exercise involving oil rigs in disputed waters is a sharp provocation directed against China.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei issued a statement that it was "unlawful for any country or company to explore oil and gas in areas under Chinese jurisdiction." The *China Daily* put out an editorial denouncing "Manila's troublemaking"; China's *People's Daily* stated "the Philippines must learn self-restraint"; and the *Global Times* renewed calls for economic sanctions against the Philippines.

Voltaire Gazmin, secretary of the Philippine Department of National Defense, responded: "The oil exploration [sites] are within our territorial limits. Why should we seek permission from anyone? Kung atin, atin (If it's ours, it's ours)." A Philippine Armed Forces spokesperson said the military would defend foreign oil vessels against Chinese forces. "It is clear in our mandate that we should protect the people and the state, not only Filipino citizens but also citizens visiting the country… We will provide security when it is needed."

Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesman Luong Thanh Nghi stated last week that on February 22, Chinese naval forces had "assaulted" 11 Vietnamese fishermen as they sought shelter from a storm in the disputed Paracel islands. He said the Chinese action "seriously infringed"

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Vietnam's sovereignty and "gravely threatened lives and property." China's spokesman Hong Lei denied the Vietnamese allegations, claiming that Chinese personnel did not use force or board the Vietnamese ship.

The rapidly mounting tensions in the South China Sea, particularly the moves by Philippine President Benigno Aquino to initiate drilling in the Reed Bank, in flagrant violation of Chinese territorial claims, are the result of the calculated moves by US imperialism.

Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario announced on Wednesday, in the midst of the war of words with China, that the United States had promised to increase its military aid to the Philippines in 2012 to $US144 million, and would be supplying the Philippines with two additional Hamilton class cruisers. Manila is currently negotiating the purchase of F-16s from the US.

The South China Sea and key waterways such as the Strait of Malacca are central to Washington's plans to control China's shipping lanes for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. Last month it was announced that Washington was engaged in bilateral talks with Manila for the deployment of US military personnel and weaponry to the Philippines, in a manner similar to the plan worked out with Canberra for the use of bases in Australia's north.

Speaking before the US Senate Armed Forces Committee on Tuesday, Admiral Robert Willard, head of the US Pacific Command, stated that the American military "must be present" in the disputed waters "to ensure the security of sea lanes." $US1.2 trillion in American trade passed through South China Sea, he said. Willard spoke of Chinese military growth "continuing unabated" and asserted that the Chinese "remain aggressive." But it is the US that is aggressively confronting China with its forces and weaponry throughout the region.

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