

Philippine government calls for the rearming of Japan

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Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario told the *Financial Times* in a recent interview that the Philippine government would support the scrapping of the so-called pacifist clause in the Japanese constitution, which has inhibited Japanese remilitarization. The justification given for turning Japan into a rearmed imperialist power was the mounting regional tensions with China. “We are looking for balancing factors in the region and Japan could be a significant balancing factor,” del Rosario stated.

Del Rosario’s comments came but days before the parliamentary election in Japan. Japanese politicians of all parties are attempting to whip up nationalist chauvinism in the lead up to the December 16 poll. These efforts revolve around two issues: the Japanese claim to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, and the call to change the constitution to permit the transformation of the “Self Defense Force” into a regular military force.

The Japanese economy has contracted at 3.5 percent in the past year and is poised to enter another recession—its fifth in the past 15 years. Politicians are stirring up nationalism in an attempt to divert from economic and social crises at home.

The push to change the constitution is driven by the need within the Japanese ruling class to shore up militarily its weakening status as the dominant power in the region. This turn has been fueled by the Obama administration, which is encouraging governments throughout the region take a tougher line against China.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino has functioned as point man for the Obama administration in South East Asia in its campaign against China. His government has adopted an aggressive stance in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea

on every possible occasion.

Del Rosario’s call is striking because of the suffering that was inflicted throughout South East Asia, and in the Philippines specifically, by the Japanese imperialist army during the Second World War. The interests of Japanese imperialism were viciously enforced throughout the region, through a campaign of repression against the population and the cooptation of sections of the local elites. President Aquino’s own grandfather was head of KALIBAPI, the sole legal political party in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation, and dutifully carried out Japan’s diktats.

By giving its blessing to Japanese rearmament, the Philippine government is performing an important service for the Japanese ruling elite in overcoming the legacy of hostility throughout the region and in Japan itself to the wartime atrocities of the Japanese military. Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s was accompanied by the brutal suppression of the working class through police-state methods.

The past five years have seen a strengthening of ties between Japan and the Philippines. In 2008, the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) was signed. It was the first bilateral trade treaty that the Philippines had signed in 60 years, the last being the trade agreement with the United States, which granted economic parity rights as a condition for formal independence. In the wake of JPEPA, Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Philippines jumped from 9 percent of total FDI in 2008 to 58 percent in 2009. It has now stabilized at an average of 30 percent of total FDI. Japan is by far the primary source of Official Development Assistance funding in the Philippines.

In September 2011, President Aquino traveled to Japan and met with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda.

After four days of meetings they issued a joint statement calling for a strategic partnership. The agreement called for “cooperation between coast guards and defense related authorities.” This cooperation would be directed toward the promotion of “shared interests” to be “advanced and protected in the South China Sea.”

Two months later, the Noda government moved to ease the country’s de facto ban on the export of arms, known as the “three principles.” The immediate beneficiary of this change was the Philippines, which in July 2012 confirmed that it was purchasing 12 new patrol ships from Japan for monitoring the disputed South China Sea.

This purchase was confirmed during a meeting held in Japan by Philippine Secretary of Defense Voltaire Gazmin and his counterpart, Satoshi Morimoto. The document that emerged out of their negotiations, the Statement of Intent, set up “unit-to-unit military exchanges, visits between the two nations’ ships, sharing of defense and security information, and exchanges of research and education.” It laid the groundwork for joint military exercises, in which China would certainly figure as the imagined enemy.

All of this has occurred with the encouragement and support of Washington, which has dramatically stepped up its military and political presence in the region, in a drive to contain China.

A document released in January 2012 by the Center for a New American Security, a prominent US think tank, summarized the situation for US interests in the South China Sea. It stated, “Nationalism in South China Sea countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia and further afield like India, Japan and Korea—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.” The enthusiastic conclusion was this: “Nationalism is on the rise.”

The drive to militarism and nationalism in Japan, and its support from the Philippines, emerge in this context.

When a Chinese marine surveillance plane flew over the disputed islands today, the Japanese government responded by scrambling eight F-15 fighter jets. The sharpening tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and the South China Sea have brought the region to a flashpoint, in which an apparently isolated and minor event could set off a region-wide conflict.



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