

Philippines drawn into US network of anti-China alliances

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5 May 2024

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin hosted a meeting of his counterparts from Japan, Australia and the Philippines in Hawaii last Thursday that was clearly aimed at intensifying the US-led confrontation with China in the South China Sea.

The presence of Philippine National Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr underscores the rapidity with which the Philippines is being drawn into the network of US-led military alliances encircling China amid escalating preparations for war.

Since coming to power in 2022, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has sharply reversed the geo-strategic policy of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte by boosting ties with US imperialism, including by expanding US military bases and joint war games. He has staged highly-publicised confrontations with Chinese coast guard vessels around the disputed Second Thomas Shoal, currently occupied by Philippine troops on a scuttled warship.

All four defence chiefs sang from the same propaganda song sheet at their joint press conference. Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles declared that “the global rules-based order is under intense pressure,” not only in Ukraine but in the Indo-Pacific as well. He said the meeting had sent “a very significant message” that “our four democracies are committed to the global rules-based order.”

The “global rules-based order”—a phrase constantly repeated by Washington and its allies—refers to the world order established by US imperialism in the aftermath of World War II, in which it set the rules. Having deliberately provoked a war against Russia in Ukraine, the US is preparing to open another front against China, which it regards as the chief threat to its global hegemony.

As for the tattered “democracies,” basic democratic

rights are being severely undermined in all four countries, including in the Philippines where Marcos has continued Duterte’s brutal “war on drugs” of extra-judicial killings.

Marles provocatively referred to the “West Philippine Sea,” a term that Manila officials adopted in 2011 for the South China Sea as the Philippines sought to transform it into a dangerous flashpoint for conflict with China.

US Defence Secretary Austin lashed out at China. Referring to the confrontations over the Second Thomas Shoal, he branded China’s actions as “irresponsible behaviour” that “disregards international law.” Asked if the death of a Filipino service member would trigger US treaty obligations to the Philippines—that is, to join conflict with China—he only answered indirectly, saying the US commitment to the Philippines was “ironclad.”

Austin spelt out the further expansion of military relations. “We’re looking to conduct more maritime exercises and activities among our four countries,” he said. “We also want to pursue coordinated security assistance to the Philippines. This will boost interoperability and help the Philippines achieve its defence modernisation goals.”

The meeting in Hawaii came less than a month after joint naval exercises on April 7 in the South China Sea. The exercises, including anti-submarine warfare training, involved three Philippine warships, one US combat ship, one Australian warship and, for the first time, a Japanese warship. China has a major submarine base on Hainan Island, directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

The naval drill was followed by the largest-ever iteration of the annual Balikatan war games between the US and Philippines. These began on April 22 and

are slated to continue to May 10. Some 11,000 US military personnel and 5,000 Filipino troops are involved in drills in a number of locations. These include the northern tip of Luzon Island and the Batanes Islands, close to Taiwan—another key flashpoint for war with China. Among the countries sending troops as participants or observers are Australia and Japan.

The expanding military exercises have been accompanied by a flurry of high-level diplomatic visits involving the Philippines with Japan, Australia and the US. These included a visit by Marcos in late February to Australia where he addressed the national parliament and a summit between Marcos, US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Washington on April 11.

Speaking in Hawaii last week, Philippine National Defence Secretary Teodoro took aim at China, declaring that “four countries... voicing the same message means an important thing in the face of a unilateral declaration by a single theatre actor ...” Significantly, he described the grouping as an alliance, saying the four countries working closer together would “make this alliance that we have stronger and more sustainable in the long run.”

For all of Washington’s pretenses that such groupings are not anti-China military alliances and are aimed at preserving “peace” and “stability,” Teodoro blurted out the reality. The four countries—each of which has formal military pacts with the US—form the latest in a network of multilateral military alliances that are all targeted against China.

Pentagon officials have even reportedly nicknamed this alliance informally as the “Squad.” Its defence chiefs met for the first time in June 2023 on the sidelines of the Shangri-La security dialogue in Singapore.

The “Squad” is clearly a reference to the four-country grouping of the US, Australia, Japan and India, known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or “Quad,” which held its first summit of top leaders in March 2021. The Quad drew in India, which is not a formal US ally but had been expanding the scope of its strategic partnership with the US, into a US-led quasi-military alliance for the first time.

The Quad was followed just months later in September 2021 by the announcement of the AUKUS

military pact involving the US, Britain and Australia, which among other things would provide nuclear-powered attack submarines to Australia. Significantly, by including the UK, the new trilateral alliance also made clear the international character of the conflict being prepared by US imperialism. Japan is now considering joining what is known as Tier 2 of AUKUS, involving collaboration in the research and development of advanced military technologies.

A new trilateral alliance is also in the process of formation involving the US and Japan with South Korea, another key US military ally in the Indo-Pacific. Biden and Kishida met with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol at Camp David, Maryland near Washington DC last August in what amounted to their first stand-alone summit. Military cooperation between Japan and South Korea is regarded as essential by the Pentagon as the two countries have large numbers of US troops and bases, as well as key elements of the US anti-ballistic missile system crucial for nuclear war with China and Russia.

The speed with which these “groupings” have been formed and consolidated in military and diplomatic exchanges and joint war games to boost “interoperability” is another warning that the US is preparing for war with China.



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