

US-Philippine military exercises directed against China

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Joint US-Philippine military exercises are currently underway that can only heighten tensions with China over disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea and in the Indo-Pacific region more broadly.

Yesterday, 4,500 US Marines and 2,500 Philippine troops staged an amphibious landing drill at Ulugan Bay on Palawan Island to simulate the recapture of an island from “militants.” Despite denials by American and Philippine officials, the exercise was pointedly aimed at China, which contests the sovereignty of waters and islands in the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, adjacent to Palawan Island.

The South China Sea is rich in gas and oil reserves, leading to disputes over energy exploration and drilling in its waters. Last weekend, US and Philippine special forces troops took part in a simulated assault to retake an offshore oil rig from “militants” off northern Palawan.

The drills are part of annual US-Philippine Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder) military exercises, which began last week and are due to conclude today. The confrontational character of the exercise is underlined not only by their location and type, but also by the involvement of troops from Australia, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia.

President Barack Obama declared last November that the US would focus on the Indo-Pacific region as its top strategic priority, announcing the greater use of military bases in northern Australia, including the stationing of US Marines near Darwin. Since mid-2009, the Obama administration has been engaged in an aggressive drive to strengthen alliances and strategic partnerships with countries throughout Asia in a bid to undermine Chinese influence.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in 2010 that the US had “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Clinton’s comments signalled US backing for ASEAN nations to more vigorously press their territorial claims against China, and have resulted in the Philippines, in particular, taking a more aggressive stance.

The Balikatan exercises took place amid an ongoing standoff between Philippine and Chinese vessels at the disputed Scarborough Shoal to the west of the Philippine island of Luzon. Earlier this month, the Philippine military dispatched its largest vessel—a re-fitted, former US Coast Guard frigate handed over last December—to confront Chinese maritime surveillance ships that were preventing the Philippine navy from detaining Chinese fishing boats. While the standoff has eased, both countries are maintaining ships in the area.

In a TV interview on Monday, Philippine Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario appealed for other countries for support. “I think the current standoff is a manifestation of a larger threat to many nations. The bigger picture is that anybody can be targeted,” he warned.

Del Rosario and Philippine Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin are due to hold talks next week in Washington with Clinton and US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta before a meeting between the US and Philippine presidents. President Benigno Aquino is expected to ask Obama for greater military assistance, and also offer a basing arrangement for US forces, possibly on Palawan Island.

Philippine military chief General Jesse Dellosa recently appealed for US backing, declaring: “We need more naval and air assets to protect our territory. The whole world knows that China has myriad more ships and aircraft than the Philippines.” The US has already announced plans to hand over a second refurbished Coast Guard cutter to the Philippine navy.

Comments earlier this week by Lieutenant General Duane Thiessen, the US commander of Marines in the Pacific, demonstrate the dangers of the Obama administration’s reckless policies. Asked if the US would come to the aid of the Philippines in the event of a military confrontation with China, he declared: “The United States and the Philippines have a mutual defence treaty which guarantees that we get involved in each other’s defence and that is self-explanatory.”

In other words, having encouraged the Aquino administration to toughen its stance, the US is committed to backing the Philippines in a war with China, even if it is triggered by an incident not of its choosing, such as the standoff over the Scarborough Shoal.

The US-Philippine exercises were held as the US was engaged in an annual “naval exchange” with Vietnam, which also has competing claims with China in the South China Sea. The exercise, which began on Monday, was larger than in 2011 and involved three American warships, including a guided missile destroyer, and 1,400 personnel. While not as cosy as the US-Philippine military ties, relations between the US and Vietnam have grown closer since 1985, despite the bitter legacy of American imperialism’s war on Vietnam.

Amid the confrontation over the Scarborough Shoal, the Balikatan exercises have provoked warnings from China. A commentary in the *Liberation Army Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese military, declared: “Anyone with clear eyes saw long ago that behind these drills is reflected a mentality that will lead the South China Sea issue down a fork in the road towards military confrontation and resolution through armed force... Through this kind of meddling and intervention, the United States will only stir up the entire South China Sea situation towards increasing chaos, and this will inevitably have a massive impact on regional peace and stability.”

An editorial *Global* the ~~Handline~~ more explicit. “Facing disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam, China should prioritise negotiations, while preparing for military clashes,” it declared. “Once a battle erupts, China should wipe out their participating naval forces... and prepare to upgrade the battle to a medium-sized war.” At the same time, the editorial stated, China needs to prepare to counter “Washington’s possible interference.”

The South China Sea is highly sensitive strategically for China, as the vast majority of the country’s imported energy and raw materials pass through its shipping lanes. It is also adjacent to key Chinese military facilities, including on Hainan Island. For the US, “freedom of navigation” means the “right” to station its warships, including giant aircraft carriers, in waters near the Chinese mainland. Through its naval dominance of the South China Sea and strategic “choke points” such as the Malacca Strait, the US can threaten an economic blockade of China in the event of a conflict.

Although its response has been low-key, the Chinese regime is making its own preparations. While the US and the Philippines have been engaged in war games, China and Russia have held joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Previous SCO military drills have consisted of simulated anti-terrorist exercises. The main objective of the latest Russia-China war games, however, is the joint defence of sea lanes, including anti-submarine tactics, air defence and electronic countermeasures.

The US-Philippine exercises are the latest in a series of belligerent steps taken by the Obama administration, which has recklessly raised tensions in Asia. The South China Sea is just one of a number of flash points that have the potential to plunge the region and the world toward a disastrous conflict.



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