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US operations in the Philippines threaten war with China

On Tuesday, the United States and the Philippines launched the largest joint war games ever staged by the two countries, involving over 17,500 troops, including approximately 12,000 Americans, 5,000 Filipinos, and 111 Australians. The military operations, which will last for 18 days, make clear that Washington is preparing to go to war with China in the near future.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has, since his election last year, dramatically reoriented Philippine foreign policy back toward Washington, restoring ties damaged by the six-year presidency of Rodrigo Duterte who had sought friendlier relations with China. Marcos Jr. is the son of the country's brutal dictator, who ruled for a decade and a half, and is himself guilty of carrying out many of the same crimes as his father's regime. He faces a \$353 million contempt order in US courts for human rights abuses, but the Biden administration is all too willing to cover this up in pursuit of Washington's war aims.

The war games follow on the heels of the provocative visit to the United States by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen. Beijing has long made clear that China's territorial claim to the island of Taiwan constituted a redline whose violation would not be tolerated. Tsai's visit to the US, where she was treated in a manner akin to the representative of sovereign nation and where US military training for Taiwanese troops was openly discussed, came perilously close to rendering the US long-standing One China policy a dead letter.

Beijing responded with militarist bluster, ratcheting up the danger of war. The People's Liberation Army staged air and naval drills around Taiwan and simulated strikes on the island, releasing a video of missiles arcing from China and exploding on Taiwan.

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The Asia Pacific region has been turned into a powder keg by the unstinting provocations of Washington and the fuse is short.

Over the last two years, Washington has conducted war games around the world of unprecedented scope, each designed to deal with the outbreak of global conflict with Russia and China. Just last month, Washington staged the longest continuous military exercises on record in South Korea that drew on the experiences of the war in Ukraine to prepare for war with China.

The joint war games in the Philippines are annual exercises known as Balikatan (Tagalog for shoulder-to-shoulder), now in their 38th year. Like Washington's war games elsewhere, the character of Balikatan has fundamentally changed and the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* noted that the exercises were "applying lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war."

In decades past the exercises focused largely on internal suppression. Balikatan's operations were tailored to the suppression of the Communist insurgency, the armed Moro secessionist movement in the southern Philippines and domestic unrest generally.

This year's Balikatan exercises are the stuff of world war. US and Philippine military spokespersons highlighted the fact that Washington was supplying the Philippines with the same hardware that it was sending to Ukraine. HIMARS artillery, Patriot and Javelin missiles, Avenger air defense systems and Reaper drones were all deployed in exercises explicitly targeting China.

The exercises prepared for a war with China that would break out in either the South China Sea or over Taiwan. Retired Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Emmanuel Bautista, laid out the stakes when he told the press that "it was impossible for the Philippines not to get drawn in a Taiwan or South China Sea conflict ... if you cannot deter war, prepare for war."

Over the next two weeks, US and Philippine military forces will stage live fire drills in the South China Sea, sinking a military vessel in waters near the Scarborough (Panatag) Shoal, which has been a flashpoint of immense contention in the past. They will stage littoral exercises designed to simulate the retaking of islands from hostile military forces.

The transformed war games take place in the wake of the announcement that Manila would be providing Washington with four additional basing locations in the Philippines under the auspices of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). This brings the total number of US basing facilities in the country to nine.

The four new bases were selected for war with China. Three are in the northernmost provinces of Cagayan and Isabela, just across the Bashi Channel from Taiwan, and the fourth is on the westernmost fringes of Palawan, as close as possible to the disputed Spratly Islands.

These will be military bases controlled entirely by the United States. Washington presents the facilities as servicing a “rotational presence” for “enhanced interoperability.” The terms of EDCA reveal, however, that these are rent-free facilities controlled exclusively by Americans and subject to American extraterritorial sovereignty. They are neo-colonial assets in Washington’s war drive.

Monday marked the commemoration of the Fall of Bataan to Japanese forces in 1942. The Japanese Occupation, and the subsequent “Liberation” by the returning US Army, ravaged the country. Manila was one of the most devastated capital cities of the war, along with Berlin and Warsaw.

There is a great deal of concern and fear in the country that the Philippines is being dragged into another world war. As US troops arrived in the country, the Manila police rounded up peacefully protesting youths outside the US embassy and dragged them off to jail.

In a speech delivered at a commemoration event, Marcos declared, “We will not let our bases be used for whatever offensive actions.” History gives the lie to this claim. The US bases in the Philippines—Clark Airbase and Subic Naval Base—were the nerve center of US empire. They repaired and refueled the planes that carpet bombed Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, raining death on hundreds of thousands.

As the war games were launched, the Philippine secretary of foreign affairs and defense secretary traveled to Washington to meet with their counterparts to stage a 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, the first in seven years. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo and Defense Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr.

They issued a joint statement which insisted that China “fully comply” with the 2016 ruling of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, which the four secretaries declared was “final and legally binding.” Washington’s hypocrisy is staggering. It is not even a signatory to the international law that it insists China must honor. The 2+2 meeting announced that the US and the Philippines would be conducting joint patrols in the disputed South China Sea with the intent of enforcing this ruling, possibly beginning during Balikatan.

At Washington's instigation, Manila is in discussion with Tokyo regarding the deployment of Japanese troops to the Philippines, and there are Japanese forces present at Balikatan as observers. The Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration is negotiating a possible basing arrangement with the Japanese. Japanese fighter jets visited the Philippines for the first time since World War II on December 7, 2022—a stunning provocation, returning to the country on the very anniversary of the invasion.

The advanced preparations for world war, with Ukraine in flames and sabres rattling throughout the Asia Pacific region, express the crisis of world capitalism. Like their class brothers and sisters around the globe, workers in the Philippines confront dire poverty. Over 10 percent of the population have been compelled to seek work overseas, leaving behind spouses and children, in order to provide for their families. The government squanders the country's social resources preparing for war with China, while vast wealth accrues to a narrow layer of corrupt and powerful family dynasties.

The working class throughout the world is increasingly coming into open struggle against their exploitation and the apparatus of the state that enforces it. Capitalism has nothing to offer them. Confronting an increasingly militant working class, with crises threatening the volatile world financial system, US imperialism seeks to secure its profits through the forcible redivision of the world.

Washington is set on war and, as it does in Ukraine and Taiwan, it presents itself as defending the sovereignty of the Filipino people.

China has never taken a square foot of Philippine soil. It has never been an imperialist power.

The United States, in contrast, conquered the Philippines in a bloody colonial war that killed hundreds of thousands and crushed the democratic aspirations of the Filipino people underfoot. Japan, now remilitarizing with the aid of the United States, brutally subjected the Filipino people to three years of terror.

It is the imperialist powers, and above all Washington, that are dragging the world to war. They must be stopped.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the World Socialist Web Site will be holding an online May Day rally on April 30, bringing together workers and youth from around the world for a common fight against capitalism and imperialist war. Join in that fight. Register today.

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