

Joint US-Philippine military task force formed targeting China

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On November 19, during the last day of his official visit to the Philippines, outgoing US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin posted on X that he had visited the “Command and Control Fusion Center” on the island of Palawan where he met with “some American service members deployed to US Task Force Ayungin.”

Over the past year, Washington has deployed medium range missiles to the Philippines, committed \$US500 million dollars in additional military funding, pledged to double investment for basing US forces in the country, and has directly supervised armed confrontations between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea by drones. Every action has openly targeted China. Task Force Ayungin is yet another provocation, directly integrating Philippine maritime activity in the disputed South China Sea under the coordination of the Pentagon.

Even the name of the joint task force is immensely provocative. Ayungin is the Philippine name for a disputed atoll, the Second Thomas Shoal, known to the Chinese as Renai Jiao and to the Vietnamese as Bai Co May. It is claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Washington has long maintained the pretense that it takes no stance on claims of territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea and postures as being concerned only with the defense of “freedom of navigation.” Washington’s actual interest is neither the freedom of sea traffic nor any particular territorial claim, but preparing for war with China. Under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the Philippines, former colony of the United States, is serving as a leading proxy in US war plans in the region.

The Second Thomas Shoal, where the rusting hulk of a World War II US naval vessel was grounded on a submerged reef, is at present the most dangerous

flashpoint in the geopolitically volatile South China Sea. In 1999, the Philippines scuttled the BRP Sierra Madre on the atoll, creating a low budget military outpost against China. Less than a dozen Philippine marines are stationed there.

By diplomatic manoeuvre and military deployment Washington has brought tensions over the South China Sea to the brink of armed conflict, particularly between the Philippines and China. Manila’s routine missions to rotate personnel and resupply the BRP Sierra Madre turned into sharp confrontations, even collisions, with Chinese Coast Guard vessels.

On June 17, a Philippine Naval vessel and a Chinese Coast Guard ship deliberately collided during a resupply mission. Several Philippine sailors were injured in the collision and one lost his thumb. The Chinese coast guard boarded the Philippine ship and confiscated the sailors’ weapons.

Alarmed at how close to war the confrontations were becoming, Manila and Beijing negotiated an agreement for the regular peaceful resupply of the BRP Sierra Madre. China stated that it did not object to provision of basic supplies, provided that no additional construction materials for the shoring up and improving of the decrepit facility were delivered. In other words, Philippine troops could be peacefully sustained on the ship until it collapsed into the South China Sea.

Washington, however, sought not the maintenance of the status quo, but the continued creation of the architecture of war. US drone pilots operating from basing facilities occupied by US troops under the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) have been secretly participating in the dangerous resupply missions for the past year, providing aerial coordination, and almost certainly military command, and footage of the confrontations

for the press.

The collision on June 17 occurred under US coordination. *Stars and Stripes* reported that a command force of US marines deployed in Northern Australia were given a warning order to prepare to support the Philippine mission. Washington is on the brink of a direct military confrontation with China. Task Force Ayungin institutionalizes the apparatus for such a confrontation.

Within a week of the resupply agreement between China and the Philippines, US Ambassador to the Philippines MaryKay Carlson visited the Philippines Western Command (Wescom) on the island of Palawan, the nearest major island to the Second Thomas Shoal and much of the South China Sea. Wescom houses the Antonio Bautista Airbase, which is one of the sites designated for US basing under EDCA. US troops at Wescom began overseeing the training of Philippine soldiers for rotation and resupply missions to the BRP Sierra Madre. These are the arrangements that have now been named Task Force Ayungin.

The only reason to conduct this military activity, given the resupply agreement between China and the Philippines, is to prepare for the improvement and development of the existing military structures on the Second Thomas Shoal and the deployment of additional troops there. Washington is deliberately undermining a fragile peace deal and instigating what will entail direct armed conflict in the South China Sea.

While Carlson oversaw the Wescom developments, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Manila at the end of July and pledged \$US500 million in additional military funding to the Philippines and announced that the US would be doubling its investment in basing facilities under EDCA.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin travelled to Wescom where he unveiled a number of new unmanned surface drones, four MANTAS T-12 USVs, and at least one T-38 Devil Ray supplied by Washington as part of the funds announced by Blinken. The T-12s can carry a payload of up to 64 kilograms and according to US Naval News, and can conduct “surveillance, swarming operations, and electronic warfare.” The T-38, over 11 meters long, carries a payload of nearly 2,000 kilograms. The US has supplied similar drones to the Ukrainian Navy for use in the Black Sea. Austin pledged that the US would deliver “many more

platforms like this” to the Philippines.

A Filipino reporter asked Austin if these integrated military activities would continue under the incoming Trump administration. Austin replied that he could not speculate about this. After the press conference, Austin tweeted his announcement of “Task Force Ayungin.” The outgoing Biden administration is establishing facts on the ground by a giving public name to the apparatus of war it was constructing against China.

Through Task Force Ayungin, Washington is overseeing and directing the confrontations with China. The collisions and brinkmanship in the South China Sea over the past several years have originated in the Philippines and have been instigated by Washington. They are poised for escalation.

At a minimum Task Force Ayungin will coordinate the schedule of confrontation, synchronizing Manila’s resupply missions with Washington’s larger geopolitical machinations. It will train the military personnel for ensuing confrontations and collisions. Such training will likely include preventing ships from being boarded, possibly by use of arms. US drones will fly over the missions, providing aerial coordination and command. Embedded reporters will be sent on the military provocations to breathlessly document the conflict and the supposed aggression of China.



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