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US, Australia stage joint patrols with the Philippines in South China Sea

Washington has over the course of a decade militarized the vital and hotly disputed waters of the South China Sea with basing agreements and deliberately provocative operations. The military activity in the region, spearheaded by Washington and targeting China, had been of an aggressive but occasional character. Now it is virtually daily and unrelenting.



Philippine Navy ships BRP Davao Del Sur (centre) and BRP Gregorio Del Pilar (back) conduct a “maritime cooperative activity” with HMAS Toowoomba on November 25 [Photo: Australian Department of Defence]

Over the past week, both the United States and Australia launched joint military patrols of the South China Sea, markedly escalating tensions in the region. China has responded with a sharpening of rhetoric, live fire exercises, and placing troops in the region on high alert. The Philippines and the US conducted joint patrols last week in the straits south of Taiwan, in a three day joint military exercise. The joint patrol sailed from Mavulis Island only 142 kilometers from Taiwan and headed to the South China Sea. It did so pursuing what is the most provocative possible route, transiting the vital Bashi Channel with combat ships.

Both the Ferdinand Marcos Jr administration in Manila and the Pentagon have presented the relentless escalation of their joint military activity in the disputed waters as “defensive” in response to growing Chinese “aggression.” This stands reality on its head. It is Washington that is instigator of the aggression in the South China Sea, drawing tight a dragnet of regional military alliances, basing agreements and joint patrols around China. The provocations lead to further escalations. China responded to the joint patrol by launching two one-day live fire drills near Hainan Island, adjacent to the South China Sea. Speaking in Hawaii on November 20, Marcos declared that the situation in the South China Sea was becoming “dire.” The situation is dire but not for the reasons elaborated by Marcos. The alliances and military provocations and joint patrols in the South China Sea are the stuff of imminent war. It is the escalating aggression of Washington, dragging behind it all of the various regional actors, that has brought this about.

Liu Pengyu, the spokesperson for China’s embassy in Washington, spoke to the press regarding the joint patrols, “China believes that defense and security cooperation needs to be conducive to regional peace and stability. They should not escalate tensions or undermine trust between countries, still less target any third party.”

The Chinese Ministry of Defense issued a blunter statement accusing the Philippines of having “enlisted foreign forces to patrol the South China Sea [and] stir up trouble.”

Exercises staged by the United States and the Philippines previously always maintain the pretense that they were targeting an unnamed outside aggressor. Now Washington leads joint patrols that are explicitly preparing for conflict with China.

On Friday, the United States staged a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP), sending a destroyer to transit near the disputed Parcel Islands, an archipelago of small coral islands in the northern portion of the South China Sea. As it routinely does when staging such provocations, Washington asserted that it was upholding the right of

“innocent passage” in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The law Washington claims to be upholding is one which it has refused to ratify.

The Chinese military’s Southern Theater Command responded to the transit by deploying naval and air forces to “track and monitor” the destroyer. People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Command spokesperson Tian Junli told the press, “The serious violation of China’s sovereignty and security by the United States is further iron proof that it is pursuing ‘navigation hegemony’ and creating ‘militarization’ of the South China Sea. ... It fully proves that the United States is an out-and-out ‘security risk creator of the South China Sea’ ... Troops in the theater remain on high alert.”

With Chinese troops on high alert, the Philippines and Australia staged their first ever joint sea and air patrols in the South China Sea over the weekend. Marcos declared that the exercises were “a practical manifestation of the growing and deepening strategic and defense partnership between our countries.”

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Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Gen Romeo Brawner Jr told the press that two fighter jets from the PLA had “shadowed” the drills in the Spratly Islands.

The Japanese Coast Guard was present for four-day exercises conducted by the Philippine Coast Guard off Bataan peninsula. The exercises included “identifying maritime threats” and “fire at sea scenarios.” The return of Japanese forces, under the guise of interoperability, to Bataan—where Japanese militarism committed some of the worst atrocities in the Pacific theater of the Second World War, including the infamous death march—is another example of how Washington’s relentless warmongering is resurrecting the barbarism of the 20th century.

During his visit to Manila earlier this month, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida supplied the Philippines with military hardware through Overseas Security Assistance and began the initial stages of discussion regarding the creation of a Reciprocal Access Agreement for the exchange and interoperability of military forces of the two countries.

The joint patrols between the Philippines with the US and Australia are immensely dangerous. A confrontation at sea between Chinese vessels and a joint patrol is

imminently plausible and could easily escalate into conflict and a rapid spiral of events to war.

Confrontations in the South China Sea are now occurring with alarming regularity. In late October, Chinese and Philippine vessels collided in the disputed region surrounding the Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines is attempting to maintain a small unit of military forces.

Washington is responding to the growing confrontations with escalation. In the wake of the Second Thomas Shoal confrontation, *Nikkei* reported that the United States has begun advising the Philippines on how to repair and upgrade the *Sierra Madre*, the World War II era warship that Manila in 1999 deliberately grounded on the shoal to create a basing platform for permanently deploying forces in the South China Sea.

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