

# More Australian troops to be sent to the Philippines

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Defence Minister Marise Payne's trip last week to South Korea, amid acute war tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and the Philippines underscored Canberra's frontline involvement in Washington's military build-up and actions in Asia. Without any public consultation, the Australian government has committed troops to the phony "war against terrorism" on Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

In Manila on September 8, Payne and Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that Australian troops would be stationed at yet-to-be named bases in Mindanao. The bases were said to be near where a local clan militia, allegedly linked to Islamic State (IS), occupied parts of the city of Marawi on May 23 after being attacked by the Philippines military.

No troop numbers were specified, but Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop previously compared the offer of soldiers to the Philippines to the deployment of about 300 Australian troops and 80 Special Forces commandos to Iraq, where they are engaged in US-led operations, under the guise of assisting the Iraqi government fight IS.

At a joint news conference with Payne on September 8, Lorenzana said the Australian contingents would be "small." He referred to concerns that any large deployment could arouse political opposition. "It would not look good if we would need troops to fight the war here," he said.

Payne revealed that, in fact, Australian troops were already on the ground in the Philippines. "We have increased our engagement—a surge if you like—in the context of the current events," she said.

It is not clear how long the soldiers have been there, undoubtedly working closely with US forces, whose presence in Mindanao was acknowledged by the US

embassy on June 9.

In June, the Australian government dispatched two AP-3C Orion military spy planes to work with the Philippines forces in Mindanao. The deployment of troops, however, has been kept hidden from the Australian people.

Lorenzana indicated the Australian role would extend beyond training. "The planes and a small attachment of Australian troops [are] to train our people and maybe some information-gathering and information analysis," he said.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last week claimed the insurgency was "a real threat" to Australia. "We do not want Marawi to become the Raqqa of southeast Asia," he said.

The timing of the Payne-Lorenzana announcement, however, raised further doubts about the real purpose of the Australian mission, because President Rodrigo Duterte's government claims to be nearing victory in the near four-month Marawi battle.

Last Saturday, Duterte rejected a proposal from the Maute group, the local clan force, for a safe exit for its fighters in Marawi in exchange for freeing hostages it held. Only about 40 Maute gunmen "and other extremists" were said to remain in the centre of Marawi City.

Washington and the Philippines military seized upon the Marawi conflict, which began as a battle between rival armed gangs, to effectively discipline Duterte, who showed signs of shifting Manila's foreign policy toward China, from where he hoped to secure investment and aid.

In return for Duterte's compliance with the US intervention, the Trump administration and its partners have deflected criticism of his regime's fascistic activities, in which police and vigilantes have killed

thousands of people in poor urban areas via a supposed “war on drugs.”

Before arriving in Manila, Payne reiterated Canberra’s backing for US domination of the region as the Korean Peninsula is on the brink of war. The US has recklessly ratcheted up tensions with North Korea with Trump threatening to engulf it in “fire and fury like the world has never seen.”

Yet in her “keynote address” to the 38-nation US-backed annual “Seoul Defense Dialogue” on September 7, Payne shamelessly declared:

“The United States, a long standing bulwark for the region’s security and wealth, will continue to be the partner of choice for many in the region. Our regional stability continues to rely on confident, economically vibrant and military-capable allies, including Japan and Australia and the Republic of Korea.”

Payne boasted of Australia’s role in the 1950-53 Korean War, in which the US conducted a devastating assault on the population in order to maintain a puppet regime in Seoul, headed by the dictator Syngman Rhee. “Indeed, more than 17,000 Australians subsequently served in Korea over the conflict, 340 of whom lost their lives,” she said.

Payne indicated that the Turnbull government stood ready to reprise that role. “Ladies and gentlemen, Australia remains a nation that is committed to making a contribution to global security, including when nations are under open threat,” she declared.

In that war, during which the 1951 ANZUS military treaty was signed, the Australian ruling class demonstrated its post-World War II commitment to Washington, as a means of pursuing its own predatory interests throughout the Asia-Pacific.

Payne was speaking amid considerable popular opposition in South Korea to the US provocations against North Korea and the stationing of THAAD anti-missile systems that can spy deep inside China and Russia, both of which have borders with North Korea.

Payne’s comments underscored Prime Minister Turnbull’s declaration last month that Australia was “joined at the hip” with the US and would join a potentially catastrophic war against North Korea.

Like Turnbull, Payne echoed the Trump administration in demanding that China use its “economic leverage” to bring North Korea to heel. “We believe that China can do more,” she insisted.

Payne further lined up against China by declaring that Australia would “continue to exercise our rights of freedom of navigation and overflight, including in the South China Sea.” The Trump administration last week announced its intention to conduct several missions a month to challenge Chinese control of strategic islets in that sea.

On September 4, just before starting her trip, Payne announced that an Australian task group, *Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2017*, left Sydney that day for a near-three month tour of the region, headed by an “amphibious assault ship” HMAS Adelaide, a new helicopter carrier.

The expedition would “focus on enhancing military cooperation with some of Australia’s key regional partners including Brunei, Cambodia, the Federated States of Micronesia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste.”

More than 1,200 personnel would participate, with the Adelaide accompanied at various stages by five other warships, “making this the biggest coordinated task group deployment since the early 1980s.”

This display of military force is designed to reinforce the US aggression in the region, as well as to deflect from the Turnbull government’s unpopularity and political crisis by building up a wartime-type political atmosphere.



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