

As Obama visits Manila: US signs agreement for basing forces in the Philippines

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US President Barack Obama arrived in Manila yesterday for a two-day state visit, the conclusion to his four-country tour of Asia over the past week.

The most significant aspect of Obama's visit occurred just hours before his arrival, when US Ambassador to the Philippines Phillip Goldberg and Philippine Secretary of Defense Voltaire Gazmin signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The EDCA is a ten-year military pact between the two countries that allows the rotational stationing of US military forces and supplies on military bases throughout the Philippines.

The text of the deal has not yet been made public. Philippine newspapers have reported that it will be released to the media shortly after Obama has concluded his visit.

A press brief on the EDCA, prepared and released by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), in the form of a set of questions and answers, spelled out certain aspects of the agreement.

The brief reveals that the agreement places no limit on the number of US forces and military supplies that may be stationed, or "prepositioned," within the country. These prepositioned supplies include US fighter jets and naval ships, including aircraft carriers. The number of US forces stationed will vary, but there is no limit to how many may be simultaneously deployed within the country.

The agreement also does not specify where these forces will be located and potentially includes all existing Philippine military facilities. Senior US National Security Council official Evan Medeiros, who is traveling with Obama, indicated yesterday that Subic Bay, the massive former US naval base, could be included under EDCA.

Under the agreement, Washington will also engage in

the construction of new basing facilities within the Philippines. Among the additional bases slated for construction is Oyster Bay, on the island of Palawan, which is but sixty miles from the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

The Philippines will retain ownership of the facilities constructed or occupied by the US military, but these will remain under US control for the duration of the agreement, which is renewable at the end of ten years. Washington will pay no rent for the use of any facilities, according to Defense Secretary Gazmin, "given the mutuality of benefits to be derived from the agreement."

One of the key disputes for Manila and Washington in the drafting of the EDCA was access by Philippine forces to the US facilities. President Benigno Aquino's administration stated that this issue was resolved, with Filipinos being given full access to US facilities.

What the EDCA brief actually states, however, is that one Filipino, the base commander, will be given full access to US facilities. These will in practice function as US bases, with access limited to US personnel and weaponry, serviced by Philippine forces, who will ferry supplies and guard their borders.

Negotiations for the basing agreement began in August 2013 under the name Increased Rotational Presence. The end result of the negotiations is styled as an executive agreement and not as a military treaty. This is an attempt to circumvent the stipulations in article 18, section 25, of the Philippine Constitution, which states that no foreign troops may be allowed in the country without the conclusion of a treaty ratified by the Senate.

The negotiations went through eight rounds of talks, during which Washington used strong-arm and blackmail tactics to get its agenda approved. When in

October, during the US government shutdown, Obama failed to attend the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in the region, the basing agreement talks ground to a halt.

Washington used its disbursement of aid in the aftermath of the devastating Typhoon Haiyan as a means of getting the Philippine negotiators back to the bargaining table on terms established by the United States. The White House dispatched Phillip Goldberg, a leading figure of the intelligence community in the State Department, as the new US ambassador to the Philippines.

When negotiations again bogged down in February this year, President Aquino sacked one of his own lead negotiators, Assistant Secretary of Foreign Affairs Carlos King Sorreta, who was insisting on clear Philippine control over US facilities.

During this same period, Aquino has gone out of his way to silence potential political opponents in the legislature to the deal. Senators Juan Ponce Enrile, Jinggoy Estrada and Ramon Revilla, leaders of the bourgeois alliance in opposition to Aquino's Liberal Party, expressed reservations about the basing negotiations during its early stages last year, hoping, they said, to press Washington for better terms.

Within weeks, a corruption scandal emerged against the three senators, which culminated in early April with the announcement that plunder charges would be filed against them. The charge of plunder carries a minimum sentence of life imprisonment.

Washington is moving to base US forces in the Philippines as a key step in its drive to militarily encircle China, as part of its so-called 'pivot' to Asia.

During his speech Monday at the Presidential palace of Malacañang, Obama denied this, declaring, "I want to be very clear: The United States is not trying to reclaim old bases or build new bases." He continued: "Our goal is not to counter China. Our goal is not to contain China ... Our goal is to make sure that international rules and norms are respected. And that includes in the area of maritime disputes."

Mention of "international rules and norms" is a clear reference to the case filed by Manila before the United Nations International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). Manila's case, which disputes Beijing's claim to the South China Sea, was drafted in the United States and is being argued by US lawyers. The US State

Department is using the case as a means to officially invalidate China's territorial claim.

Obama explicitly made this connection when he stated "we're very supportive of President Benigno's approach to go before the tribunal for the law of the sea and to seek international arbitration that can resolve this in a diplomatic fashion."

Obama depicted Beijing as the aggressor in the region and stated that, in contrast to China, "we [the United States] don't go around sending ships and threatening folks."

This is exactly what Washington is doing.

That Washington is "sending ships and threatening folks" was made crystal clear by an article, "U.S. Beefs Up Military Options for China as Obama Reassures Allies in Asia" published by the *Wall Street Journal* on the day of Obama's arrival in the Philippines. The article was based on interviews with several unnamed high-ranking Defense Department officials. The officials stated that Washington, through its Pacific Command, had drawn up revised options for dealing with China, which they characterized as "muscular" and "brawnier."

The article stated that Washington would be engaged in "a more direct challenge to Chinese claims there than the U.S. has taken in the past." This direct challenge would take the form of "increasing surveillance operations near China," more frequent port calls by US ships, and the sending of U.S. aircraft carriers through disputed waters close to the Chinese coast, including through the strait of Taiwan.

Under the new basing agreement, the Philippines will become more closely embroiled in such provocative and reckless actions. The EDCA is a large stride in the direction of the re-establishment of US colonial-style control over the country, and is a key component in Washington's drive toward war with China.



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