

Containing China: Washington Increases U.S. Military Presence In the Philippines

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It has now hit the headlines: the US is negotiating with the Aquino government for an increase in its military presence in the country through more frequent joint military exercises and other military cooperation activities, and an increase in the number of US troops rotating in the country. Recent policy pronouncements and visits by American officials have been leading to this point.

The Obama administration has declared, as part of its spending cuts, that it would move toward refocusing the concentration of its overseas deployment of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan to the Asia-Pacific region. Then came the visit of US State Secretary Hillary Clinton, which was followed recently by a delegation of US Senators that included former Republican presidential candidate John McCain of Arizona, Senators Joseph Lieberman (Connecticut), Sheldon Whitehouse (Rhode Island) and Kelly Ayotte (New Hampshire).

Instead of taking a negotiating position, the Aquino government is now practically begging the US to increase the number of rotating troops in the country from the current 600 US Special Forces soldiers at any given time, and to make more frequent the conduct of joint military exercises. The Aquino government is justifying this by raising the specter of a potential conflict with China over the Spratly islands, and declaring that the US would aid the Philippines in case war erupts. The Aquino government practically grabbed the ploy of the US hook, line and sinker.

Is this not true?

First of all, the US would act only according to its own interests. This is clearly stated in US policy documents and was proven, historically, in practice. When the late dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos asked for US support in the country's conflict with Malaysia over Sabah, the US did not respond. Likewise, when the conflict over claims to the Spratly islands first erupted, the US likewise clarified that it is not obligated to act in behalf of the Philippines.

It was only later when there still seems to be no end in sight to the world economic crisis and China has been increasingly resistant to WTO impositions did the US join the fray. Also, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which China is one of the prime movers, is gradually consolidating its ranks.

According to GlobalSecurity.org, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization traces its roots from the Shanghai Five of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the objective of which was to strengthen confidence-building and trust among the member-states by mutually reducing the deployment of troops and armaments in common borders.

However, with the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001, which also coincided with the acceptance of Uzbekistan as a member, the SCO expanded its areas of cooperation.

According to the SCO charter, which was signed in June 2002, its areas of cooperation would encompass:

1. Maintenance of peace and enhancing security and confidence in the region;
2. Search for common positions on foreign policy issues of mutual interest, including issues arising within international organizations and international fora;
3. Development and implementation of measures aimed at jointly counteracting terrorism, separatism and extremism, illicit narcotics and arms trafficking and other types of criminal activity of a transnational character, and also illegal migration;
4. Coordination of efforts in the field of disarmament and arms control;
5. Support for, and promotion of, regional economic cooperation in various forms, fostering favorable environment for trade and investments with a view to gradually achieving free flow of goods, capitals, services and technologies;
6. Effective use of available transportation and communication infrastructure, improvement of transit capabilities of member States and development of energy systems;
7. Sound environmental management, including water resources management in the region, and implementation of particular joint environmental programs and projects;
8. Mutual assistance in preventing natural and man-made disasters and elimination of their implications;
9. Exchange of legal information in the interests of development of cooperation within SCO;
10. Development of interaction in such spheres as science and technology, education, health care, culture, sports and tourism.

Thus, the SCO is developing to be a military, political, and economic bloc that poses a challenge to US hegemony in the region. According to the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, the SCO has gone to the extent of calling for the withdrawal of US troops in the region. It has also been conducting joint military exercises.

Economically, the SCO covers 30 million square km and encompasses a combined population of 1.46 billion or 20.8 percent of the world's population of 6.991 billion. It is also one of the most energy-rich regions in the world.

In July 2005, Iran, Pakistan, and India gained observer status. Russia is asking the member-states to speed up the processing of membership of these countries. This would make the SCO even stronger.

Would the US move against China in defense of the Philippines?

US interest in Asia revolves around containing China and the growth of the SCO, and

securing under its economic sphere of influence, the most populous region in the world. Asia is home to 4.14 billion people or 59 percent of the world's population. US corporations must be salivating over the idea of cornering Asia for US investments and exports. And it would not risk getting into a conflict with the biggest market and its main investment destination in Asia: China. Besides, China is too big to conquer militarily. The major powers in the world – the US, Britain, France, Japan – tried to up to World War II but failed.

Also, the US would think twice before provoking an armed conflict with China. China has surpassed Japan in being the biggest creditor of the US. According to a Reuters report, China holds \$906.8 billion in US Treasury bonds. Japan, which used to be the biggest US creditor, has dropped to second with \$877.4 billion in US Treasury bonds.

What is the purpose of the move of the US to increase the frequency of joint military exercises and the number of troops rotating in the country?

This is part of the grand plan that includes maintenance of its troops in South Korea and Japan, which, according to reports, number from 70,000 to 85,000; the deployment of 2,500 Marines and tightening of air force cooperation with Australia; and stationing of combat ships in Singapore.

The US said it is not interested in rebuilding its military bases in the country. This has an element of truth to it because the US could no longer afford to maintain a lot of permanent bases overseas. According to the 2010 US Quadrennial Defense Review, there are three key elements in US defense posturing: forward-stationed and rotationally deployed forces, capabilities, and equipment; a supporting overseas network of infrastructure and facilities; and a series of treaty, access, transit, and status-protection agreements and arrangements with allies and key partners.

But this does not negate the fact that bases or no bases, the US is hell-bent on projecting its military might in the region.

Would the Philippines benefit from an increased US presence in the country and the region?

If we consider the transfer of decommissioned, obsolete, US coast guard cutters as a benefit, then probably yes. If we consider the training of AFP troops in targeting, torturing, and killing our fellow Filipinos and Moro brothers, who are resisting the US-imposed, oppressive, anti-people policies of the government, in the name of counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency as a benefit then it would be another yes.

And besides, even if the US supports Philippine claims to the Spratly islands, what would the Filipino people gain from it? It is only the giant oil companies that would profit from the oil reserves in the islands. Take the Malampaya oil and gas reserves for example. While Shell made a big show of paying \$1.1 billion in royalties to the government for the extraction and processing of natural gas, this is made insignificant by the fact that its operations never made the prices of gas and oil in the country cheaper. Nor did it result in the country being more energy self-sufficient.

Aside from projecting its military might in the region, US troops are here to ensure that the US-dictated policies of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization are maintained, and its investments in the country and the region are protected and promoted.

So instead of begging the US to increase its military presence in the country, the Aquino

government should be working for the repeal of the US-RP Mutual Defense Treaty, the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, and the Visiting Forces Agreement and calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops in the country. That is unless, the US, and not the Filipino people, is the real boss of the Aquino government.

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