

Former Philippine President Fidel Ramos travels to China to conduct negotiations

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Former Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos traveled to Hong Kong on Monday to conduct informal negotiations with China on behalf of President Rodrigo Duterte with the goal of defusing tensions in the South China Sea and increasing trade ties between Manila and Beijing.

Duterte took office as president two weeks before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague handed down a sweeping ruling on July 12 declaring unlawful China's nine-dash-line historical claim to the South China Sea. Over the past month, Duterte has attempted to balance between Washington and Beijing, looking to increase trade ties with China, while assuring Washington during Secretary of State John Kerry's visit last week that he supported the basing of unlimited US forces in the country under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

On July 14, two days after the PCA ruling, Duterte announced that he was appointing Ramos to serve as an informal negotiator on his behalf to conduct discussions with China. On July 23, Ramos confirmed to the press that he would accept the appointment. He declared that his function was to serve as an "ice breaker" between the two countries.

Duterte held a National Security Council meeting on July 27 in which, according to presidential spokesperson Ernesto Abella, he instructed Ramos not to take an "adversarial or insistent position" on the South China Sea. He cautioned him to take a "very diplomatic route instead of confrontation."

Ramos staged a news conference in Manila on Monday prior to departing for Hong Kong. He told the press that he would not be raising the topic of the PCA ruling, stating "That is not my mission. ... My mission is to rekindle ties with China."

Ramos added that he would carry out this mission

through informal talks with "friends and assets." Ramos was accompanied in this mission by Rafael Alunan and Chito Sta. Romana.

Alunan's presence on the mission highlights the contradictory nature of the Duterte's attempt to balance between Washington's "pivot to Asia" and trade ties with China. The former secretary of the Department of Interior and Local Government is a founder of the West Philippine Sea Coalition, an organization that over the past few years has staged repeated protests in front of the Chinese consulate denouncing Chinese "imperialism" in the South China Sea.

Sta. Romana is accompanying as an expert on China. A former leading member of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), he, along with two other leading members of the CPP—Ericson Baculinao and Jimmy Floracruz—was stranded in China in the early 1970s while on a party mission to meet with Mao Zedong. The three CPP leaders went on to become known as the "gang of three"—working as Beijing bureau chiefs for ABC, NBC and CNN respectively.

Ramos announced that he will be meeting with Wu Shicun, the president of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies think tank in Hainan. Wu played an instrumental role in authoring China's opposition to the PCA arbitration.

Ramos stated at a press conference in Hong Kong that one of his proposals for Beijing to help remove "irritations" in the relationship was to allow joint fishing by Filipino and Chinese fishermen within the common fishing grounds which the PCA ruled were part of the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Chinese state-run Xinhua news agency published an editorial on August 8 hailing Ramos visit, which it said, "brings a whiff of hope that the two countries will return to bilateral negotiations over the issue ... Ramos'

visit, which represents the first concrete step on the Philippine side to engage in bilateral talks with China on the South China Sea, could open a new chapter in settling disputes.”

Ramos has been closely associated with those sections of the Philippine ruling class most heavily engaged in pursuing trade and investment with China. He was instrument in the constitutional coup that ousted President Joseph Estrada and installed President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2001.

During her tenure as president, Arroyo oversaw the reorientation of Philippine economic and political ties increasingly towards Beijing. She signed the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) in 2005 which authorized joint exploration and exploitation of resources in the South China Sea by China, the Philippines and Vietnam.

On taking office in 2010, President Benigno Aquino led Manila to play the leading role in the region spearheading Washington’s “pivot” against China. He filed Manila’s legal case in The Hague against Beijing and escalated tensions at every turn in the South China Sea. At the same time, and with full backing from Washington, he filed plunder and corruption charges against Arroyo over her business deals with China.

In 2012, Arroyo was placed under arrest on plunder charges which carry a mandatory minimum sentence of life in prison. Duterte, as part of his creation of a supermajority of support in the legislature for his fascist agenda of vigilante death squads and state murder, has brought Arroyo back into the political limelight.

On July 21, the Supreme Court pardoned Arroyo on plunder charges. She has been elected to Congress and has been appointed House Deputy Speaker. Other Arroyo administration figures have been incorporated into Duterte’s cabinet or serve as part of his legislative coalition.

Arroyo announced to the press that she “fully supported Duterte’s agenda.” She explicitly called for the restoration of the death penalty, something which her administration abolished in 2006.

Duterte’s ties to Arroyo and his commissioning of Ramos to act as a negotiator with Beijing clearly reveal his desire to defuse tensions and increase trade ties with China. At the same time, he knows that he must maintain relations with Washington. The drive of US

imperialism to war with China as a means of securing its global economic hegemony makes such a balancing act impossible.

The influential Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), made Washington’s mounting displeasure with Duterte apparent in a statement published on August 5.

The Washington-based think tank wrote that the PCA ruling “should have been a slam-dunk for Duterte. When the decision came down overwhelmingly in Manila’s favor, the Duterte team should have been ready to mount a full-court press to push the international community to support the ruling—the only tool Manila had to bring pressure to bear on Beijing to comply.”

Instead, “Former president Fidel Ramos, who was named by Duterte as his special envoy for negotiations with China, has gone further and suggested the president set the court ruling aside to pursue an agreement.”

In this context, the CSIS suggested that Washington would stop funding Duterte’s death squads. “For Washington, the extrajudicial killings could eventually become an impediment to closer ties with Manila. The US Congress so far has been quiet about the killings. But if they continue, it is possible that when Congress returns from its recess in early September, some leaders will raise questions about Washington’s sizable military and economic assistance to the Philippines.”

The White House has no objections to martial law or extra-judicial murder. Kerry supplied Duterte with \$32 million to fund his anti-drug campaign just two weeks ago. But, the CSIS statement makes clear, if Duterte does not toe Washington’s line against China, there could be drastic consequences.



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