

Russia proposes joint military exercises with the Philippines in the South China Sea

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4 January 2017

Two Russian warships—Admiral Tributs, an anti-submarine vessel, and the sea tanker Boris Butoma—docked in Manila on January 2 for a goodwill visit to the Philippines, the first official navy-to-navy contact between the two countries. During the visit, Rear Admiral Eduard Mikhailov, head of the Flotilla of the Russian Navy Pacific Fleet, proposed joint military exercises with the Philippines in the South China Sea.

In a speech delivered to the welcoming ceremony at the port, Mikhailov explained that, “We’re very sure that in the future we’ll get such exercises with you, maybe just the maneuvering or maybe use some combat systems and so on.” He added that the joint exercises “in the South China Sea” should be expanded in “a few years” to include “not only Russia-Philippines, but Russia, Philippines, China and maybe Malaysia together.”

While Mikhailov claimed that the exercises would be focused on “maritime piracy and terrorism,” the geopolitical stakes involved in joint drills involving Moscow, Beijing and Manila in the disputed waters of the South China Sea were explicit. Mikhailov pointedly told the assembled reporters that Manila can “choose ... to cooperate with the United States of America or to cooperate with Russia, but from our side we can help you in every way that you need.”

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has announced that he is open to joint military exercises with Russia in the South China Sea. This stands in stark contrast to his declaration that he would no longer be carrying out such exercises with the United States in the disputed waters.

Under Duterte, who took office in mid-2016, the Philippines has emerged as a focal point of geopolitical instability. In an editorial on December 28, entitled “A perilous moment for Asia’s peace and stability,” the

Financial Times wrote “Manila is the first of the ‘wobbly dominoes’ the Trump administration must deal with.”

Duterte is attempting to restore Manila’s diplomatic and economic ties with Beijing, which had been drastically eroded by the provocative policies of the US “pivot to Asia,” implemented with the full support of his predecessor Benigno Aquino. To do this, he effectively ignored the arbitral ruling issued in The Hague against China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Washington sought to bring pressure on Duterte by raising human rights concerns over his murderous drug war, a program that the US initially funded, and which has seen over 6,000 alleged drug dealers summarily killed in the past six months. Duterte responded by denouncing Washington, threatening to end joint military exercises with the United States, and seeking arms and aid from Beijing and Moscow. The political stakes in Manila’s geopolitical reorientation are heightened by the fact that the Philippines will serve as chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2017.

Duterte has, over the past month, muted most of his vulgar rhetorical flourishes against the United States. President-elect Donald Trump spoke with Duterte by phone on December 2 and declared his support for the drug war, a fact which Duterte heralded to the press, declaring that he would happily work with the new American president.

The crisis between Manila and Washington, however, has far deeper geopolitical roots than the Obama administration’s tepid human rights posturing. That this former colony of US imperialism is in the process of distancing itself from Washington and forging ties with its longstanding rivals is an expression of how far

the decay of American economic might has advanced. Washington's attempts to shore up this decline by military means are bringing the world to the brink of a global war. It is in this context that Manila seeks arms and aid from China and Russia.

The expanded ties between Manila and Moscow were initiated during a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Duterte in November in Lima, Peru, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. In early December, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay and Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana traveled to Moscow where they met with their counterparts.

Yasay informed the press that the growth in relations between Moscow and Manila was an expression of the Philippines' move away from the United States. "Because of [our] special relationship with the United States we were not able to really pursue that kind of warm and mutually beneficial relationship with Russia. Now, it's changing," he stated.

Yasay initiated arrangements for a state visit by Duterte to Moscow in April or early May. He discussed expanding Philippine agricultural exports to Russia and securing increased Russian investment and technology "in areas such as mining, oil exploration and communications, possibly including surveillance."

Lorenzana meanwhile worked to negotiate the purchase of 26,000 assault rifles for Duterte's war on drugs, in the wake of a US announcement that it would be delaying or perhaps canceling a planned sale of arms to the Philippines over human rights concerns. Moscow also offered to sell a submarine and drones to the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

At the same time, Manila is negotiating the acquisition of arms from Beijing. Incoming Philippine ambassador to China, Chito Sta. Romana told the AFP on Monday that the Philippines was engaged in a "strategic shift in our foreign policy." He continued, "The Chinese viewed the Philippines as a geopolitical pawn or Trojan horse of the US. Now they look at us as a friendly neighbor."

Washington continues to exercise immense economic and political power within its former colony. There is no section of the ruling class, or any of its political operatives, including Duterte, that desire a break with the United States. Washington's military campaign to secure its economic dominance in the region is a

reckless drive to war, and any move by the countries of Southeast Asia to shore up relations with China in this context can only occur in opposition to the dictates of US imperialism. Washington will not tolerate the loss of its former colony, and it will pursue all means, legal and extralegal, to secure again the unwavering allegiance of Manila.



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