

US and the Philippines: naval ships and ‘historical ties’

By Joseph Santolan
21 May 2011

Carrier Strike Group 1, headed by its Nimitz class flagship USS Carl Vinson, has left the US Fifth Fleet in the Arabian Sea and joined the Seventh in the Asia Pacific. In a clear show-of-the-flag operation, the Carrier Strike Group traversed the Straits of Malacca, sailed to Manila, where it was docked for three days, and is now docked at Hong Kong. While the carrier was sailing in the disputed South China Sea, the US embassy in the Philippines arranged for Philippine president Benigno Aquino III and a key coterie of political and economic advisers to be flown out to the USS Carl Vinson to inspect it and to witness the maneuvers of F-18 fighter jets. The deployment of Carrier Strike Group 1 to the region is part of the heated escalation of tensions between China and United States.

It was from the deck of the USS Carl Vinson that the remains of Osama bin Laden were placed in a weighted bag and dumped into the Arabian Sea. In the wake of this event, Carrier Strike Group 1 sailed toward the Philippines for its first stop in the Asia Pacific region. According to an editorial in the *Philippine Star* on May 18, the visit of the aircraft carrier to the Philippines was planned in the immediate aftermath of the confrontation between a Philippine oil exploration vessel and two Chinese gunboats over the disputed Reed Bank in the South China Sea on March 2.

On May 12, two days prior to President Aquino’s visit to the USS Carl Vinson in international waters, yet another confrontation occurred in the South China Sea. The Philippine military claims that two Chinese jets buzzed Philippine reconnaissance aircraft on a routine patrol over the disputed Spratly Islands.

Concurrent with the US naval visit to the Philippines was the arrival and dedication of a Hamilton Class cutter which the Philippines had recently purchased from the United States. The new addition to the Philippine Navy fleet will be its largest ship. The 380-foot vessel is equipped with a helicopter flight deck and is designed for extended blue water deployment. It was purchased with money transferred from the Philippine Department of Energy to the Armed Forces for the express purpose of guarding Philippine oil and gas interests in the South China Sea.

The Philippines has been playing an increasingly provocative

role in the South China Sea, acquiring, developing and permanently deploying military equipment and personnel to the region, as well as initiating drilling in the disputed waters. This is a dramatic shift from the policy pursued by the previous Arroyo administration, whose interests increasingly leaned toward China. The United States has backed and encouraged these provocations by its former colony under the leadership of President Aquino.

Speaking on the deck of the USS Carl Vinson at the dedication of the new Philippine vessel, US ambassador to the Philippines, Harry Thomas spoke of “a commitment born of our shared histories and close ties ... We are exceedingly proud that the ex-US Coast Guard cutter Hamilton—now named the *Barako ng Pilipinas Gregorio del Pilar*—was transferred to the Philippine Navy on May 13. This is yet another example of the United States’ commitment to partnering with the Philippines.”

The new name of the ship—Gregorio del Pilar—reveals far more about US-Philippine historical ties than either Ambassador Thomas or President Aquino would like to discuss.

Gregorio del Pilar was a Philippine general who fought in the Philippine-American War and was killed in the defense of his country from US imperialist invasion.

The Philippines was the United States first, and only, official colony. It was acquired from Spain at the end of the Spanish American war in the Treaty of Paris for \$US20 million. And it was conquered by US troops over the space of a decade, from 1899 to 1909, in a bloody, vicious colonial war that saw the death of approximately 20,000 US troops and anywhere from 200,000 to one and half million Philippine civilians, depending upon the calculation of the impact of disease produced by the conflict.

US imperialist expansion was driven by the compulsion of American capitalism to expand, and to occupy and claim markets and sources of raw materials. The powerful Sugar Trust, in particular, played a key role in President McKinley’s decision to go to war and to claim the Philippines. The lure of the vast potential markets of China made the harbor of Manila a vital position for securing the Pacific.

