

The Philippines and Japan sign military access agreement

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On July 8, the Foreign and Defense Ministers of the Philippines and Japan met in Manila for 2+2 Talks and signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), allowing the deployment of Japanese military forces to the Philippines for training and joint military exercises. The agreement is a significant step toward a US-led war with China and marks a milestone in the return of Japanese imperialism to Southeast Asia.

Under the terms of the deal, Japan will now take part, alongside Australian forces, in the annual Balikatan war games staged by United States in the Philippines. The military exercises openly target China. Japan has until now been an observer to the exercises. Washington is forging an imperialist bloc for war with China and, under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, Manila is functioning as a leading proxy for US interests.

Japan concluded similar RAAs with Australia in 2022 and with the UK in 2023. The Philippines is the first country in Asia to sign such a military pact with Japan, the imperialist power that ravaged East and Southeast Asia during World War II.

The assembled officials at the signing denounced China for destabilizing regional peace and depicted the RAA as a means of securing it. They repeated the shibboleths of Washington, speaking of “the need for international order” and the “rule of law.” Yet, it is Washington that has brought the region to the brink of a catastrophic war, as it has the rest of the globe, by whipping up territorial disputes and encouraging its allies like Japan and the Philippines to take belligerent stances towards Beijing.

The RAA therefore bears the fingerprints of US imperialism. The possibility of such a deal was publicly broached during an unprecedented trilateral summit where Marcos met with US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Washington in April. The three are establishing a de facto trilateral military alliance, similar to other agreements Washington has built throughout the region to surround and threaten China.

China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian

responded to the RAA pact, “The Asia-Pacific region does not need any military bloc, still less groupings that incite bloc confrontation or a new Cold War... Japan bears serious historical responsibilities for its aggression and colonial rule over the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries during WWII. Japan needs to reflect on that part of history and act prudently in fields related to military and security.”

The new RAA expresses Japan’s own imperialist interests. Tokyo’s Defense Minister Minoru Kihara stated, “The Philippines and other Southeast Asian nations are situated in a very strategically important region, placed in a key junction of Japan’s sea lanes. Advance defense cooperation and exchanges with the Philippines is important for Japan.”

These are the words of an imperialist power returning to a region it once conquered. One senses other, historical phrases in his words—“Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” and “Malayan tin and rubber”—the watchwords of Japanese militarism 85 years ago.

The deal marks another significant step towards scrapping Article 9 of the post-war Japanese constitution, the so-called pacifist clause, that explicitly prohibits the country from maintaining a military or waging war overseas. In line with this, there are ongoing discussions to base Japanese forces in the Philippines.

In April, Philippine ambassador to the United States, Jose Manuel Romualdez, told the press that the Philippines and Japan were in talks about rotational deployment of Japanese forces to the Philippines. Rotational deployment is a military euphemism for the continuous basing of troops in the country. Washington uses this term to justify the basing of US forces in the Philippines under the terms of the joint Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Japanese officials at the time denied that rotational deployment was being discussed, gesturing at the pacifist clause. However, at the joint press conference held Monday afternoon after the signing of the RAA and in the presence of Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and Defense Minister Minoru Kihara, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo explained that Manila was

considering crafting a deal for the basing of Japanese forces in the country.

The Japanese ministers also affirmed that Tokyo was supplying Manila with a coastal radar surveillance system. The system will be used to monitor and counter the movements of Chinese vessels in the region. The system is being transferred to the Philippines under the terms of Japan's Official Security Assistance, launched in April 2023, part of the National Security Strategy that marked a significant turning point in Japanese remilitarization and the return of Japanese imperialism to the Asia-Pacific region.

Manila is also scrapping its constitution. The Philippine constitution bans the basing of any foreign troops in the country without a treaty ratified by a two-thirds majority of the Senate. EDCA is an executive agreement, not a treaty, and was never ratified by the legislature. It allows the basing of an unlimited number of US forces anywhere in the country.

The signing of the Japan-Philippine RAA takes place in the midst of boiling tensions between Manila and Beijing over disputed territories in the South China Sea. By far one of the most destabilizing events in the region, however, took place in April when Washington deployed the Typhon mid-range missile system to the northern Philippines to target China during the Balikatan and Salaknib exercises in April and May. Typhon fires SM-6 and Tomahawk cruise missiles, with the latter capable of striking major cities on China's east coast.

In June, a confrontation between the China Coast Guard and a Philippine military resupply mission in the Second Thomas Shoal nearly resulted in an armed conflict. Leading figures of the Philippine military have begun speaking openly of the need to invoke the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with Washington, which would mark an unprecedented step toward war.

Philippine Senator Imee Marcos, the president's sister, has for the past two years opposed the increased US military presence in the country as increasing the risk of war with China. On July 3, she warned that 25 areas in the Philippines, the sites of EDCA bases, could be targeted by Chinese hypersonic missile attacks. A Pulse Asia survey of Philippine public opinion in the first week of July found that a majority of Filipinos sought a diplomatic solution to tensions with China, and only eight percent felt that the Philippines should seek "US military support against China."

Looking to reduce tensions somewhat, President Marcos held a Bilateral Consultation Meeting with Chinese diplomats in Manila in early July. After the meeting, he issued instructions to the Philippine Armed Forces to defuse tensions in the South China Sea. The next morning it was

announced that US mid-range missiles would be removed from the country by September, with Philippine Army spokesman Colonel Louie Dema-ala stating this was "as per plan." However, Dema-ala backtracked on Monday, claiming that "there is no specific departure date."

The loyalty of the majority top brass of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has always been to the Pentagon and not the elected civilian government. Any steps, however slight, taken by the Marcos administration toward moderating the conflict with China have been publicly defied and secretly undermined by the military.

The spokesperson of the Philippine Navy issued a statement that the missions that had led to the recent conflict would continue, declaring "we can do anything we wish to within our exclusive economic zone." AFP Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr issued a statement demanding China return the firearms confiscated from Filipino troops in the most recent South China Sea confrontation, and pay the Philippine military \$US1 million in compensation. The military, he announced, was launching a new initiative, known as COMPLAN Mulat (Awake), to counter Chinese influence on social media.

While Marcos has played a critical role in facilitating it, the aggressive drive against China does not originate with his administration. It is part of the war plans drawn up by Washington and its implementation in the country is, above all, the work of the Philippine military.

The United States conquered the Philippines in a bloody colonial war, killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos to establish its imperialist rule at the beginning of the 20th century. Japan brutally conquered the Philippines, in a barbaric occupation of mass murder, rape and pillage. The return of these imperialist powers to the scene of their crimes is part of a strategy to provoke a war with China that will produce far more death and suffering than was ever wrought by their earlier, criminal conquests.



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