

Top-level US-Philippine ministers meeting escalates war drive against China

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2 August 2024

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin arrived in Manila on July 30, for talks, known as the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, with their counterparts, Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo and Secretary for National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr. It was the first such meeting held in the Philippines.

Significantly, the talks were held at Camp Aguinaldo, the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Behind the stock phrases brought out by Washington for such events in its former colony—“ironclad commitment,” “robust alliance,” and “historic ties”—were active preparations for war with China.

At a joint press conference, Blinken announced that the US would be providing \$US500 million in additional military funding for the Philippines to “boost security collaboration.” He termed the money a “once-in-a-generation” investment for the Philippine Armed Forces and Coast Guard.

The funding will be supplied by the US as Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and will be spent according to a plan, the Philippines-Security Sector Assistance Roadmap (P-SSAR), that was completed during the 2+2 meetings. Details of the roadmap have not been made public. The meeting also committed to concluding an intelligence sharing agreement, a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), by the end of 2024.

Austin visited Subic Bay, once a vital US naval base, the military chief of Washington touring its former possessions. Subic remains a critical port, with direct access to the South China Sea and the capacity to dock aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines.

According to a report published in *Naval News*, the Philippines is moving to create a new base at Subic, at the old US Naval Air Station Cubi Point, for the deployment of reconnaissance and attack aircraft in the South China Sea. Subic is already used for military purposes, including

the delivery of US military equipment during joint exercises. The ongoing construction includes the creation of a dedicated drone and maritime patrol base at Subic.

All of these facilities will doubtless be directly used by the US military. Under the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the United States has the ability to rotationally deploy, i.e., base, troops and equipment at an unlimited number of locations throughout the country.

In the July 30 joint press conference, Blinken announced that the US was “doubling” its investments in EDCA facilities. This expanded investment in the basing of US forces in the Philippines was separate from the \$US500 million in aid pledged to the Philippine military.

The US now operates nine EDCA facilities, including three in the far northern Philippines, just over 200 miles across the Bashi channel from Taiwan.

Under the terms of EDCA, the US Marine Corps began operating MQ-9A Reaper Drones out of Basa Air Base in Pampanga in Central Luzon. During sharp tensions and direct confrontations between Philippine and Chinese Coast guard vessels in the South China Sea over the past several months, the US military flew Reaper drones to provide “vital logistical support,” according to a Marine Corps press release that was subsequently taken down from the US Department of Defense website.

The US is currently renovating the Basa Air Base for its own use to house 20 aircraft and operate a command and control center.

The 2+2 summit comes amidst sharp tensions between the Philippines and China, stoked behind the scenes by Washington.

In 1999, the Philippines deliberately grounded the BRP Sierra Madre, a former US vessel, on the Second Thomas Shoal, transforming it into a rusty facility atop a collection of partially submerged rocks on which they could base a handful of Filipino soldiers in the South

China Sea on the cheap.

A Philippine resupply mission to the Sierra Madre in June led to a dangerous confrontation between Philippine and Chinese Coast Guard vessels, that Manila described an “intentional, high-speed ramming.” A Filipino sailor was reported to have lost a finger in the collision.

On July 21, the Philippines and China announced that they had “reached an understanding on the provisional arrangement” for future resupply missions to the Sierra Madre on the Second Thomas Shoal. The deal was termed a “temporary arrangement” arrived at out of the “need to de-escalate the situation in the South China Sea,” according to the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson explained that China’s position is that the Philippines needs to remove the Sierra Madre from the Second Thomas Shoal, but added, “If the Philippines needs to provide supplies to the ship’s occupants before the Philippines tows away the beached warship, the Chinese side is willing to allow the Philippine side to carry out the transportation and replenishment on humanitarian grounds.... If the Philippines transports a large amount of building materials to the ship and tries to build fixed facilities and permanent outposts, China will never accept it and will resolutely block it in accordance with laws and regulations, so as to safeguard China’s sovereignty.”

White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told the press that the US would “do what is necessary,” to ensure the Philippines continued its resupply missions to the Sierra Madre. Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Año insisted that the resupplies would remain “a pure Philippine operation... There is no need at this time for any direct involvement of US forces.”

The protestations by Año are false. The confrontational resupply missions were conducted with “vital logistical support” provided by US flown Reaper drones.

On July 27, a Philippine civilian vessel, escorted by the Philippine Coast Guard, successfully resupplied the Sierra Madre without confrontation, the first such mission since the provisional agreement was concluded. China announced that it supervised the process from a “reasonable distance.”

While the text of the provisional arrangement has not been released, it seems that there is no timeline for the removal of the Sierra Madre from the Second Thomas Shoal. Moreover, any attempt the Philippines to engage in construction or expansion of its facilities there would quickly destabilize the new status quo.

In the press conference with Blinken and Austin, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Manalo told the press that the medium range missiles deployed by Washington to the Philippines were “meant for our own defensive capabilities.”

Previously Manila had claimed that the US missiles had been deployed to the Philippines temporarily for military exercises in April and would be removed from the country shortly after their conclusion. Manalo’s statement, and his claim that the missiles would not lead to “an arms race” with China, strongly suggest that the medium-range missile deployment is intended to be permanent.

In a meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, Blinken referred to the 2+2 Ministerial meeting as “evidence of a steady drumbeat” between the two countries. It is an unintentionally apt metaphor. Washington is beating the drums of war.

During Blinken and Austin’s visit, French fighter jets for the first time landed on Philippine soil and conducted joint operations from Clark Airbase with the Philippine air force to demonstrate France’s commitment to “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. This is the patented rhetoric of the United States for preparations for war with China. As Blinken and Austin departed, US combat ships and Philippine naval vessels conducted joint exercises in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

Washington’s war plans extend far beyond the South China Sea. As it encircles China on all fronts, it has its eyes above all on Taiwan. The basing facilities in the Philippines are vital aspect of these wider preparations for war.

Under the guidance of Washington, the Philippines has concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan for the basing of Japanese forces in the country. Defense Secretary Teodoro announced last week that the Philippines is pursuing similar RAAs with France, New Zealand, and Canada. The networks and alliances of a global war not only against China but Russia and Iran, are being drawn ever tighter.



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