

# On Philippines-US relations and the US-China maritime conflict

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### Only the start!

The US and Philippine panels agreed during the 6<sup>th</sup> US-Philippines Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in Washington, March 17–18 to let the US military forces use five Philippine military bases. When US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter visited the Philippines last April 13, the “agreed locations” became seven. The updated list includes the former US’ airbase, Clark and, hold your breath, Camp Aguinaldo, the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the pillar of the Philippine state!

Sec. Carter and Philippine defense secretary Voltaire Gazmin made the public announcement at the height of the campaign for the 2016 national elections, when many people were focused at the on-going electoral campaign events that were more carnival-like than a serious democratic exercise.

Like the deployment of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) in 2002, the present deployment here of US troops is “upon the invitation of the allied government of the Philippines,” as Carter reiterated.

Exactly. The administration of President Benigno S. Aquino III is buttressing US’s military strategy. Statements of US (officials), which Arroyo did not disprove, said she invited US troops to help annihilate the Abu Sayyaf and she allowed them to base in AFP camps and embed in Filipino formations in Mindanao.

The Aquino government delivered everything the US needs: heating up the conflict by sending a Philippine Navy ship to arrest Chinese poachers in Scarborough/Panatag Shoal and confront the Chinese Coast Guard; drumbeating its belligerent position against China; peddling among the Filipino people the need to depend on the US to respond to this problem; and entering into the EDCA that gives the US the right to position again its troops and war equipment. This is the Aquino administration’s legacy to the one who will take his place.

Because opposition was not strong enough, the Philippine state is now putting into operation the unhampered use of the Philippines in accordance with the design of the US “rebalance” or “pivot” in the Asia-Pacific that gears toward containing and even towards waging a war against China.

The US admits that the conflict on sovereignty in the islands, reefs, cays and rocks in the South China Sea is not within its domain.

By letting US military forces preposition, however, to the point that it allowed US Marines to base in Camp Aguinaldo and by agreeing to let Filipino troops patrol with US troops in the South China Sea, the Aquino government gives primacy to serving the US in its role set by the “rebalance” for the Philippines.

The Aquino government is reliant on the US. Meanwhile, the US gears against China, not because it is fighting for the rights of countries involved in the territorial dispute, rather, in order for it to remain the only superpower in the entire world.

The US’s war against China is increasingly becoming a reality. The US has deployed stealth bombers to the Pacific. US troops in Japan have increased by 20%. For the first time since 2011, 1,250 US Marines deployed in Australia’s Northern territory along with four UH-1Y Venom helicopters and an array of war equipment. Australia and Japan have laid down the legal bases of their support for the US’s “rebalance.” And now, Philippine soldiers will join them in patrolling the South China Sea.

China continuously modernizes its weaponry and realigns the structure of the People’s Liberation Army. No signs show that it is giving in to provocations and threats of the US.

Hence it looks like the filing of a case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration merely aims to bolster US’s would-be rationalization of its war against China and to win international support. The world awaits the decision of the Permanent Court. As it nears, however, maneuvers in the South China Sea are intensifying.

AC-10 Warthogs of the US Air Force regularly fly from Clark Air Base. Within the scope of the South China Sea, these particularly hover on Scarborough/ Panatag Shoal that China grabbed from the Philippines in 2012. China purportedly plans to transform this into an “island” where it will have an airfield.

The Aquino government does not explain that these moves could lead to war. They withhold from the people the truth that US basing will not bring about security, that we will not be safe from the exchange of missiles between the US, Australia and Japan on one hand and China on the other.

This is just the start of a farsighted design of the US that that has trapped the Philippines. The Filipino people always have the opportunity to fight and assert independence and sovereignty. The people should assert to the government that while there is still time, the Philippines should break away from the military agreements with the US so that it becomes independent in seeking peaceful means of solving its conflict with China.

**Editorial, *Kilusan***

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## **EDCA: A Cooperation for War under the Shadow of Fighting Giants**

The news that the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) is already being implemented has resonated in the whole world. This new agreement between the US and the Philippines that allows war forces of the US to base here once again is vital for the Asia-Pacific Pivot/Rebalance of the US.

## **Initial implementation**

During the 6<sup>th</sup> US-Philippines Bilateral Strategic Dialogue, March 19, in Washington, the parties agreed that the US will “position” troops and war materiel in the following: Basa Airbase in Floridablanca, Pampanga; Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija; Antonio Bautista Airbase in Palawan; Benito Ebuen Airbase in Mactan, Cebu; and Lumbia Airport in Cagayan de Oro City.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter arrived in the Philippines, April 13. The principal promoter of US’s wars observed some portions of the Balikatan War Exercise 2016. Aside from this, Carter met with Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin of the Philippines, April 14. They agreed to position additionally troops and war equipment in Clark Air Base and Camp Aguinaldo.

