

Hegseth visits Manila: Washington prepares for war with China

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28 March 2025

US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth arrived in Manila on Thursday evening, his first stop in a brief warmongering tour of Asia.

On Friday, Hegseth visited Malacañang Presidential Palace, where he met with President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. and held a press conference at the Camp Aguinaldo military facility alongside his counterpart, Philippine Secretary of Defense Gilberto Teodoro, Jr.

Hegseth's visit to the Philippines comes in the midst of a critical mid-term election, scheduled to be held on May 12, that is functioning for the elite as a referendum on the geopolitical allegiance of the Philippines. The tariffs, spending freezes, and volatility of the Trump administration have thrown into sharp relief the question of Manila's loyalty to its former colonial ruler. The Marcos administration, functioning as a proxy of US imperialism, has brought the Philippines to the brink of war with China.

The opposition to Marcos is headed by the Duterte family, which has sought to improve relations with China by distancing Manila from Washington. Over the past month, the Marcos government has overseen the impeachment of Vice President Sara Duterte and the arrest and extradition to The Hague of her father, former president Rodrigo Duterte, on charges of crimes against humanity. The current political situation in the Philippines is deeply unstable.

Hegseth announced that the Trump White House was lifting its funding freeze on \$500 million in military funding to the Philippines committed in the final year of the Biden administration. However, hundreds of millions of dollars in USAID grants, for malaria eradication, educational improvement, and HIV/AIDS prevention, remain frozen and are likely to be scrapped. The release of military funding is seen as shoring up the political prospects of the Marcos administration slate.

Clearly supportive of the Marcos administration, Hegseth declared, "There is a very real reason why our first trip and our first visit is here to your great country," to which Marcos responded, "Your visit to the region, and especially the fact that you have come to the Philippines as your first stop, is a

very strong indication and sends a very strong message."

Hegseth's visit, however, was far more than a bid to strengthen Manila's loyalty in an election. It was a dramatic escalation of Washington's preparations for war with China.

The language of Hegseth's press conference in Manila is indicative of the openly aggressive face of US imperialism under Trump. Gone was any reference to what had been the political shibboleth of Washington in the Asia Pacific region: the defense of "freedom of navigation." Hegseth spoke rather of "preparing for war," using the phrase more than once. Every time Hegseth mentioned China he termed it "Communist China," and spoke of its "aggression." Hegseth referred to US Seventh fleet commander Admiral Samuel Paparo "and his war plans. Real war plans."

Hegseth presented the US approach to the Asia Pacific region until now as "years of deferred maintenance, of weakness." The Trump administration he announced would "truly prioritize and shift to this region of the world in a way that is unprecedented... Today, it's the Philippines. Tomorrow, it's Japan. It will be Australia and South Korea and other nations in this part of the world." To underscore his words, the US arranged for a joint patrol the same day, alongside Philippine and Japanese warships, of the hotly contested Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

Hegseth and Teodoro both declared that the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the United States and the Philippines was an ironclad commitment for both parties to go to war in the event of an attack on "either country's armed forces, aircraft, and public vessels—including those of their coast guards—anywhere in the South China Sea." The lies surrounding the MDT have grown over the years in keeping with Washington's growing aggression. The treaty pledges a response to aggression in the Pacific, not the South China Sea, "in accordance with constitutional processes."

The preparations for war of which Hegseth spoke so openly are ongoing and rapid.

Last year, during the joint Balikatan military exercises, the United States deployed the Typhon medium range missile launcher system to the Philippines, with a range capable of

targetting large areas of China, including Beijing. Despite claims that they were only for the war-games, the missile launchers remain in the Philippines. In early March, Colonel Michael Rose, commander of the US Army's 3rd Multidomain Task Force, told reporters that his unit would establish a second Typhon system in the Pacific region.

China has denounced the US deployment of the Typhon system, more than any other action, as aggression, and has repeatedly called for the system to be removed. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement to coincide with Hegseth's visit, warning Manila against welcoming a "predator" into the region.

Hegseth announced that the US military was deploying the unit's recently activated Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), the Marine Corps land-based, anti-ship weapon. An unmanned vehicle, it has the capacity to target ships up to 100 nautical miles away with Naval Strike missiles. The US, he stated, would also be deploying additional aquatic drones, which have been used in the past year to supervise confrontations with Chinese vessels in the South China Sea.

The NMESIS system will be operated by a new force based in the Philippines under the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) basing deal. The 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment will be based in Western Luzon, facing the South China Sea, and operate NMESIS—"an island-hopping force to harass warships and other threats in the Pacific," according to USNI News.

The US Marines will monitor the disputed South China Sea using AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar.

Some of these US forces, based in the Philippines under terms of extra-territorial sovereignty, are returning to Subic Naval Base. USNI reported that last month, "the U.S. Marine Corps quietly leased a 57,000-square-foot warehouse at the former Subic Bay Naval Supply Depot." It was from the Subic and Clark bases, closed down in 1992 and now reopening, that Washington orchestrated its bombardment of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

The unmanned military equipment and their lethal missile systems, explicitly targetting Chinese ships, will not be operated by Filipino troops, but by American forces based in the country. Washington is actively and daily targeting China with the material of war from the shores of its former colony in Asia.

Washington is conducting what are effectively uninterrupted military exercises in the Philippines. It is currently staging Salaknib, involving 5,000 troops. Next month, however, is the largest of all, the annual war games, Balikatan. Every year, Balikatan has been more aggressive, larger, and more open in its targeting of China.

2025 marks the largest yet—16,000 troops from the

Philippines, Australia, Japan, and the US will participate in what is termed a "Full Battle Simulation," under the supervision of Washington. It marks the first year that Japan returns as active military participant to the country it once ravaged.

Among the Balikatan exercises are Special Operations Forces training in the Batanes islands, about 120 miles south of Taiwan. The US and the Philippines will also be launching a "bilateral cyber campaign."

Hegseth and Teodoro presented a "Joint Vision Statement on US-Philippine Defense Industrial Cooperation," which outlined a shift in some US defense industrial production to the Philippines, including unmanned systems, ammunition components, critical mineral processing, logistics support, ship maintenance and repair, airspace integration, additive manufacturing, aircraft maintenance and repair, and systems components and spare parts production.

The statement pledged the Philippines to "remove barriers in industrial regulation" to ensure the success of the plans. Foremost among these "barriers" would be the removal of any form of labor protection.

What is envisioned in this joint statement is the transformation of the Philippines into an island platform in the Asia Pacific region for the maintenance and expansion of the US war machine in its intended war with China.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio is scheduled to visit the Philippines next month, likely over the course of the Balikatan exercises. Hegseth departs the Philippines for Japan, where he will continue his war preparations.



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