

Philippine President Duterte declares end to joint war games with the US

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1 October 2016

On Wednesday, September 28, speaking at the conclusion of his state visit to Hanoi, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared that the upcoming US-Philippines war games, scheduled to be staged from October 4 to 12, would be the last such joint military exercises. He stated he would cancel all future joint military exercises because “China does not want” them.

Over the six-year term of Duterte’s predecessor, Benigno Aquino, and in the wake of President Obama’s announcement of the US “pivot to Asia,” the annual joint US-Philippine Balikatan exercises had grown to unprecedented levels. In May 2015, 11,000 troops participated in the exercises, a record number. The exercises were also increasingly open in their targeting of China. US and Filipino troops, for example, staged drills to carry out amphibious assaults on “artificial islands” in the South China Sea during a war against an unnamed country.

Since the Duterte took office at the end of June, ties between Manila and Washington have declined sharply. As Duterte sought to pursue trade and diplomatic ties with China, Washington, using the pretext of human rights as a means to pressure the Philippine president, has criticized his murderous drug war. Duterte has responded by stepping up his rhetoric against Washington.

Duterte, after meeting with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Monday, stated that he was looking to secure economic and military support from Moscow and Beijing because he was “about to cross a Rubicon with the United States.”

Duterte is scheduled to travel to Beijing from October 19-21 where he will be meeting with Premier Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping. Among the stated aims of his visit are bilateral discussions over the South China Sea dispute and increased Chinese investment in

the Philippine economy. As Washington and its allies have increased their criticisms of Duterte’s drug war, China has begun defending it.

On Thursday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang told a press briefing that “Under the leadership of President Duterte, the new Philippine government enacted policies that prioritize combating drug-related crimes. China understands and supports that. We stand ready to have anti-drug cooperation with the Philippines and formulate a common action plan for it.”

In the wake of Duterte’s declaration that the October military exercises with the United States would be the last, his presidential cabinet attempted to mount public relations damage control. Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay stated that Duterte only meant military exercises in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, but that all other joint exercises would continue. National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon laughably asserted that Duterte only meant that the military exercises would be “the last for the year.”

Duterte’s cabinet has now established a pattern of directly contradicting Duterte’s volatile public statements. When Duterte announced two weeks ago that he was instructing US troops to leave Mindanao, his defense secretary directly contradicted him the next day saying that US troops would not be leaving. No formal request for the departure of US forces has been submitted by Manila.

Rodrigo Duterte is a parochial figure of limited capacity, a small city mayor vaulted onto the national stage. He remains a provincial strongman whose expertise is limited to death-squads and populist speech-mongering. His political fixation is implementing his fascistic agenda, carried out under the auspices of a war on drugs, to erect a police state over the murdered

bodies of thousands of impoverished Filipinos.

On September 30, Duterte staged a press conference at two in the morning, in which he positively compared himself to Adolf Hitler. Duterte stated “Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now, there are three million drug addicts. I’d be happy to slaughter them. At least if Germany had Hitler, the Philippines would have ...” Here he paused and gestured to himself. “My victims, I would like to be all criminals.”

The death toll of alleged criminals killed by police and vigilantes in the past three months is now nearing 4,000. The country has been placed under a “state of national emergency” with military checkpoints set up throughout the country and police and military explicitly authorized to carry out arrests without warrant.

Senator Leila de Lima, a key ally of former President Aquino at the head of the Senate Justice committee, had been conducting an investigation into the explosive growth of extrajudicial killings. On a motion from Senator Manny Pacquiao, she has been removed from her post and replaced by Senator Dick Gordon who has put forward a bill authorizing the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus. The Senate has announced that it will be ending its investigation into the killings this week. Congress, meanwhile, has launched an investigation into the alleged criminal dealings of Senator de Lima and is currently discussing broadcasting a sex-tape in which de Lima is claimed to be involved.

Superficially Duterte’s hold on power, with his cheap populist rhetoric and with ruling class support for his fascistic agenda, seems secure. Examined in the light of geopolitics and history, however, Duterte is in a perilous and fragile position. Washington will not tolerate any opposition to its geopolitical hegemony. It will certainly not allow its former colony to shift decisively into the camp of Beijing.

When other regional leaders have signaled anything other than full support for Washington’s confrontational stance towards China, their terms of office have been cut short. The removal of Kevin Rudd as Australian prime minister through an inner Labor party coup, and the abrupt resignation of Yukio Hatoyama as prime minister of Japan, both in 2010, and the election defeat of President Mahinda Rajapakse in Sri Lanka in 2015, all point to this fact. Duterte could

face a similar or worse fate if he does not toe the US line.

Among Duterte’s domestic support is the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which has enthusiastically backed his administration and have taken seats in his cabinet. Recognizing Duterte’s precarious geopolitical position, CPP head Joma Sison publicly advised him to rely on two sources of support to prevent being thrown out of office: the military and the Maoist CPP.

Former secretary of foreign affairs Albert del Rosario hinted yesterday at the initial measures that would be taken against Duterte if he continues to oppose Washington. He stated that the Philippines stood to lose up to “\$4 billion in development assistance,” \$140 million in military financing, as well as a \$800 million in generalized system of trade preferences.”

US Senators Patrick Leahy and Benjamin Cardin stated on September 26 that the US would need to re-examine its foreign aid to the Philippines in light of Duterte’s violations of human rights. Leahy is the ranking member of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on foreign aid. He warned that Manila’s “state-sanctioned violence” would require “an appropriate response by the US government.”

The hypocrisy of Washington knows no bounds. Secretary of State John Kerry committed \$32 million to fund Duterte’s war on drugs during his state visit to Manila in July. On September 24, just this past Saturday, US Assistant Secretary of State on International Narcotics William Brownfield quietly gave the Duterte government \$6.7 million specifically earmarked to continue his reactionary anti-drug crusade.

The US government is signaling to Duterte that it has no problems whatsoever with his fascistic agenda—it will happily fund his death-squads—but he must toe its anti-China line. If he fails to do so, the full weight of Washington’s anger will be brought to bear upon his administration, decked out in the tawdry rags of concern for “human rights.”



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