The Philippines becomes the staging ground for a US-led war with China

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Over the past month, the Philippines has been the staging ground for a rapid succession of imperialist provocations against China. France, Australia, Japan, Canada, New Zealand, all following in the wake of the United States, have each staged war games or concluded alliances with Manila targeting China over the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

By far the most destabilizing of all the imperialist provocations is the continued presence of the Typhon missile launcher system, deployed by the United States to the Philippines last year. The intermediate range missile launcher has the capacity to target much of China, including Beijing, with ballistic missiles from its current location in Northern Luzon. The Typhon system in the Philippines is as provocative to China as missiles deployed to Cuba would be for the United States.

On February 12, the Chinese foreign ministry called on the Philippines to "change course" and remove the Typhon system. On February 25, China's *People's Daily* published a commentary denouncing the deployment of the Typhon missile launcher system. "The region needs peace and prosperity, not intermediate range missiles and confrontation.… The Philippines has repeatedly gone back on its word and acted in bad faith… initially promising that it was only a temporary deployment, and that the system would be withdrawn."

The Typhon system was deployed to the Philippines last year as part of the Balikatan military exercises. The Marcos government declared at the time that it was a temporary deployment only for the duration of the joint war-games, but the war-games ended, and the missiles remained.

Washington has an agreement with Manila for the basing of US forces in the country. It directly supervises and coordinates confrontations between Filipino and Chinese vessels in the South China Sea using aerial and aquatic drones.

On February 4, the Philippine and US air forces staged a joint air patrol over the Scarborough Shoal, a hotly contested portion of the South China Sea, involving two B-1 bombers and three FA-50 fighter jets. The next day the Philippines, Japan, the US, and Australia staged joint naval and air patrols in the disputed waters. On February 12, the Philippines, the United States and Canada held joint maritime drills in the South China Sea.

The Philippines has a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States and Australia, and a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan. While the terms of each agreement are distinct, they all allow the deployment of troops to the Philippines for wargames, training exercises, and, potentially, war.

Canada, New Zealand and France are all actively negotiating VFAs with Manila. The Philippines concluded negotiations with New Zealand for a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) on February 18. The Philippine Department of Defense estimated the VFA with New Zealand would be operational by middle of the year, and that with Canada before the end of 2025.

The French navy's nuclear-powered, aircraft carrier Charles De Gaulle, accompanied by three destroyers and an oil supply ship, made its first visit to the Philippines on February 21, stopping at Subic Bay. The arrival of the French carrier strike group marked the first such visit to the region in over four decades.

The French Navy flew senior Philippine military officials and journalists to the Charles de Gaulle in the South China Sea as it was en route to Subic. There, sailing through the heatedly contested waters, the French Ambassador to the Philippines Marie Fontanel delivered a speech about France's commitment to "freedom of navigation," a phrase which for over a decade has served as the slogan of US imperialism and its naval provocations in the Asia Pacific region.

The visit was part of deepening military ties between the Philippines and France. In December 2023, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro and French Minister of Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu signed a letter of intent opening negotiations to conclude a VFA between the two countries. A French defense attaché office opened in June 2024. A French frigate joined the US-led Balikatan military exercises that year. Fontanel said that France had drawn up a proposed VFA and submitted a draft to Manila in October and were waiting to hear back from the Marcos government.

The Charles De Gaulle staged joint military drills in the South China Sea with the Philippines including communications drills, tactical maneuvers, anti-submarine warfare exercises, and personnel exchanges.

Three days after France, Japan arrived. Japan's Defense Minister Gen Nakatani visited the Philippines and held a

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bilateral meeting with Teodoro on February 24. Accompanying Nakatani in his visit to the Philippines were two Japanese warships, sailing to the former colony for a "good will visit."

Nakatani and Teodoro concluded an agreement for the expanded exchange of military personnel and, according to Nakatani, "high-level dialogue between defense equipment authorities as well as the dispatch of Japanese public and private missions to the Philippines."

Nakatani toured Philippine military facilities, including the Wallace Air Station and Basa Air Base, and viewed the installation of long-range air surveillance radar systems supplied by Japan. He remarked that among the Philippine military personnel at the Air Station was a recent graduate of the Japanese National Defense Academy. Nakatani met with Marcos in Malacañang on Thursday.

The Philippines signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan in July 2024, allowing the deployment of Japanese military equipment and the basing of Japanese troops in the Philippines. The RAA still requires ratification by the Japanese parliament.

Britain is part of this militarist mix as well. UK National Security Adviser Jonathan Powell declared this week that the UK supported Philippine policy in the South China Sea against "Chinese aggression."

The relentless warmongering is not without consequences. On February 18, a Chinese People's Liberation Army helicopter nearly collided with a Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources aircraft over the South China Sea. The Philippine Coast Guard reported that the helicopter came within three meters of the aircraft.

As is often the case in such near collisions and confrontations, there were Filipino journalists on board. The presence of journalists on such flights over the South China Sea suggests it was, at least in part, a staged provocation on the part of Philippine government.

It is useful to pause for a moment to reflect on what is at stake in the spiraling escalation and military build-up in the South China Sea. The spokesmen of the visiting military forces to Manila invariably pull a long face for the press and speak of Chinese aggression and concern for Philippine sovereignty and "freedom of navigation." The contested territory in the South China Sea, which China expands with sand and the Philippines with the rusted hulk of a sunken vessel, is a collection of partially submerged rocks and coral atolls barely visible from the window of a low-flying plane.

Former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio has for the past five years put himself forward as the foremost intellectual crusader for the claim of Philippine sovereignty over the "West Philippine Sea." On February 20, he confessed to *Business World*, "We [the Philippines] don't have a common narrative on why we are claiming sovereignty over the Scarborough Shoal and Spratly Islands. We have different stories. We don't have a common historical, legal and factual narrative."

He urged the Marcos administration to "start crafting a national narrative," calling for "The Department of Foreign Affairs, National Historical Commission, Department of Education, and national security adviser [to] sit down and settle our narrative." Rafaela David, president of the pseudo-left Akbayan party, hailed this proposal, calling for the crafting of a school curriculum on the country's claim to the South China Sea.

They are manufacturing national myths in public in service to imperialist warmongering. No one ever lived on these rocks; they have no history, no past, no meaningful grounds for any claims of sovereignty.

The South China Sea, like the Mediterranean, was what bound together Southeast Asia long before colonialism tore it apart. Its trade winds, named Amihan and Habagat, tied southern China—Fujian and Guangdong—to Funan (the Mekong river delta) and Srivijaya (Sumatra) and Luzon in a single complex shared maritime world.

The rocks and atolls of the South China Sea, to which national myths accrete like barnacles, were obstacles to this commerce. When they were occasionally drawn at the fringe of an early map it was to warn sailors of a partially submerged reef, not to stake a claim of sovereignty.

The imperialist powers circle the South China Sea, scenting blood in Washington's wake. Their pretexts of concern are laughable, but the danger of war is imminent and real. The old colonial powers in Asia—France, Britain, and Japan—are all returning to the scene of their crimes hoping for a share of the spoils, along with middling powers such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The Philippines is but a stepping stone for these powers, nothing more. The alliances and interoperabilities and agreements and treaties all tend to a common end: war with China. But the imperialist powers do not have control over the forces they are setting in motion, or the enormity of the conflict it portends. They cannot foresee or predict the spark that will set things off, where or how some archduke will be assassinated. Washington is dragging the world to the brink of a war of incalculable devastation.

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