

Philippine president delivers anti-China speech to Australian parliament

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The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese rolled out the red carpet on Thursday for Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr, who became his country’s first leader to address a joint sitting of the Australian parliament.

Marcos’s speech soon made clear why he was feted. Without explicitly naming China, he launched into a thinly-veiled denunciation of Beijing while focussing on the strengthening of military ties between the two American allies as part of the US-led preparations for war against China.

“We must come together as partners to face the common challenges confronting the region. Not one single country can do this by itself. No single force alone can counter them by themselves,” he declared.

The speech was replete with the stock phrases employed by Washington to condemn so-called China expansionism and aggression. The Philippines, he declared, was “on the frontline against actions that undermine regional peace, erode regional stability, and threaten regional success.” The Philippines and Australia had to “join forces, together with our partners, in the face of threats to the rule of law, to stability, and to peace.”

In reality, it is the US that has profoundly destabilised the entire region. It has consolidated military alliances and partnerships that encircle China, which it regards as the chief threat to its global hegemony. The repeated references to the “rule of law” and the international “rules-based order” are to the global framework established by US imperialism in the aftermath of World War II in which Washington sets the rules to advance its interests.

The Philippines, a former American colony, has been a critical component of Washington’s increasingly

aggressive confrontation with Beijing, in the South China Sea in particular. Marcos emphatically declared that he would defend the “sovereign rights” of the Philippines—a reference to its territorial disputes with China. “I will not allow any attempt by any foreign power to take even one square inch of our sovereign territory,” he told the parliament.

Over the past decade, the US has deliberately inflamed long-running disputes in the South China Sea between China and its neighbours. It used the Philippines as a proxy in the Permanent Court of Arbitration to challenge Chinese maritime claims under UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—a law Washington has never ratified. The 2016 ruling decided on the status of waters surrounding the various reefs, atolls and features in the South China Sea, not on territorial ownership or sovereignty.

Since he came to power in 2022, Marcos has ended the efforts of the previous president, Rodrigo Duterte, to ease tensions with China. He has revived and extended US basing arrangements in the Philippines, including those directly adjacent to the South China Sea, as well as joint war games with the US military. His administration and the Albanese government, which is deeply committed to the US war drive against China, are singing from the same songbook.

From the outset, Marcos’s speech was steeped in militarism, hailing the actions of the Philippines and Australia during World War II in combating Japan, to justify closer military ties today. He hailed the joint military drills, Exercise Alon, held last August. By far the largest war games between the two countries, they involved 560 Filipino soldiers and 1,200 Australian military personnel, and also 120 US Marines. The exercise focussed on amphibious operations—nominally defensive, but it was a trial run for potential efforts to

seize Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea.

The Philippines president pointed out that Australia was the only country, other than the US, that has a Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines.

Marcos noted that Australia and the Philippines signed a Strategic Partnership last September that established an annual defence ministers' meeting and regular high-level meetings. The agreement foreshadowed provocative joint naval patrols in the South China Sea. It also endorsed the 2016 UNCLOS decision and supported the AUKUS military pact between the US, UK and Australia, directed against China, that will supply Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines.

The Philippine president further underscored the rapidly strengthening military ties between the two countries, evidenced by the signing of new agreements, including on "Enhanced Maritime Cooperation" to promote "our shared vision" on maritime security and "respect for international law." Marcos and Albanese agreed to strengthen cooperation on "cyber and critical technology," which undoubtedly will have military applications.

In feting Marcos, the Labor government has turned a blind eye to the flagrant human rights abuses being carried out by his administration. Marcos, the son of the brutal US-backed dictator Ferdinand Marcos, has praised his father's rule, far from distancing himself from it. He has continued the notorious "war on drugs" of his predecessor Duterte, with its extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests and "disappearances" aimed above all at terrorising the poorest layers of the population. A Human Rights Watch statement highlighted the continuing state violence directed against activists, human rights defenders, union leaders and organisers.

The entire joint sitting of Australia's parliament listened mutely to Marcos's speech and applauded. The sole feeble protest against this extreme right-wing figure was a sign held up by Greens Senator Janet Rice saying, "stop the human rights abuses." She was ejected from parliament. However, none of the parties and politicians, including Rice, has objected to the militarist message that was central to the speech, as they have all lined up with the US-led war drive.

Well aware of its anti-China thrust, the Australian media was appreciative of Marcos' speech. The state-

run Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) cited the remarks of Euan Graham, an analyst from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a government-aligned think tank, who declared: "Marcos has given similar speeches before, but I think the key context here is that we have a South-East Asian head of government talking in forceful direct terms in Australia, and putting defence and security on his agenda, not mincing his words."

Marcos is in Australia for a special ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations)-Australia summit in Melbourne next week to mark 50 years of Australia's connection with ASEAN as a dialogue partner. Albanese will hold discussions with many of the South East Asian leaders present at the summit in an effort to cajole and bully into line those not fully supportive of Washington's confrontation with China. It is measure of the Marcos administration's whole-hearted commitment to the US war plans that he was given pride of place before the Australian parliament.



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