

Philippine protests further escalate tensions with China

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Tensions between the Philippines and China have increased significantly in the past few days. Various political groups, under the leadership of Philippine ex-left party Akbayan, will be staging protests of China's claim to the South China Sea today in front of Chinese consulates in the Philippines and around the world. Beijing has responded with economic pressure, issuing travel warnings against the Philippines and imposing tighter restrictions on the import of Philippine agricultural produce. Chinese travel agencies have indefinitely suspended tours to the Philippines.

The mounting tensions occur as a naval stand-off between Philippine and Chinese vessels enters its second month. On April 10, a Philippine gunboat accosted Chinese fishing vessels in the disputed waters of the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea. Chinese maritime police vessels intervened and a stand-off ensued. There are currently eleven Chinese ships and an uncertain number of Philippine vessels in an ongoing confrontation at Scarborough.

The protests being headed by Akbayan today are deliberately provocative. During past protests the Chinese flag has been burned, and expensive placards have denounced China for "bullying" and "imperialism".

China's embassy in the Philippines issued a warning to Chinese citizens that "massive anti-China protests" were going to occur, and urging them to stay away from protests and, as much as possible, to stay indoors.

China is the fourth largest source of Philippine tourism. Chinese tourists make up 9 percent of all arrivals to the country, and 250,000 tourists arrived

from China last year. Philippine undersecretary for Tourism Regulation told the press, "We have taken note that there are indeed cancelations from China and the number is quite alarming because China is a very important market for the Philippines."

China's tightened regulation of agricultural products particularly threatens the banana trade, the Philippines fifth largest export. Last year, the Philippines exported \$US360 million worth of bananas to China.

On Wednesday, an offshore platform belonging to China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) initiated drilling in the South China Sea in waters contested by China, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines. Wang Yilin, CNOOC's chairman, told *Xinhua*, "Large deep-water drilling rigs are our mobile national territory and strategic weapon for promoting the development of the country's offshore oil industry."

The *People's Liberation Army Daily*, the official paper of the Chinese military, issued an editorial yesterday stating, "For anyone who tries to snatch the sovereignty over Huangyan Islands [Scarborough Shoal], not only will the Chinese government not agree; the Chinese people will not agree; and the Chinese army will not agree."

An editorial in the state-owned English-language *China Daily* read: "No matter how willing we are to discuss the issue, the current Philippine leadership is intent on pressing us into a corner where there is no other option left but the use of arms ... Manila is living in a fantasy world if it mistakes our forbearance for timidity. This is a dangerous delusion. We have never

been a trigger-happy nation. But nor have we ever been afraid to fight when necessary ... the Philippines should stop being a troublemaker and drop its ridiculous claim. Otherwise they will learn to their cost how serious we are about our land and sea.”

Behind all of the escalating tensions are the machinations of Washington. As part of its “pivot” to Asia, the Obama administration has deliberately and provocatively encircled China militarily and has sharply increased the rhetoric of confrontation throughout the region. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced during joint meetings with their Philippine counterparts in the first week of May that the US would be tripling military aid to the Philippines. Panetta confirmed on Wednesday that Washington will be deploying Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore.

The protests being conducted against China today figure in Washington’s plan to increase pressure on China. In January, the prominent US think tank Center for a New American Security issued a book outlining what it saw as the US agenda in the South China Sea. It stated that “Nationalism in South China Sea countries ... may be the best basis for stitching together common interests in a loose, almost invisible network of like-minded and increasingly capable maritime states that are willing to help deflect Chinese hegemony.” It concluded enthusiastically, “Nationalism is on the rise.”

The protests being led by Akbayan, the ex-left group allied with Philippine President Aquino, have been funded by Loida Nicolas-Lewis. Lewis is an American billionaire, originally from the Philippines. She was married to Reginald Lewis, food industry tycoon and the wealthiest African-American in the 1980s. Upon her husband’s death she assumed control of the business. She was a prominent backer for Obama, and met with him on several occasions.

She formed the political group US Pinoys for Good Government (USP4GG) to financially support Aquino’s campaign for the Philippine presidency, with the expressed intention of using Aquino’s administration to assert Philippine sovereignty in the

South China Sea. Lewis funded the war-mongering trip made by Walden Bello and other Akbayan representatives to islands in the South China Sea in July of last year when they denounced China and asserted Philippine ownership of the Spratly islands. In August 2011, Lewis met with Ben Bernanke, head of the US federal reserve, to discuss opposition to the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China’s (ICBC) acquisition of the Bank of East Asia which had 26 branches in the United States.

The provocative and well-funded protests against China today are part of a calculated campaign of escalating tensions in the region and undermining Chinese influence. This campaign has its origins in Washington.



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