

Philippine state visit to Canada escalates anti-China “pivot”

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Earlier this month, Philippine President Benigno Aquino made a three-day state visit to Canada, the first visit to the country by a Philippine head of state in 18 years. Aquino’s visit, which follows Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s own sojourn to the Philippines in 2012, highlights the growing military-strategic partnership between the two countries, which are important allies of the US in its preparations to wage war on China.

Aquino began his visit in Ottawa on May 8. He was subsequently hosted by Filipino-Canadian business and political leaders in Toronto and Vancouver, cities with large Filipino populations. Canada is home to approximately 800,000 people of Filipino descent, many of whom entered the country through its infamous migrant worker programs, which are used by Canadian corporations and the wealthy to hire poverty-wage labourers and caregivers under conditions often compared to modern-day slavery.

Electoral considerations undoubtedly played a role in the state visit. It is a federal election year in Canada, and national elections are to take place in the Philippines in 2016. Both Aquino and Harper are desperate to shore up flagging support at home.

Harper hopes to win votes from the Filipino-Canadian community. His Conservative Party has made it a point in previous election campaigns to target ethnic communities with mock gestures of goodwill, while implementing policies that victimize and impoverish them.

Aquino is the scion of an old feudal-era landowning family and son of former president Corazon Aquino. He wishes to boost polling ratings that have plunged as a result of a string of political scandals, including his callous mismanagement of the Typhoon Haiyan relief operation in 2013, and public distrust of his “anti-corruption” campaign, a politically-motivated scheme to sideline critics of his government’s wholesale integration into the US’s anti-China “pivot to Asia.”

More important than these considerations, however, are the military-security initiatives being undertaken in Ottawa and Manila to further incorporate the two countries into the US pivot. The Canadian elite is also eager to expand economic ties with the countries of south-east Asia, which have abundant supplies of cheap-labour.

On the first day of Aquino’s visit, Harper announced plans to bolster the Philippines’ maritime security and counterterrorism capabilities through liaising with Canada’s military and intelligence agencies. This increased inter-agency cooperation is ostensibly aimed at stemming a tide of drug and human trafficking in the region, as well as combatting so-called terrorist groups—a catch-all which includes the armed separatist movement in the southern region of Mindanao, as well as the New People’s Army, the armed wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines.

Both of these armed groups and the political movements that they represent have close ties to sections of the Philippine elite and are regularly used as an alibi to base US military forces in the country. The vast majority of the politically-motivated killings in the Philippines are in fact committed by the police forces, the military, and private militias employed by big-business and the local elite.

Harper has also offered Manila the services of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to train Philippine military personnel in the proper handling of improvised explosive devices. Such a mission, while relatively minor at the outset, could well provide a beachhead for broader Canadian military deployments in the country. The Harper government has used the same “training” pretext to thrust the CAF into the US-led war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. CAF “advisors” in northern Iraq are routinely on the frontlines and helping spot ISIS bombing targets.

Harper backhandedly voiced his support for the Philippines’ claim to a collection of islets in the South China Sea, a claim contested by China and currently pending legal arbitration. While prefacing his comments by saying that his government “does not take [a] position” on the dispute, Harper added that “countries should respect international law and should not use force in asserting sovereignty over the disputed waters,” a reference to China’s attempts to build military islet outposts in the disputed waters.

This inflammatory rhetoric echoes Washington’s line. Over the past year, the Obama administration has dropped its formally neutral stance in the dispute and accused China of aggressively pursuing its claims. Meanwhile, they have turned a blind eye to numerous countries in the region, including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan, who are conducting their

own basing efforts on the islets.

The hypocrisy of the US position is underscored by the US military's incendiary activities in the region, including threatening to deploy warships and military aircraft within 12 nautical miles of the territory claimed by China in the disputed Spratly island chain.

Driving this looming showdown is the emergence of China as America's fastest-growing economic and military rival. Since 2011, when the pivot to Asia was officially announced, the US has staged a massive repositioning of its military forces to the region. In addition, the Obama administration has sought to strengthen military alliances across the Asia-Pacific, while conspiring to oust governments deemed to have developed too intimate military or economic ties to China or that have advocated a more conciliatory line toward Beijing.

Canadian imperialism is participating actively in the US pivot so as to both maintain its three-quarter century long military-strategic partnership with Washington and advance its own predatory interests and ambitions in the Asian-Pacific.

In November 2013, the Harper government signed a secret agreement with Washington to integrate Canada more fully into US war-planning against China, the "Asia-Pacific Defence Policy Cooperation Framework."

Within Canada's ruling elite there has been increasing discussion in recent years of the need to broaden their economic reach in the Asia-Pacific, the world's fastest growing region, to mitigate the impact of the global economic crisis and slowing trade with the US. However, complaints from governments in the region about Canada's limited political and military presence in East and South East Asia have proved a barrier, prompting calls from sections of the Canadian establishment for a more aggressive Canadian foreign-military policy.

Light on this debate is shed by *Brave New Canada*, a policy guidebook for the Canadian ruling elite written by Carleton University Professor Fen Hampson and Derek Burney, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's former chief of staff.

"Canada has important security interest in the (Asia-Pacific) region," argue Hampson and Burney, "... [A]s our own economic fortunes and future are increasingly tied to the region we will have a specific and not simply a generalized stake in the region's continuing prosperity and stability. Our economic partners in the region, notably Japan and Korea, but also our new trading partners in Southeast Asia, have signaled that if we want to do business with them and sign new investment and trade deals we have to be more reliable and engaged security partners. We can't simply be carpetbaggers."

In order to surmount this obstacle, the Harper government has re-oriented both politically and militarily to Asia. Prior to the recent military and trade agreements with the Philippines—among which was a pledge to explore a free trade deal—Canada sent its CAF Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to the Philippines in 2013 to help with the Typhoon

Haiyan relief efforts. For Canada, like the other major powers, military-led "disaster-relief" operations have become an important tool for expanding international influence and interoperability with foreign militaries and do so while promoting the lie that Canada's military is a humanitarian force.

Canada has also negotiated a free trade deal with South Korea, is a participant in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, and is one of the largest regular contributors of troops to war games on the Korean peninsula. It is also participating in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a US-led free-trade and investment bloc that includes Japan, Australia, Mexico, and a host of smaller nations in South East Asia and Latin America, but which tellingly excludes China.

Every month sees new provocations directed at China. Last month, the Philippine and US militaries staged their annual 10-day Balikatan, or "Shoulder to Shoulder," joint exercises across the country, which involved 11,600 troops. The war games included simulations of amphibious assaults on islands similar to Chinese outposts in the Spratlys. The Philippines has also recently conducted its first-ever war games with Japan, a nation also deeply implicated in the US pivot and whose ruling class is frantically seeking to throw off the remaining constitutional restrictions on the expansion and overseas deployment of its military in order to prepare for war.

With tensions mounting in East Asia as the US prepares for war against China, a host of states on both sides of the Pacific—lesser imperialist powers like Canada and Australia, and historically oppressed countries such as the Philippines—are invariably being drawn into a vortex of sabre-rattling and brinksmanship that could ignite at any moment into a war between nuclear-armed states.



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