

# Philippines not to join wargames in the South China Sea

By Joseph Santolan  
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On August 3, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that President Rodrigo Duterte had issued a standing order that “we should not involve ourselves in exercises in the South China Sea, except in our national waters, 12 miles of our shores.” Lorenzana added that this order was given in an attempt to “keep a lid on tensions” in the region.

The announcement that the Philippines would not be joining the US war games in the disputed waters comes amid a dramatic escalation of Washington’s preparations for war with China. In an attempt to contain the explosive social crisis engendered by the US government’s criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 epidemic, Washington has brought the world to the brink of a war between two nuclear-armed powers.

The US is attempting, through military and economic measures, to prepare a regime change in Beijing. Over the past month, Washington has carried out a series of provocations, accusing China of spying, closing the Houston consulate, banning Chinese social media apps, and sending a cabinet official to Taipei.

On July 23, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States was not pursuing a policy of “containment,” indicating that the United States was pursuing a course of direct conflict with China in pursuit of regime change.

Pompeo’s statement came on the heels of his announcement on July 13 that the United States rejected all Chinese maritime claims beyond the country’s 12-nautical mile territorial limit. He denounced China’s claims in the South China Sea as “unlawful.”

Pompeo based his statement on the 2016 Arbitration ruling of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), which rejected aspects of Beijing’s

territorial claim. The case in The Hague was introduced by the Philippines under then President Benigno Aquino III, but the arguments were drawn up in Washington and were argued by US attorneys.

As the ruling was handed down in mid-July 2016, Duterte was just taking office. Looking to pursue improved economic ties with Beijing to fund his proposed infrastructural investment, he downplayed the significance of the ruling, refusing to take aggressive action against China’s claims in the South China Sea.

Washington was left with a carefully crafted legal pretext against China but without a client-state through which to pursue it.

On July 22, as Washington dismissed China’s claim as “unlawful,” the Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin referred to the South China Sea as “an avenue of cooperation” by China and the Philippines and declared that the two countries should not stumble over a territorial dispute over small marine “features,” which he characterized as a “pebble” on that avenue.

The Chinese ambassador to Manila, Huang Xiliang, issued a statement embracing Locsin’s formulation and Locsin responded by tweet, “Agree to disagree on the Arbitral Award. Civilized.”

Without explicitly naming the United States, Huang spoke of the challenges to relations between Manila and Beijing. “Glutted with cold-war mentality, some superpower is instigating the containment and oppression of China in every possible way, trying to sow discord among regional countries, and even forcing them to choose sides,” he stated.

The position taken by Manila over the past four years, completely undermines Washington’s posturing as the defender of legal norms and the “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea is one of the most heavily

trafficked bodies of water in the world. The only threat to freedom of navigation in these waters is the imminent danger of war, which is a direct result of the reckless aggressiveness of Washington.

For years, Washington has presented its military maneuvers in the South China Sea, each of which has brought the world closer to a possible catastrophic war, as being in defense of “freedom” and of the rights of the smaller countries in the region.

Now, as Manila, the official legal claimant in the ITLOS case, seeks to “agree to disagree” with China, Washington announces that it does not matter what any of the involved actors want, the United States rejects China’s claim and will enforce “freedom” at gunpoint.

Over the past weeks, Washington has staged military exercises involving two aircraft carriers in the disputed South China Sea. The military preparations for war are far advanced. In July, the United States deployed 67 large reconnaissance planes to the South China Sea. Several of the US planes flew provocative reconnaissance missions along the Chinese coast.

At the same time, the Trump administration has pursued increased diplomatic ties with Taiwan, further challenging the One China policy established by Nixon and Kissinger as the bedrock for US-China relations. On Sunday, US Health Secretary Alex Azar became the first US cabinet level official to visit Taipei.

The ruling class opposition to Duterte in the Philippines has sought over the course of several years to channel the growing levels of social unrest behind Washington’s war drive against China. They have repeatedly claimed that Duterte is a pawn of Beijing.

They have sharply escalated this rhetoric as COVID-19 ravages the country, a result of the government’s authoritarian and incompetent handling of the epidemic. Following Washington’s lead, they have blamed China for the outbreak and attacked the fascist Duterte from the right, denouncing him for being unwilling to prosecute a war with China.

Adopting a page from his playbook, they have employed misogynistic language, producing a number of social media posts that claimed his unwillingness to attack China proved that he did not “have any balls.”

Former Senator Antonio Trillanes declared that Duterte’s directive not to engage in joint exercises in the South China Sea “is a clear manifestation of Philippine support of China’s foreign policy in the

West Philippine Sea.” The West Philippine Sea is the nationalist designation of the Philippine claimed portion of the disputed South China Sea.

Trillanes continued, “the message of the Duterte government to China is unambiguous subservience.” Significantly, Trillanes was the leader of multiple military coup attempts in 2003 and 2007.

The Philippines is Washington’s former colony. The United States has used the country and its pliant leaders to whatever geopolitical ends it desired for over a century. Hundreds of thousands of US troops were based in the country, at Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base. Washington bombed Indonesia and Vietnam from planes that were took off from the Philippines. The country figures prominently in Washington’s war plans with China. The Pentagon wants its bases back.

During his State of the Nation Address in July, Duterte stated, “I read somewhere... that the Americans intend to come back to Subic.” He announced that he would not allow a return of US military bases to the country, declaring, “If you put bases here, this will ensure if war breaks out... the extinction of the Filipino race.”

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