It was Carter himself who announced to the international media that of the 5,000 troops that participated in the recently held Balikatan 2016, 275 Airmen and Marines will remain in the Philippines. Aside from this number are an undivulged number of commandos from the US Special Forces. They are the first batch of US’s rotational forces in the Philippines in accordance with the EDCA. They will stay in the Philippines until April 30 and the next rotational batch, which may be greater in number and armed with different kinds of weapons for war will take their place.

Two hundred US airmen and nine aircraft: five A10 combat aircraft; three HH60G Pave Hawk helicopter; and, an MC-130H Combat Talon II special forces’ infiltration aircraft will position in Clark Air Base. The US has deployed 75 US Marines in Camp Aguinaldo.

Soon, additional “agreed locations” will be announced. That the former Subic Naval Base, which the US Navy regularly uses to anchor its ships and submarines even before the EDCA, will be included is not far-fetched. A unit serving the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet of the US Navy has been basing in Clark Air Base, aside from US forces that stay in these former bases during joint military exercises of the US and the Philippines.

Eighty Australian soldiers participated in the Balikatan 2016 that just ended. Military officials from Japan, India, South Korea, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam joined as observers.

China condemned Balikatan 2016. According to China’s spokesperson, “It is a ploy of the Philippines to involve outsiders in the regional conflict.”

Both the US and the Philippines insist that the Balikatan has nothing to do with the conflict in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, China sees the EDCA as “a sign of the further militarization of the South China Sea issue.”

## **In the midst of an escalating friction between the US and China in the South China Sea**

The US had escalated its jostling with China in the South China Sea when 10 justices of the Supreme Court decided that the EDCA is “legal and constitutional.” US State Secretary John Kerry who was in the middle of the Bilateral Security Dialogue between the US and the Philippines expressed his pleasure. “The issue now is the implementation of EDCA,” he conveyed.

The EDCA has a big and long-term significance for the US especially now that it is raising the level of confrontation with China. US’s warships sailed twice in China’s territorial waters. The US Air Force deployed two of its strategic bombers in its base in Australia. This March alone, the US Carrier Group led by USS John Stennis sailed to the South China Sea. The carrier group remains in the said area up to the present.

Carter along with Gazmin went to the aircraft carrier USS John Stennis, 70 miles away from the

Philippines. On the flight deck of the carrier, Carter said, "What's not new is an American carrier in this region. What's new is the context and tension that exists, which we want to reduce." Earlier, Carter and Gazmin admitted to the media that "US and Philippine Naval forces twice patrolled the South China Sea." Carter added, "More joint patrolling of the South China Sea will follow," and joint is not limited to US and Philippines forces only.

Officials of the US Navy, Philippine Navy and Japan Maritime Defense Force met on March 5 for cooperation on patrolling the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, China has not stopped building structures on the reefs-turned- "islands." China announced in November that it will deploy a squad of J-11 fighter jet planes in Woody Island, Paracels. News came about in February that China positioned surface to air missiles in Woody Island also. China did not deny this. Lately (April 20), a Chinese military airplane landed on Fiery Cross (Kagitingan), purportedly to fetch three sick workers.

### **In the shadow of fighting giants**

At stake in the territorial dispute is the \$5 trillion worth of international trading that passes through the South China Sea. At stake also are oil deposits and natural gas believed to be under this sea. Control and security of this sea, in short, is the issue in the dispute between the US and China.

The long standing territorial dispute in the South China Sea among China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan (if we treat the last separately from China) has become a fight between two giants. The territorial disputes cover the two archipelagos, the Spratlys and the Paracels and the Panatag or Scarborough Shoal. The two archipelagos are in fact groups of islets, reefs and shoals.

Since 2000, the US has considered China as a rival economic and military power and the primary threat to its domination of the world. The US tried to recover influence it lost to China especially in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). When US president Obama came to power (2009) the US speeded up its recovery effort in the entire scope of the ASEAN and in the entire Asia-Pacific. The US, however, has been undergoing an economic crisis since 2008. Thus, its military advantage became the key instrument for recovery and for it to play a role in the South China Sea conflict.

