

The US to further expand its military presence in the Philippines

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Amid a worsening confrontation with China over the South China Sea, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter declared yesterday that American forces would get access to a greater number of military bases in the Philippines under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the two countries.

On his flight yesterday from New Delhi to Manila, Carter told journalists that the current five bases were just the “initial sites for rotational presence” of the US military. “The agreement provides for more sites in the future,” he said. “This is an evolving thing. We agreed to these five with an understanding that they could be more and would be more, as we see what else and where else is significant.”

EDCA gives virtual carte blanche to the US military to access “agreed locations” throughout the former American colony. Once the Philippine administration signs off on “agreed locations,” US forces can operate in those bases with scant oversight by local authorities. The agreement authorises the deployment of unlimited US military personnel for a wide range of activities, including training, the refuelling and maintenance of aircraft and warships and the prepositioning of military equipment and supplies.

Carter explained that “rotations” were “our favourite way of having a presence, for US forces to operate in and out of the Philippines.” The Pentagon’s use of “rotations” in the Philippines, Australia and other countries is part of a long-term restructuring of its basing arrangements in Asia to provide greater flexibility and reduce the costs associated with large, fixed bases. The US military can move its forces into Philippine bases for indefinite periods of time.

The use of the term “rotational presence” is also to maintain the fiction that the US has no bases in the Philippines. Even though EDCA is in blatant violation

of the Philippine constitution, which bans the presence of foreign troops and bases, the Supreme Court ruled in January against legal challenges to the agreement.

Carter is due to visit two of the five “agreed locations” including one directly adjacent to the South China Sea. The five bases include four airfields and the army’s largest training camp. The Antonio Bautista air base on the western island of Palawan is just 300 kilometres from the Chinese-administered islet of Mischief Reef while the Basa military airfield is about 330 kilometres from the Scarborough Shoal currently occupied by Chinese vessels. Both island features are contested by the Philippines.

A lengthy *New York Times* article on Tuesday entitled “US and Philippines, united by China, ramp up military alliance” explained the rationale behind the Pentagon’s initial focus on airfields, rather than naval bases. “[S]hips can operate from long distances and the United States has naval bases not far away, in Japan and Guam, and can use ports in Subic Bay and Manila to resupply. Airfields, on the other hand, need to be nearby in order to allow rapid response in the South China Sea,” it stated.

The heavy presence of US military forces directly adjacent to the South China Sea makes a mockery of incessant American propaganda critical of China’s land reclamation on a handful of islets. On the eve of Carter’s arrival in the Philippines, Fox News published an “exclusive” citing the presence of two Chinese fighter aircraft on Woody Island, China’s regional administrative centre, as further evidence of China’s “militarisation” of the South China Sea. US access to Philippine military bases dwarfs China’s limited military presence on islets under its control.

Carter is due to observe the annual joint Balikatan military exercises currently underway, involving

thousands of US and Philippine troops as well as US warships and aircraft. In a pointed message to China, he will also reportedly spend time at sea on US navy ships in the South China Sea.

Carter's trip to the Philippines amid the Balikatan war games is part of the Obama administration's ramping up of pressure on China. At Washington's instigation, the G-7 foreign ministers meeting on Monday adopted a joint statement on maritime security, which, while not explicitly naming China, was clearly aimed against its activities in the South China Sea. Parroting the US line, it voiced "strong opposition to any intimidating, coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions."

In an unusually strong response, Beijing summonsed senior diplomats from each of the G-7 countries on Tuesday to register a formal protest over the statement. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang told the media on Wednesday that China had "solemnly clarified" its position on the South China Sea to each of the diplomatic representatives. In comments the previous day, Lu had accused the G-7 of "hyping up maritime issues and fuelling tensions in the region."

China was undoubtedly concerned by the support given by the European members of the G-7—Britain, France, Germany and Italy—to Washington's confrontational stance on the South China Sea. Beijing has sought over the past year to use economic inducements to cultivate relations with Europe as a counterbalance to the United States.

At the same time, Lu welcomed the remarks of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday calling for "mutually acceptable political and diplomatic solutions" to territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In remarks directed against Washington's aggressive intervention, Lavrov declared that it was necessary "to stop any interference in the talks between the parties directly involved and attempts to internationalise these disputes."

As part of its "pivot to Asia," the US has transformed what were longstanding, but relatively minor, regional territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and its South East Asian neighbours into a dangerous flashpoint for war, involving all of the major powers. The US navy has twice sent warships within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit around Chinese-

administered islets and is currently preparing a third "freedom of navigation" provocation.

Washington's claim to be defending "freedom of navigation" is both a pretext for the Pentagon's massive military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region as well as a potential casus belli for war with China. Speaking last week at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, Carter emphasised the necessity of a naval expansion to grow "both the number of ships and, importantly, above all, their capacities to deter and, if deterrence fails, defeat even the most advanced potential naval adversaries."

Carter's remark leaves no doubt that the US preparing for war against its "most advanced adversaries" with China at the top of the list.



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