

Australian government offers to send troops to the Philippines

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For the second time this month, without any public consultation, the Turnbull government has moved to place Australia on the front line of a US-led military intervention in Asia that could trigger a wider war.

In a doorstep interview outside parliament yesterday, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop let it be known that at a recent meeting she offered Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to send troops to the Philippines, supposedly on an “advise and assist” mission.

Pointedly, Bishop made the “offer” public, despite conceding that Duterte had not yet accepted it. In most previous US and Australian interventions, the diplomatic pretence has been that the military forces were invited by the host country, which then announced the decision.

Bishop claimed that Australian troops could assist the fight against alleged Islamic State (IS)-linked forces in Marawi City on the southern island of Mindanao. In reality, Australian Special Forces would join their US counterparts, who are already on the ground in Mindanao as part of an intervention in collaboration with the Philippine military.

The US Embassy in Manila and the Philippine military revealed on June 9 that US Special Forces have been involved in the Marawi battle since it was launched in May.

Less than three weeks ago, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull gave an unprecedented pledge to join what would be a catastrophic war by the United States against North Korea.

Confronting a deepening political crisis at home, Turnbull is seeking to don the mantle of a wartime prime minister, despite widespread anti-war sentiment. As well as joining the Trump administration’s belligerent stance against North Korea, he and his ministers are hyping up misleading propaganda about

the involvement of IS in long-running conflicts in Mindanao.

Bishop’s declaration marks an escalation of Canberra’s involvement in the Philippines, raising the prospect of ground troops being sent to Asia for the first time since the disastrous Vietnam War. In June, Turnbull government announced the dispatch of air force surveillance planes to Mindanao.

Bishop drew a parallel with Australia’s role in Iraq, where some 300 regular troops are training local forces, and about 80 Special Forces soldiers are “advising and assisting” close to the front line—in other words, actively engaged in the fighting. She made clear the same would take place in the Philippines. “We would be ready to support the Philippines in the same way we are supporting Iraq in advising, assisting and training,” Bishop said.

Bishop suggested that Duterte was receptive to the offer. “The president heard my offer. I know the United States, likewise, made offers. I know Malaysia and Indonesia are prepared to support, Singapore are prepared to support the Philippines should they request that support.”

In other words, this is a US-backed “offer” that Duterte is under immense pressure to accept. Bishop emphasised how intimately she was working with Washington. She said she was in “constant” discussion with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, as well as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, about the situation in Marawi.

Once again, the “war on terrorism” is being used as a cover for US militarism. Washington and the Philippines military have seized upon the conflict in Marawi, which began as a battle between rival armed clans, to effectively discipline Duterte, who was shifting Manila’s foreign policy away from the US and

toward China.

As part of a pitch for Chinese investment and financial assistance, Duterte previously vowed to eject US military personnel from the Philippines, a former US colony. Washington, which retained a large military presence under the Marcos dictatorship, signed an agreement with Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino, to secure virtually unlimited access to military bases in the country.

The Marawi battle suddenly erupted on May 23, just as Duterte arrived in Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The military launched a raid against what it claimed was the IS headquarters in the Philippines. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana then declared military rule, compelling Duterte to return immediately to the Philippines.

With its allies in the Philippines military, Washington is using the Marawi battle to reorient Manila's geopolitical ties away from Beijing and Moscow, and firmly back into the camp of US imperialism.

Bishop's comments yesterday followed an extraordinary June 29 public call by a visiting US Marine general for Australian commandos to be dispatched to the Philippines. Lieutenant General David Berger, in Australia for the biennial Talisman Sabre US-Australian military exercises, said he expected Australian forces could soon join American troops in that country.

"Both of us have a long history of being an expeditionary force when needed, so we begin from a common point I think and we've operated alongside for 100 years," Berger told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He spoke of "looking for stability" in the region to deter "bad behaviour."

Berger's remarks point to concerns in Washington about the instability of the Duterte regime, which the US and its partners have continued to shield from criticism of its murderous, fascistic activities, mostly conducted under the cover of a "war on drugs."

Since Duterte took office in July last year, government figures show police have killed close to 3,500 "drug personalities." Thousands more have been murdered in unexplained circumstances in poor urban areas, even according to police data. Duterte has declared he is "happy to slaughter" millions of supposed addicts and dismissed the deaths of children as "collateral damage."

On Monday, Duterte provocatively told police they could kill "idiots" who violently resist arrest. This came just two days after hundreds of people turned the funeral of a schoolboy into a protest against Duterte's rampage. Kian Loyd delos Santos, 17, was shot in the head by plainclothes police in a Manila alley.

Far from opposing Duterte's brutality, the US and its allies have publicly appeased him as part of their intervention. Bishop's announcement came after a brazen display of support for Duterte by the director-general of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), Nick Warner, in Manila on August 22.

Australia's top foreign spy chief, who rarely appears in public, met with Duterte and Defense Secretary Lorenzana at the Malacañang presidential palace. The president's office later released photos of Warner and Duterte smiling and using Duterte's signature closed-fist hand gesture, a symbol of his 2016 presidential campaign pledge to kill thousands of "criminals."

ASIS is Australia's highly secretive equivalent of the US CIA. The presence of its chief, who has also been involved in interventions in Iraq and Solomon Islands, and previously headed Australia's Defence Department, is a sure sign of intense Australian intelligence and military involvement in the Philippines.

The Mindanao deployment is another front in Canberra's escalating involvement in predatory US military operations globally. In May, the Turnbull government added 30 troops to the Australian contingent in Afghanistan, making a total of 300. It is now refusing to rule out an increased commitment under the Trump administration's plans to expand the US intervention there.



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