

The US to sign major military pact with the Philippines

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A new 10-year agreement that will give US forces extensive access to Philippine military bases was announced yesterday ahead of US President Barack Obama's arrival in Manila today. Senior US National Security Council (NSC) official Evan Medeiros described the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) as "the most significant defence agreement that we have concluded with the Philippines for decades."

The US-Philippine agreement, which will be signed today, will further consolidate the US military encirclement of China. The central purpose of Obama's trip to Asia, which has included Japan, South Korea and Malaysia, has been to reassert the US "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia aimed at subordinating China and the region to US economic and strategic interests.

US and Philippine officials have attempted to disguise the purpose of the defence deal, claiming that it is not directed against China and is simply to facilitate training and cooperation with the Philippine military for missions such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. All of this is to head off widespread public hostility in the Philippines to the basing of US military forces in its former colony.

The agreement comes 23 years after the Philippine Senate voted to close down the US Subic Bay naval base and Clark air force base after nearly a century of American military presence in the Philippines. Under the guise of the "war on terror", the US established a joint special operations task force on the island of Mindanao from 2002. However, EDCA will open the door for the full gamut of US forces. While Medeiros refused to speculate at yesterday's briefing, he did indicate, when pressured, that the US would have access to "a variety of facilities" and "Subic Bay could be one of them."

The Philippine agreement is modelled on one signed between Obama and former Australian Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard in November 2011, which stationed US Marines in the northern city of Darwin, and laid the foundations for far broader US access to Australian air and naval bases. As in the case of Australia, US troops will be rotated through existing Philippine bases—in part, to sidestep the country's constitution which prohibits foreign military bases. In reality there is little difference between "rotational basing" and a permanent base—by 2016, a full US Marine Expeditionary Unit comprising 2,500 soldiers with air and naval support will operate out of Darwin.

The basing of US forces in northern Australia and the Philippines is part of the Pentagon's war plans against China, which include the ability to block shipping lanes through South East Asia for vital Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. As part of the "pivot", the Obama administration has encouraged Philippine President Benigno Aquino to take a more aggressive stance on its territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

The new agreement also provides for increased US weapons sales to the Philippines. Virginia-based defence analyst Loren Thompson told Reuters: "What Manila needs most by way of military technology is weapons that can help enforce its claim to areas of the South China Sea." That could include P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, conventional munitions such as the Standard Missile-3 and small warships, he said.

The Philippine agreement is just the most public expression of Obama's focus on strengthening military ties throughout his Asian trip. US Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told yesterday's briefing: "We're modernising each of our alliances... You have this agreement, which is going to deepen our

cooperation with the Philippines... With Japan, they're going through a process of looking at their approach to collective self-defence... We've indicated trilateral cooperation between Japan, South Korea and the United States on issues like missile defence, for instance, is another priority."

Each of these moves is aimed at tightening the US military noose around China. On the first leg of his trip, Obama welcomed the steps taken by Japan's right-wing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to reinterpret his country's constitution to permit "collective self-defence"—that is, for joint US-Japanese military operations outside Japan. Obama also gave Abe an "absolute" guarantee that the US would support Japan in a war with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea.

In South Korea, Obama extracted an agreement from President Park Geun-hye that the plans to transfer operational command of the South Korean military in time of war, or OPCON, from the US to South Korea would be further delayed. As a result the Pentagon will retain effective control of more than half a million South Korean military personnel beyond December 2015.

At a joint press conference last Friday, Park reaffirmed her strong support for the "pivot" and gave way to US demands that South Korea integrate its anti-missile systems with US plans for a regional anti-ballistic missile shield aimed against China. Obama stated that the two leaders had "agreed to continue to modernize our alliance, including enhancing the interoperability of our missile defense systems."

National Security Council official Medeiros was also enthusiastic about the results of Obama's trip to Malaysia—the first by a US president in nearly 50 years. Unlike Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, Malaysia is not a formal US ally. However, Medeiros highlighted yesterday's "very substantial and very robust joint statement by the US government and the government of Malaysia about our position on the South China Sea. Very significantly in the joint statement, they actually came out in support of the principle of international arbitration, which has been a subject of some diplomatic wrangling in recent months as the Philippines has sought to pursue an arbitration case regarding its disputes with China."

The US has assisted the Philippines mount its case for

"international arbitration"—even though it claims to be neutral in the territorial dispute—as a means of undermining China's calls for such disagreements to be settled bilaterally. Washington is also seeking to muster international backing for Manila. Malaysia's tacit support for the Philippines legal case against China is another sign that Kuala Lumpur is establishing closer ties with Washington. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak declared yesterday that he "welcomes America's rebalancing towards Asia."

In their joint statement, Obama and Najib announced an upgrading of relations to "a comprehensive partnership." The two leaders reaffirmed "the longstanding military-to-military cooperation" between the two countries, including through the Malaysia-US Strategic Talks and the Bilateral Training and Consultative Group. Obama and Najib flagged "practical future cooperation in the maritime domain, including ways the United States could support the development of Malaysia's maritime enforcement capacity through the provision of training, equipment and expertise."

In recognition of its support for the "pivot", Obama gave his imprimatur to the autocratic Najib government by refusing to meet with Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim or to comment on the government's attempt to railroad him back to jail on trumped up charges. Instead, US National Security advisor Susan Rice will meet with Anwar later this week. This calculated snub underscores the utter hypocrisy of Washington's use of "human rights" and "democracy" as the pretext for provocations and interventions—most recently in Ukraine against Russia.



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