Chinese president visits the Philippines

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On Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded a two-day visit to Manila, where, in meetings with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, he signed a number of agreements which markedly increased diplomatic and economic ties between the two countries.

Among the deals signed was a commitment to begin conducting joint exploration and exploitation of the oil resources of the South China Sea. Xi visited Manila in the midst of Washington's continued escalation of economic warfare against Beijing and advanced preparations for direct military conflict.

Xi arrived in Manila from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit where US Vice President Mike Pence had issued a series of bellicose declarations against China, preventing the summit from arriving at a joint communique for the first time in its history.

As it has throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Washington's attempt to contain the rise of China and to reduce its massive economy to a semi-colonial status, subordinate to US interests, has riven Philippine politics. Disputes over increased ties with China and the intense pressure which Washington brings to bear upon any such moves within its former colony have been at the heart of every major political conflict and corruption scandal over the past decade.

Former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, during her second term in office, from 2004 to 2010, sought to re-orient Philippine economic and diplomatic ties toward Beijing. She signed the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) with China, a deal allowing for the joint exploration of the disputed South China Sea.

President Benigno Aquino III, of the Liberal Party, took office in 2010. Through a series of provocations against Beijing in the South China Sea and the filing of corruption charges against Arroyo and her political allies, he came to serve as one of Washington's foremost proxies in the region.

The Aquino administration filed suit against China's claim to the South China Sea in a case drawn up and argued by Washington before The Hague, and arranged for the return of US military bases to the country through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Duterte's administration is a return to, and escalation of, the orientation of the Arroyo administration under conditions in which Washington has qualitatively intensified the danger of a global war. Whatever stance Duterte takes, it is being made on the frontlines of a rapidly worsening US-China confrontation. The personal and political volatility of the fascistic populist is, fundamentally, an expression of just how sharp the social and geopolitical crisis has become.

Speaking in Singapore to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit on November 15, Duterte stated that if war were to erupt in the South China Sea, "my country will be the first to suffer." China, he declared "is already in possession" of the disputed waters, and the United States, with its repeated military exercises and Freedom of Navigation Act maneuvers, was "creating tension."

Xi's trip to the Philippines was the first state visit by a Chinese president to the country in 13 years, when Arroyo signed the JMSU deal. Speaking to the press in Manila, Xi described the relations between Beijing and Manila under Duterte as "like a rainbow after the rain." At a banquet in his honor, Xi stated, "After President Duterte took office, our two sides have worked together to remove many obstacles. Our relationship has been turned around and put on the right trajectory."

In addition to his talks with Duterte, Xi met with members of the Philippine legislature, holding a half-hour discussion with Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who is now Speaker of the House. Arroyo told the press that Xi's visit would "provide a major boost to President Duterte's envisioned massive infrastructure program." She told Xi, "Infrastructure will be very important for the Philippines in the coming years. And there is no country in the world that matches China's recent track record and capability in this area."

Meeting with the members of the Philippine Senate and Congress, Xi stated that the deals which he was signing

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with Duterte would see increased traffic between China and the Philippines. He spoke of plans to bring more Chinese tourists to the Philippines and more Filipino teachers and nurses to China. More significantly, he declared that the agreements which they reached would transform the South China Sea into “a sea of friendship and cooperation.” Xi specifically called for a “maritime and air liaison mechanism” to allow the two countries to coordinate their naval and air movements in the disputed waters.

Over the course of his two-day visit, Xi signed 29 economic agreements, most for joint infrastructure projects and Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) loans from Beijing. Duterte has announced that the flagship project of his administration is a massive infrastructure project, which he has named “Build, Build, Build,” and which is officially projected to cost $US155 billion by 2022. The cornerstone of the proposal is Chinese investment.

The deals signed by Xi included the construction of a 639-kilometer railway linking Manila and Bicol, along with a number of other infrastructure projects, most slated to be funded by Chinese loans. The Chinese Steel Company, Panhua Group, signed a deal on the sidelines of the visit with Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Ramon Lopez for the investment of $3.5 billion in the construction of a steel manufacturing plant, to be based on the southern island of Mindanao, which is currently in its second year of martial law.

The most significant deal was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which effectively revitalizes the JMSU, allowing for the joint exploration and exploitation of oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. According to a draft released to CNN by opposition Senator Antonio Trillanes, the deal calls for joint work between the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and an as-yet-unnamed Philippine counterpart. Senate President Vicente Sotto III, tied to the Duterte administration, said that the Malacanang presidential palace had stated that the MOU agreed to a 60–40 sharing of mineral resources, with the majority share going to the Philippines.

The bourgeois opposition, gathered around the Liberal Party of former President Aquino, has raised an immense outcry over Xi’s visit and denounced Duterte as a “puppet” of China. The hue and cry over national sovereignty in the “West Philippine Sea,” has reached a fever pitch.

Not one of these political figures cares a scrap for Philippine sovereignty, nor is there an anti-imperialist bone in their bodies. Washington established its direct colonial rule over the country in a bloody war of conquest that led to the death of over one million Filipinos. The politicians posturing in outrage over sovereignty are, in their majority, the heirs of the oligarchies brought to power by their former colonial master. Many of them likewise embraced the brutal wartime Japanese occupation; Aquino’s grandfather served as vice president of its puppet government. The hullaballoo over sovereignty and the vicious denunciations of China are being mobilized in service to US imperialism.

Opposition senators Trillanes and Pangilinan declared that the MOU on the South China Sea violated the Philippine Constitution. Trillanes alleged that the deal had been drawn up by China. Presidential spokesperson Sal Panelo responded with a statement that it did not really matter who drew up the deal, but Duterte’s Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Teddy Locsin, adopting the language of the president, declared, “Of course it f..king matters. I wrote it.”

Among the forces generally opposed to Duterte’s establishment of ties with China are the military brass, which have long historical ties to Washington. Duterte has stated his intention to defuse tensions with China by decreasing military exercises targeting Beijing in the South China. However, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has, according to the *New York Times*, “quietly expanded the number of exercises it will conduct with the United States military next year.”

During Xi’s visit, Lorenzana oversaw a provocative live-fire drill in the waters off the South China Sea, launching recently purchased Israeli missiles at “enemy ships.” He told the press, “We will use this technology to protect our seas.” When asked if he had deliberately timed the demonstration to coincide with Xi’s visit, Lorenzana ridiculously stated, “No. The weather was good.”

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