When the American Navy steamed into Manila Bay under the leadership of Admiral Dewey in 1898, Philippine forces had

already defeated the Spanish colonial regime in all but its stronghold of Manila. The Spaniards secretly negotiated to surrender to the Americans in the bay rather than the Filipinos surrounding their ramparts. A battle for Manila was staged, with no actual conflict occurring, and US forces occupied the city.

As the falseness of the promises extended by the United States to Philippine revolutionaries to respect Philippine independence became increasingly apparent, tensions mounted between the two camps. War broke out on February 4, 1899, when US troops fired on Philippine forces camped outside the city of Manila.

Many of the tactics practiced in the imperialist wars of the United States throughout the twentieth century were learned in the Philippines. The military leadership promptly instituted censorship of the press. All US press dispatches sent by wire abroad were monitored and approved by the military government in the Philippines. References to massacres, forced detention, or disease were eliminated. The readership of the US press saw a rosy picture of the war, full of happy Filipinos and US victories. As letters began to arrive home from soldiers the real stories began to emerge—stories of mass graves, of the execution of prisoners, some barely 13 years old, of entire populations being rounded up into “reconcentration” camps, and of torture.

The US adopted the Spanish torture method of the ‘water cure’ to acquire information from prisoners. The victims would be forced to drink large quantities of water until their stomachs became distended, their torturers would then lay them on the ground and stomp on their stomachs. Many of the tortured died from burst internal organs.

Rural populations of upwards of 100,000 were taken off the land they farmed and forced into cramped, disease laden reconcentration camps. Cholera became rampant. Their crops failed, and thousands died of starvation and malnutrition.

The guerilla resistance increased. Plagued by bad press at home, the US military in the Philippines under General Otis declared victory. Anyone still fighting against the United States was no longer an enemy combatant but an outlaw, a bandit, and would be denied the rights accorded to enemy combatants. If caught they would be tried and executed. Washington quietly replaced the incompetent Otis shortly after his declaration of victory with General Arthur McArthur, who ordered the escalation of US forces.

At home, Washington began creating propaganda films. Thomas Edison himself began producing films reenacting US victories against the Filipinos, who were labeled insurgents. Some of the US troops prior to departing for the Philippines were commissioned to act in these propaganda films. African American regiments, known as buffalo soldiers, were told to remove their US army uniforms and don imitation Filipino clothing and pretend to be shot at.

In December of 1899 the initial wave of the conflict had

turned sharply against Philippine president Aguinaldo. He retreated northward with US troops hard on his heels. On December 2, 1899 he charged Brigadier General Gregorio del Pilar to guard the mountainous Tirad Pass. It was a suicide rear defense move to permit Aguinaldo and his forces to escape.

Del Pilar, then barely 24 years old and commanding 60 soldiers, held the pass against the 500 US troops of the 33rd Infantry regiment. They held the pass for five hours, barely long enough for Aguinaldo to make good his escape. Fifty-eight of the sixty soldiers were killed, among them del Pilar. Del Pilar’s body was stripped naked and left to rot under the sun. All of his possessions, his uniform, his love letters and his journal, were taken by looters.

Four days later, a US Lieutenant found his body and buried under a stone marker which he carved, “Gregorio del Pilar. An Officer and Gentleman.”

Del Pilar’s journal was later recovered and the final entry reads, “The General has given me a Platoon of available men and has ordered me to defend this Pass. I am aware what a difficult task has been given me. Nevertheless, I feel that this is the most glorious moment of my life. I am doing everything for my beloved country. There is no greater sacrifice.”

The United States co-opted the Philippine elite, including Aguinaldo, and kept the Philippines as a colonial possession until the Second World War. The United States wrote the textbooks used in the Philippine school system throughout the colonial period. No references were made to the bloody conquest.

When US and Philippine officials speak sanctimoniously of “historical ties,” it is this bloody history, the emergence on to the world stage of US imperialism, to which they are in reference. A century later, the US, a waning economic power, is seeking to shore up its dominant position globally and in Asia using methods that are no less criminal and predatory.

To name this naval vessel, whose exclusive purpose is symbolic of the continuing client role to the United States played by the Philippine ruling elite, Gregorio del Pilar is a galling act of hypocrisy.

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