US accelerating military encirclement of China

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The United States and the Philippines announced last Friday that five of the country's military bases would be opened up to American forces under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The implementation of the Philippine basing arrangement is just one component of the accelerating US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region as part of the Pentagon's encirclement and war preparations against China.

The two countries signed EDCA in 2014 but the Philippine Supreme Court only rejected legal challenges to the agreement in January. Last week's announcement followed two days of high-level discussions in Washington on an offer by the Philippine administration in February to make eight bases available to the US military.

The five "agreed locations" include the Antonio Bautista Air Base on Palawan Island, directly adjacent to the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Over the past year, Washington has dramatically heightened tensions with Beijing, denouncing its land reclamation activities and "militarisation" of the South China Sea. Last October and again in January, US navy destroyers directly challenged Chinese maritime claims by intruding into the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-administered islets.

The US military will also have access to Basa Air Base north of Manila, Fort Magsaysay (a huge army base), Lumbia Air Base in Cebu and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base in Mindanao. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter is due to visit Manila next month to finalise arrangements. However, Philip Goldberg, US ambassador to the Philippines, told the media he expected the initial movement of supplies and personnel to begin "very soon." The US Congress has set aside $66 million for the construction of military facilities in the Philippines.

Beijing condemned the new basing deal and warned of the potential for conflict. A comment published on Saturday by the state-owned Xinhua news agency accused Washington of "muddying waters in the South China Sea and making the Asia Pacific a second Middle East." On Monday, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying pointed to the hypocrisy of the US accusing China of "militarising" the South China Sea, exclaiming: "Isn't this kind of continued strengthening of military deployments in the South China Sea and areas surrounding it considered militarisation?"

As the US prepared to move military forces back into its former colony, General Dennis Via, chief of US Army Materiel Command, revealed to the media last week that Washington had secured other basing arrangements in Asia, including Vietnam, Cambodia and other unnamed countries. Under these deals, the US army will be able to stockpile equipment to enable troops to be deployed more rapidly to the region.

Via emphasised that the "activity sets" would be geared to low-intensity operations such as multinational training exercises and relief operations. "We are looking, for example, at in Cambodia placing a combat support hospital," he said.

Reassurances that the US military presence will be benign are worthless. As in the Philippines, the Pentagon is treading carefully so as not to immediately inflame opposition to a foreign military presence. In the case of Cambodia and Vietnam, the death and destruction wrought in both countries by Washington's neo-colonial war in the 1960s and 1970s is deeply etched into popular consciousness.

Washington has already forged closer diplomatic, economic and military relations with the Vietnamese

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regime, including backing its more aggressive stance in its disputes with China in the South China Sea. The US has lifted embargoes on the sale of arms to Vietnam, conducted joint military exercises and is seeking greater access to port facilities. However, the placement of US army supplies inside Vietnam for the first time since American troops were forced to withdraw in 1975 marks a turning point in the regime's collaboration with US imperialism.

Beijing will be even more concerned about Cambodia's decision to host US military equipment. The Cambodian regime has close ties with China and has attempted to block US efforts to press the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to take a more confrontational stand against China over the South China Sea. Nevertheless, the US has been developing defence ties with Cambodia since 2006. These include limited training, port calls and joint exercises. Washington has also been exploiting the Lower Mekong Initiative to drive a wedge between Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, on the one hand, and China which is building dams on the upper Mekong River, on the other.

The latest basing arrangements with the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia come on top of the stationing of the US navy's littoral combat vessels in Singapore and closer military collaboration with Indonesia and Malaysia. The rapid expansion of the US military presence in South East Asia goes hand in hand with the restructuring of permanent American military bases in South Korea, Japan and Guam, the upgrading of the US strategic partnership with India, and preparations to station long-range strategic bombers in northern Australia.

The US build-up is part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," formally announced in 2011—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at subordinating China to Washington's interests. The "pivot" has greatly inflamed potential flashpoints for war throughout the region, particularly through its provocative activities in the South China Sea.

Speaking in Canberra last week, Admiral Scott Swift, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, delivered another broadside against China, declaring that "freedom of the seas" was "increasingly vulnerable to a state-led resurgence of the principle of might makes right." He declared that he was troubled by "the undeniable signs of militarisation in select parts of the region, unprecedented in scope and scale."

The cynicism of such statements knows no bounds. The US navy has not only carried out two "freedom of navigation" operations within territorial waters claimed by China, but earlier this month dispatched the nuclear aircraft carrier, the USS John C Stennis, along with its associated strike group, to the South China Sea for four days of exercises and patrols. Over the past quarter century, the US has ridden roughshod over international law on the basis of "might makes right" to engage in a continuous succession of wars, military interventions and provocations.

Now Washington is preparing for war on an even more terrible scale with China and pressing countries throughout the region into line. Swift's visit to Canberra coincides with a concerted campaign to pressure the Australian government to mount its own "freedom of navigation" operation in the South China Sea—a reckless military exercise that always entails the risk of a miscalculation or mistake triggering a broader conflict.

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