

US drive against China sharpens political tensions in the Philippines

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Over the course of the last month, tensions have mounted sharply between the Philippines and China over the presence of Chinese vessels anchored in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The tensions are finding open expression in Philippine politics, where the bourgeois opposition to President Rodrigo Duterte had gathered to form a coalition party, 1Sambayan, whose fundamental concern is to reorient Philippine foreign relations away from Beijing and back into the camp of Washington.

The heightened tensions first emerged over the announcement in late March, in the same week that 1Sambayan was founded, that Chinese vessels were anchored near Whitsun Reef, a feature of the South China Sea claimed by both countries. The Chinese government initially stated that the boats were fishing vessels sheltering in the boomerang shaped atoll from the brunt of a storm. While some vessels departed, others remained anchored in at Whitsun Reef for over a month.

Duterte sought to quietly deal with the tensions, stating that he intended to speak with the Chinese ambassador. The Biden administration, however, has been pushing sharply against China since it took office in January. The formation of 1Sambayan and the confrontation at Whitsun can only be understood in the context of the renewed US drive against China.

While Duterte sought to downplay the confrontation, the US Embassy in Manila immediately issued a statement denouncing China for using “maritime militia to intimidate, provoke and threaten other nations, which undermines peace and security in the region.”

It is, in fact, Washington that is chief culprit in deploying its military forces to intimidate and provoke. During the crisis in April, the US deployed multiple warships to the region and 65 surveillance aircraft. The South China Sea Strategic Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a think tank associated with Peking University, issued a report indicating that publicly available flight data revealed that US spy planes had been conducting record levels of flights over the South China Sea since January. The report referred to the US activity in the South China Sea as “unprecedented” intensity.

China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, on March 29 issued a sharp statement, referring to the US

deployment of naval forces to the disputed waters. “No one is more suitable than the US for the label of militarization and jeopardizing freedom of navigation,” it said.

Tensions sharpened further on April 27, when the Philippine Coast Guard reported that seven Chinese vessels were anchored near the Sabina shoal in the northeastern portion of the Spratly islands. After the Coast Guard confronted the ships, the Chinese vessels departed the area.

Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin issued a statement that revealed how far tensions had mounted. He declared that any attack on a Philippine vessel, “however small, as long as it is a government vessel, is an attack on the US, triggering the MDT [Mutual Defense Treaty] and that response is global.”

Locsin was referring to the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Philippines that states that an attack on either party was an attack on both. He was stating that if shots were fired in the South China Sea the result would be a global war. Far from urging caution, however, he went on, “We must have the courage to go where probably we cannot go back from.”

On May 3, Locsin escalated further, issuing a vulgar tweet, “China, my friend, how politely can I put it? Let me see... O... GET THE F..K OUT.” He went on to refer to China as “an ugly oaf.”

The public crudity of the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs expresses the level of tension that has been created over the disputed waters. It created the remarkable situation in which notoriously vulgar Duterte called for calmer and more reasonable language. “China remains our benefactor,” he stated. “Just because we have a conflict with China does not mean to say that we have to be rude and disrespectful. As a matter of fact, we have many things to thank China for—both its help in the past and its aid today.”

When Duterte spoke of aid from China, he had in mind in particular the Philippines’ reliance on China as the single largest source of vaccines for the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite repeated efforts, the Philippines has been unable to secure large quantities of vaccine from Washington, and the limited vaccination roll-out thus far has relied heavily on vaccines secured from China, many of them donated by the Chinese

government.

Locsin belatedly issued a public apology, not to China, but to his counterpart, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, declaring “I just don’t want to lose my friendship with the most elegant mind in diplomacy with manners to match.”

The mounting tensions in the South China Sea, inflamed above all by the provocations of the Biden administration, have sharpened global tensions and brought in a number of imperialist powers.

The UK announced that it was sending its Carrier Strike Group, the largest armada it has deployed in years, to the South China Sea. UK Defence Secretary described the deployment as “flying the flag for Global Britain—protecting our influence, signalling our power”. The UK armada will be accompanied by a US Navy destroyer as it sails through the contested waters.

Japan, through its Self-Defense Forces (SDF), announced that it would be providing a \$US1.1 million defence aid package to the Philippines, supplying the Philippine military with non-lethal aid, and Japanese troops would be providing Filipino forces with training. The deal marks the first time that the SDF is supplying military equipment as a form of official development assistance.

The question of Manila’s geopolitical alignment, as Washington sharpens its campaign against China, has become the central focus of the upcoming 2022 presidential elections in the Philippines.

Vice President Leni Robredo, head of the opposition Liberal Party, denounced the President as “pro-China” in her weekly radio address on Sunday. She stated that Duterte’s repeated assertions that confronting China’s boats in the South China Sea raised the danger of war was “throwing our sovereignty out the window.”

The elite political opposition to Duterte coalesced into an umbrella organization, known as 1Sambayan. The focus of the new grouping is the attempt to use the elections to reorient Philippine foreign policy away from Beijing and back into the camp of Washington.

Two of the leading organizers behind 1Sambayan highlight this agenda. Retired Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio and former Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario were at the centre of Manila’s activities sharpening tensions in the South China Sea as part of the Aquino administration’s integration in the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.” Carpio and del Rosario were directly responsible for Manila’s submission of a legal claim to contested portions of the South China Sea before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea in The Hague.

The court’s ruling in Manila’s favour in mid-2016 did little to alter the state of affairs in the region, as Duterte took office a month before the ruling was handed down. Duterte sought to downplay tensions in the South China Sea as a means of securing improved trade and diplomatic relations with China. The bourgeois opposition to Duterte is seeking to reverse this

state of affairs and use the 2016 ruling to press Manila’s claim and sharply exacerbate tensions in the region.

In a speech on May 5, Duterte returned to this topic, stating, “They filed a case, we won. That paper, in real life, between nations, that paper is nothing.” Carpio issued a public demand for Duterte to resign. Duterte challenged Carpio to a public debate. Carpio accepted, but then Duterte backed out.

Former Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Albert del Rosario, a leading convenor of 1Sambayan issued a statement in response to the discovery of the Chinese vessels at the Sabina shoal, “We Filipinos have a collective constitutional duty to protect our national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest and the right to self-determination.”

A critical element of support for the platform of 1Sambayan comes from the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and various so-called national democratic organizations that follow its political line. Founder and ideological leader of the CPP, Jose Ma. Sison, published statements on Facebook referring to Duterte as “a traitor” for supposedly relinquishing Philippine sovereignty.

Bayan Muna, a leading national democratic organization, is a founding member of 1Sambayan, where it is joined to the bourgeois opposition and to the right-wing Magdalo party. Magdalo was founded by coup-plotting elements of the military officer corps.

The Philippines remains in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. The working population and poor are suffering under the worst conditions of mass hunger since the Japanese occupation. The CPP and its allied organizations are attempting to channel the mass opposition emerging throughout the country behind the electoral interests of 1Sambayan, a coalition founded on the interests of escalating tensions with China and rejoining the war-drive of US imperialism.



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