China preempted the US's ploy. Its steps, though, go against its agreement with the ASEAN in 2002. China submitted to the United Nations the map that showed the "nine dash line" on May 7, 2009. This means, almost 85% of the South China Sea is Chinese "territory." This is contrary to the China-ASEAN agreement: Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

The Philippines promptly filed a diplomatic protest against China. Malaysia and Vietnam jointly filed their protest before the UN, May 8, 2009. Indonesia protested as well. This gave the US a reason to intervene in the South China Sea and assert its naval power in the South China Sea here and in the whole world.

In a security meeting of the ASEAN in Vietnam, July 2010, then US State Secretary Hillary Clinton said, "The resolution of the dispute in the South China Sea is pivotal for regional stability." She also said, "The US has a national interest in 'freedom of navigation,' open access to maritime commons in Asia and respect for international laws in the South China Sea."

The US raised the slogan "freedom of navigation" as it challenged and jostled with China's "sovereignty" or "power" in the South China Sea. The US, with its allies Japan and Australia, dragging the Philippines, continues to win over Vietnam, and woos Malaysia and Brunei.

At the opposite side, Russia and India support China. Lately, they came up with a joint statement of support for China's position and called for bilateral talks for a decisive resolution of the South China Sea conflict.

The EDCA, however, complicated the Philippines's stand for a peaceful solution of the dispute with China. It narrowed road towards a peaceful solution of the conflict. A contest of military strength overshadow the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea. Who will blink or fire first?

### **EDCA: Implications and significance for the country's and people's independence, security and economy**

Media persons and other groups have brought the South China Sea issue to presidential candidates several times. The situation of Filipino fishers that the Chinese Coast Guard drive away every time they attempt to fish in Scarborough Shoal is always prominent. They used to fish there without getting disturbed. They would often fish alongside fishers of different nationalities. They did not have problems, until China grabbed Scarborough.

Every presidential candidate would reply like a broken record disc. One would like to be a "hero." But strangely, they do not mention the EDCA in their discourse. It's as if the issue is not related to the Philippines's foreign policy or to the country's relations with other countries.

The EDCA is an agreement that binds the Philippines to US's wars and militarist schemes. It compromises relations of the Philippines with other states or countries, including China and countries with which the US has waged war. This is a confirmation that the Philippines does not conduct its foreign relations independently.

This again underlines the fact that the AFP is dependent on the insulting "support" of the US, \$40 Million in 2016, including what was spent for the Balikatan and for the reconditioned C130 that the US "gave" to the Philippines. Meanwhile, it gives not less than \$2 billion yearly aid to war maker Israel that annihilates Palestinians.

Among the immediate and concrete significances of EDCA, however, compromising Clark (and soon, Subic) as an economic zone is striking. Even without removing the Economic Zone marker, stationing of troops and war equipment will change Clark's status as a civilian and economic area.

The status of Clark and Subic will change with their reversion as military bases. Their status as economic zones will be meaningless. Their being military bases will restrain the movement of locators, workers and even of residents that go inside to shop or eat.

Workers in an enterprise in Clark attest, "Every time Balikatan is conducted, security is tighter. Most likely, the security perimeter would become permanent or would widen when US troops and war equipment preposition."

The status of Clark, and soon, Subic, will no longer be favorable for commercial and industrial businesses. At first, locators and some people who wanted to invest, especially in Clark were wondering. "Why are the Clark International Airport and the Green City Project not moving forward?" After the Supreme Court decided in favor of the EDCA, their wonder turned to worry.

At stake is the future of almost 200,000 workers and employees of hundreds of locators here. Among those that will lose their jobs are the employees of Clark Developmet Corporation (CDC) and of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA). The dream, especially of people of Central Luzon, to have a commercial-industrial hub in Clark is now hanging in the air. The vision of developing Clark International Airport as an alternative to the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) that operates beyond its capacity is likewise hanging.

In the more than 20 years without military bases and in the process of transforming Clark and Subic from being war-useful to becoming economy-useful, they have created 10 times more jobs compared to the time it was a military base. Most of all, jobs now are productive and decent, unlike during the time these were busiest doing work for war and to service US soldiers.

As the clash in the South China Sea intensifies, the crisis of US-led global capitalism worsens. Capitalists are firing big numbers of workers from all lines of industry, manufacture and services in the whole world. Oil industry capitalists in the West Asia (Middle East) and elsewhere have dismissed thousands of workers, including Filipino workers as well as seamen serving as crew of oil tankers and other cargo ships.

The anxiety of workers and employees and of Filipino and foreign locators has to transform into a solidarity to oppose the reversion of Clark and Subic as military bases. They will win the support of everyone opposed to US's wars.

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**P.S.**

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