

Washington announces basing of US troops in the Philippines

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On February 1-2, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited the Philippines where he met with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and announced that Washington would be expanding its military presence in the country under the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and resuming joint military exercises in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

While Washington is waging a war with Russia in Ukraine, most recently announcing the deployment of M1 Abrams battle tanks, it is at the same time preparing for and provoking war with China. Austin's Asian tour of the past week demonstrated how far advanced these preparations have developed. Prior to his arrival in the Philippines, Austin met with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol who recently publicly spoke of the possible deployment of US nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula.

In Manila, Austin declared that China's "threat to international order" was "unprecedented." This claim stands reality on its head. It is Washington, not Beijing, that is rapidly ramping up preparations for war in the Pacific. The Biden administration is deploying more fighter jets and bombers to South Korea, shifting US troop deployments in Japan to a more immediate war footing, and restoring military bases in the Philippines, all the while openly targeting China. In the process the White House is deliberately resurrecting Japanese militarism, pushing Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to scrap the country's constitutional limits on armed forces and expand its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. In December 2022, Japan became the third largest military spender in the world.

Washington's preparations for war with China are focused above all on Taiwan. The Philippines, immediately to Taiwan's south, is critical to these plans.

The United States suffered a serious blow to its military presence in the region in 2016, when then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, looking to improve economic ties with China, announced shortly after taking office that he was ending joint military patrols in the disputed South China Sea and putting all implementation of basing arrangements for US forces on hold.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr, who took office last year, had campaigned claiming that he would continue Duterte's orientation to China. Within months it was clear that a

reorientation back toward Washington was under way. There is profound concern throughout the region that the tensions over Taiwan, stoked by the Biden administration, will erupt into war. The Philippines would inevitably be directly caught up in this conflict. Philippine Ambassador to the US Jose Romualdez expressed Manila's dilemma when he recently told the Associated Press, "We're in a Catch-22 situation. If China makes a move on Taiwan militarily, we'll be affected—and all ASEAN region, but mostly us, Japan and South Korea."

As he had in South Korea, Austin declared to the Philippine press that the US had an "ironclad commitment" to the country. Washington's expanded military presence, he asserted, "makes both of our democracies more secure." Nothing could be further from the truth. Washington's only ironclad commitment is to protect its own imperialist interests. Its military presence destabilizes the region and undermines democracy. The basing of US troops in the country is a direct violation of the Philippine constitution.

The stationing of US forces in the Philippines is already under way. Austin visited Camp Navarro on the southern island of Mindanao, where a US Joint Special Operations Task Force is currently deployed.

Austin announced that the Marcos government was adding four new locations for the forward deployment of US troops and military supplies in addition to an existing five. While the precise locations have not yet been specified, then Philippine Military Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Bartolome Bacarro, told the press in November 2022 that Washington had requested two locations on the Luzon strait, the portion of the country closest to Taiwan.

Austin also stated that the US and Philippine militaries would be resuming the joint military exercises in the disputed South China Sea, which Duterte had ended in 2016. These war games directly target China in waters claimed by Beijing and are very provocative.

While Austin presented the war preparations of Washington as serving some commitment to the defense of "democracy," he said not a word on human rights or the bloody legacy of the Marcos dictatorship, which is being rehabilitated by Marcos Jr.

With the full backing of Washington, Ferdinand Marcos Sr imposed martial law on the country in 1972 and used its

draconian powers to oversee the brutal apparatus of military repression. Thousands were killed and tens of thousands tortured by the Marcos dictatorship, while the United States increased its military aid to his regime and declared its support for his—in the words of Vice President George H. W. Bush in 1981—“adherence to democratic principles.” The paramount concern for Washington was the preservation of its vast military complexes at Clark Airbase and Subic Naval Base.

Marcos Jr has declared that the martial law rule of his father was a “golden age” in Philippine history. Under the current presidency, activists and political dissidents are routinely arrested as “terrorists.” The day before Austin’s arrival in the country, the government’s Anti-Terrorism Council issued a public declaration that a community doctor working with a deeply impoverished indigenous community was a “communist” and a “terrorist,” charges which could likely result in her death in a state-backed extrajudicial assassination. Washington had nothing to say about any of this.

Prior to his election, Marcos Jr faced subpoena and arrest in the United States for contempt of court in a case involving his family’s gross violations of human rights. The Biden White House arranged for Marcos Jr’s safe travel to the United States where the US president held a friendly meeting with him in New York. Washington sheds tears for human rights only when it serves its war aims and imperialist ambitions.

As under the Marcos dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s, Washington’s concern in the Philippines is not democracy or human rights but establishing and maintaining a military presence to advance its war plans.

The US bases in the country were a flagrant violation of Philippine sovereignty, a military extension of its neo-colonial rule. The US exercised direct rule over these bases and the millions of US troops stationed on or cycled through them were not subject to Philippine jurisdiction. Scores of Filipinos were killed by US servicemen, thousands raised accusations of rape, but not a single American was prosecuted under Philippine law. A vast network of prostitution and vice grew up around the bases, with the direct support of the US military brass. Washington staged the carpet bombing of North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from its bases in the Philippines.

In 1991, the Philippine Senate voted to end the lease of the US military bases and the future establishment of foreign military bases in the country was barred by the constitution without the approval of a two-thirds majority of the Senate. It is for this reason that the *New York Times* wrote that Austin’s announcement would mark “the first time in 30 years that the United States will have such a large military presence in the country.” For 30 years, the basing of US troops in the country has been banned. The Biden and Marcos Jr administrations are poised to reverse that.

The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which Austin and Marcos now invoke, is an executive agreement signed by the defense secretary of the Aquino

administration and the ambassador of the Obama administration in 2014. It was an end run around the constitution, presenting the basing of US troops as a “rotational presence,” which did not require legislative ratification. In early 2016, the pliant Philippine Supreme Court, duly chastened by corruption charges, ruled that EDCA was constitutional. Washington rapidly moved to deploy troops but Duterte was elected four months later and relations soured. After six long years, with the newly elected Marcos, the United States is moving again to establish bases.

Austin told the press that the EDCA arrangement is not about “permanent basing, but it is a big deal. It’s a really big deal.” The denial that this is permanent basing is a necessary subterfuge to enable the “big deal,” through which the United States is re-establishing its military bases, critical to its war aims in the Asia Pacific region, in its former colony, the Philippines.

The ten pages of EDCA authorize the deployment of unlimited numbers of US troops and supplies to a set of “agreed locations.” These locations will be governed by the United States. Filipinos will not be allowed to enter any US-controlled location. Only one Filipino military representative will be allowed access, and only with permission secured in advance from the US commander.

US forces are also guaranteed access to all “public land and facilities (including roads, ports, and airfields), including those owned or controlled by local government” as needed. US troops and civilian contractors are subject to the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the US government. Should they be accused of a crime, the Philippine legal system will have no jurisdiction over them.

The US will pay no rent for the use of these facilities and if they choose to vacate a facility, the Philippine government is obligated to reimburse the US military for any “improvements.”

These are military bases. No euphemism about “indefinite rotational presence” can disguise this reality. The terms of EDCA smack of a restored colonial presence. Washington is reenacting historic crimes and dredging up the reactionary filth of the past in pursuit of its war ambitions against China.



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