

Philippine impeachment trial escalates campaign against Duterte over alleged China ties

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At an October 2 press conference, former senator Antonio Trillanes alleged that Vice President Sara Duterte and her family had corrupt financial ties to China. The claim was swiftly taken up by the National Security Council and by leading figures in the ongoing impeachment trial of the vice president, who raised the specter of Chinese “interference” and threats to national security. The essence of the factional war in the Philippine bourgeoisie was openly expressed: the Marcos administration’s drive to destroy its principal political rival is bound up with its alignment with Washington’s confrontation with Beijing.

Washington is preparing for war with China throughout the Indo-Pacific. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has brought the Philippines into the forefront of this offensive, expanding military cooperation with the United States, opening Philippine territory to American forces and integrating the country ever more closely into US strategic operations. The Duterte faction represents a growing section of the Philippine bourgeoisie whose economic interests are more closely bound up with China and which seeks to distance Manila from Washington’s provocations against Beijing.

The impeachment trial is the mechanism through which Marcos is seeking to destroy his principal political rival. Sara Duterte remains the strongest potential contender for the 2028 presidential election. Her removal from office and disqualification from holding any future office would clear the field for a Marcos-backed successor and eliminate the main political vehicle of the bourgeoisie for improved relations with China.

Trillanes supplied the immediate pretext for this

escalation. At his October 2 press conference, he claimed that Cale88 Foods Corporation, a banana-chip exporter in which Duterte’s husband, lawyer Manases Carpio, had held a major stake, received more than P319 million (\$US5 million) in remittances from China-linked entities. The allegation was promptly converted into a charge that the Duterte faction was the conduit of Chinese influence within the Philippine state.

The allegation rests on virtually nothing. Cale88 is an exporter selling into the Chinese market, and remittances from China are thus ordinary commercial transactions. Of the P319 million cited by Trillanes, only three transfers, totalling less than P10 million, were flagged because the reporting bank had not identified an underlying trade or economic justification.

Trillanes had withdrawn from the prosecution’s witness list before making the allegation. Freed from the obligation to testify under oath or submit his claims to cross-examination, he used a press conference to make the most incendiary charges. The prosecution and state agencies could then selectively corroborate the limited documentary core of his allegations, while Trillanes supplied the political conclusion: that the Duterte faction served as a conduit for Chinese influence.

Trillanes is among the most provocative figures in Philippine politics. A leader of repeated coup attempts—including the 2003 Oakwood mutiny and the 2007 Manila Peninsula siege—and the political mouthpiece of a right-wing military faction, he has functioned for two decades as an instrument of rival sections of the bourgeoisie and a staunch advocate of Washington’s interests. From the Arroyo-era mutinies to the campaign against former president Rodrigo

Duterte, Trillanes has been a recurring figure in virtually every major political intrigue of the past two decades.

In 2017, amid Duterte's turn toward Beijing and growing tensions with Washington, Trillanes travelled to the United States and met Senator Marco Rubio and other American officials to discuss the US-Philippine alliance, corruption and human rights. His current role is entirely consistent with that trajectory. He has become the political advance guard of the campaign to prosecute the destruction of the Duterte faction under the banner of a struggle against Chinese influence.

Three days after Trillanes's press conference, Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) executive director Ronel Buenaventura testified before the Senate impeachment court that Cale88 had indeed received P319,326,770.41 in remittances from mainland China and Hong Kong. Payments from China to an exporter selling in the Chinese market are not inherently suspicious; it was Trillanes's political framing that converted the figure into an allegation of Beijing's corrupt influence.

Trillanes publicly wielded the figure before the AMLC placed it in the court record. He has offered no explanation of how his team obtained confidential banking, tax and anti-money-laundering data. The match between his claims and Buenaventura's testimony points to access, direct or indirect, to the state's financial-intelligence machinery now being mobilized against the Duterte faction.

Senator Risa Hontiveros, representative of the pseudo-left Akbayan party, pushed the allegation into the realm of national security. She claimed that some of the firms remitting money to Cale88 were Chinese state-owned enterprises linked to the Chinese Communist Party and Beijing's influence apparatus. Trillanes's insinuation of an illicit money trail was thereby elevated into a charge of Chinese political penetration of the Philippine state.

The Marcos administration immediately amplified the charge. Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro declared that, if substantiated, it carried grave national-security implications. Teodoro, among the most provocative advocates of confrontation with China, is helping convert the impeachment into another arena for anti-China militarist agitation—and potentially for his own presidential ambitions.

The National Security Council announced that it would review the matter and coordinate with intelligence and investigative agencies to determine whether the remittances had implications for national security. In this way, the trajectory of the accusation became unmistakable: Trillanes launched it in public, AMLC authenticated the number, Hontiveros supplied the Chinese state-influence interpretation, and the defense establishment and national-security apparatus moved in behind it.

No evidence has been produced that the Chinese government financed Duterte politically. The documented issue is less than P10 million—about US\$170,000—in banana-chip transactions for which banks had not identified supporting commercial documentation. From this, Trillanes and his allies have manufactured accusations of Chinese espionage and political penetration of the Philippine state.

The contrast with the actual character of foreign influence in the Philippines could not be more stark. For more than a century, US imperialism has selected candidates, cultivated military officers, bankrolled political forces, supported dictatorship and exercised decisive influence over the state. Today, Washington is returning to Philippine bases, deploying missile systems on Philippine territory and integrating the Armed Forces of the Philippines into its war plans against China.

None of this is treated by the Marcos administration or the political establishment as foreign interference. But remittances from China to a Philippine exporter selling banana chips in the Chinese market are seized upon as a national-security menace.

There is a marked absurdity to the hullabaloo of national security raised over \$170,000 in undocumented banana chips. Behind the farcical allegations, however, the Philippine bourgeoisie is waging a life-and-death struggle for control of the state, caught up in Washington's preparations for war against China, which have destabilized the globe.



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