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## *RIMPAC Naval Exercises, the Philippines and War on China*



The United Kingdom's carrier strike group led by HMS Queen Elizabeth, and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces led by Hyuga-class helicopter destroyer JS Ise joined with U.S. Navy carrier strike groups led by flagships USS Ronald Reagan and USS Carl Vinson to conduct multiple carrier strike group operations in the Philippine Sea, Oct. 3, 2021. Photo: US Navy.

A strange group of visitors are arriving in Hawai'i: 38 battleships, four submarines, more than 170 aircraft, nine national land forces, and some 25,000 personnel from more than two dozen countries. These war machines come every other year to participate in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises, the largest naval exercise in the world, hosted by the US Navy since 1971.

One contingent in these war games will stand out: a lone frigate bearing the name of Antonio Luna, the firebrand Philippine revolutionary army general who led the military

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resistance against invading US troops during the Philippine-American War. This warship will represent the present-day Philippine armed forces, now allied with, trained, and funded by its former military foe.

Such a paradox, however, does not seem out-of-place in an event such as RIMPAC, whose stated goal is to ensure “the safety of sea lanes and security on the world’s interconnected oceans” by flexing America’s war muscle, intimidating rivals, and reaffirming the subservience of vassal states, particularly the Philippines.

Because of the strategic geopolitical location of the Philippines, as well as its rich natural and human resources, the archipelagic nation and former colony is indispensable in America’s “pivot” toward Asia. First announced in 2011 by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, this foreign policy ushered a new era of US imperialism.

With the West’s markets still hungry for wealth and expansion, it became imperative for the US not only to strengthen and exploit its dominance in Asia but also to defend it from China’s steady and rapid rise as an economic and military superpower. In this impending war, Hawai‘i and the Philippines, together with Taiwan, South Korea, Okinawa, Japan, and Guam, will play crucial roles as battlefields and lily pads in the Pacific, staging areas from where the US can launch offensives.

As China fortifies outcroppings in the West Philippine Sea into military bases – both there and in the Taiwan Strait, the US conducts provocative “freedom of navigation” incursions by military aircraft and warships. In April of this year, the US sent 5,000 troops to the Philippines for Balikatan (“shoulder-to-shoulder”) war exercises, which ended on the day before Chinese President Xi Jinping’s virtual meeting with then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Around the same time, Hawai‘i’s US Representative Ed Case also visited the Philippines to promote ties between the US and its former colony.

It would be naive to believe that these tactical manoeuvres are all in the name of international peace and security, given the contradictions of the US’s strategic stance. For instance, while sanctioning Russia and supporting Ukraine with weapons, the US will not send troops to fight in Ukraine. In contrast, on May 23, President Joe Biden vowed that the US would engage militarily if China were to invade Taiwan, despite the horrific cost of a war in the region.

Unsurprisingly the US government appears unbothered by reports of widespread disinformation, intimidation, violence, and fraud in the recent presidential elections in the Philippines. Is it because the new president is Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr, son of

the late dictator who oversaw the use of US bases in Clark and Subic Bay during the Vietnam War?

Eager to rekindle this relationship and further consolidate US military presence in the Philippines, the Biden administration was among the first to congratulate the dictator's son on his victory and his family's return to power—36 years after Ronald Reagan helped the Marcos clan escape to Hawai'i after an uprising ousted the older Marcos in 1986. Can we expect a similar arrangement that seeks to exonerate the Marcoses from liability for their crimes for the sake of US war interests in the region?

This historical context and current global situation paint a frightening picture. Less concerned about peace, international security, and human rights, and more motivated to strengthen its military dominance, the US's war posturings against China can be expected to escalate.

Thankfully, this warmongering is far from unchallenged. Around the world, people's movements are leading the charge in resisting the lurch toward another world war and are together forming an agenda for peace.

In the Philippines, militant activist groups are continuing the movement that successfully evicted American troops from its bases on Philippine soil in 1991 and are now trying to prevent the de-facto return of these bases through the Visiting Forces Agreement of 1998, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014, and joint exercises such as Balikatan.

In the continental US as well as in Hawai'i, human rights organisations are lobbying for the passage of the Philippine Human Rights Act, which would cut off US government funding used by the Philippine military and police to perpetrate extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations, silence dissent, and serve as pawns for a possible war with China.

In Hawai'i, indigenous and other grassroots organisations like Cancel RIMPAC are calling for an end to the war exercises in the islands. The financial cost of holding RIMPAC exercises is a scandalous expense at a time when resources are so direly needed to save millions from poverty and hunger and a still-ongoing global pandemic. And that is not even considering the carbon released by the tons of fossil fuels burned by military contingents or the harm to sea life during the exercises.

Community and environmental groups have succeeded in wresting an agreement from the US Navy to shut down Red Hill, a 250 million gallon capacity US military fuel storage facility that has been leaking for decades, contaminating the aquifer that supplies drinking

water in O‘ahu, Hawai‘i. It became clear to all that the US military could not care less about the health of even its service members, let alone the health of the people of Hawai‘i, or the fragile ecology of the island. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that military posturing in the Asia-Pacific risks the potential extinction of the human species through a nuclear war.

Through RIMPAC, Balikatan, and other similar exercises, the US is already setting the stage for the horrors of death and destruction. There is no other choice for us but to respond by bringing together the peoples of Hawai‘i, the Philippines, and other nations to frustrate these threats of war, protect life, and promote lasting global peace and justice.

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