

The Philippines: Amid Threat of Regional War, Socialists Oppose US Militarisation and China's Bullying

By [Sonny Melencio](#) and [Federico Fuentes](#)

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Sonny Melencio is a Filipino socialist activist and Party of the Labouring Masses (PLM) chairperson. He spoke with Green Left's Federico Fuentes about global imperialism and the Filipino left's response to the looming threat of a US-China war.

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Federico Fuentes (FF): How do you view the current dynamics at play within the global imperialist system?

Sonny Melencio (SM): At the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower. But this did not mean other nations would simply subordinate themselves to the US. Rising powers, especially China, have sought to expand their spheres of influence and are beginning to challenge the US' traditional dominance.

The US military's global interventions have left the superpower overstretched and affected its economy. That is why former US President Donald Trump called to end "costly" US military interventions.

Within this scenario, other military powers have filled the power vacuum left behind in certain regions, flexing their power to establish a limited hegemony and regional sphere of influence.

But most of these military powers — such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia — are close to, if not adjuncts of, US and Western interests. US imperialism remains entrenched in the economy and politics of these countries.

It would seem that aside from China, the efforts of other sub-imperialist, regional or military powers are an extension of US efforts to maintain its global rule while also allowing these countries to carve out their own spheres of influence.

There is also a more positive scenario taking place in Latin America that needs to be taken into account. While the ALBA [Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our Americas] project of former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez is on the backburner, the election of left and progressive governments in Colombia, Brazil and Chile are very encouraging.

All of this points to heightened and increasing instability for the imperialist world order.

FF: How have these global dynamics affected politics in the Philippines?

SM: We are in the middle of a looming theatre of war between the US and China, in which the policy adopted by the previous Rodrigo Duterte regime of favouring the Chinese government's interests and taking a "soft" stance on the West Philippine issue has been replaced by President Ferdinand Marcos Jnr's shameless subservience to US imperialist interests.

Aside from its military bases in the Pacific, the US also has many nuclear submarines, hundreds of warships, almost a thousand combat aircraft and more than 300,000 soldiers and personnel patrolling the Pacific and Indian Oceans, including the South China Sea.

China has deployed four nuclear submarines, 350 warships, thousands of ground-launched missiles capable of retaliating against US bombs (and reaching the west coast of the US) and air-defence systems are scattered across China, occupied islands and atolls in the South China Sea.

The left and progressive movements in the Philippines oppose these preparations for war by both the US and China.

PLM is campaigning to dismantle US bases established under the Visiting Forces and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), and for the withdrawal of all troops belonging to the US and its imperialist allies stationed in the Asia-Pacific region.

PLM also calls on China to halt its militarisation of the region and its bullying of countries that maintain sovereign rights over specific zones of the South China Sea. We call for the implementation of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Treaty to urgently demilitarise the region, and advocate for a broader Asia-Pacific-wide nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty and regime.

We are also campaigning against AUKUS [the Australia-UK-US military alliance] and its fielding of more nuclear submarines in the Asia-Pacific.

FF: How do you explain the growing tensions between the US and China and how do you view China's role in the region?

SM: There are left forces that view China becoming a major industrial power — and even outstripping the US — as a positive development. But China's rise to superpower status does not constitute an advance for socialism.

China is likely to surpass the US as the world's largest economic power before 2030. China

is also starting to build up its military defence perimeter and number of military bases, even if it is not doing this in the same way as other imperialist powers. Rather than military interventions and occupation, China is relying on bilateral agreements based on economic considerations leveraged by China's massive investments in infrastructure projects.

China has escalated its bid for exclusive territorial control of the South China Sea by expanding Longpo Naval Base, on Hainan Island, as a home port for four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. In the disputed Spratly Islands, China has begun to dredge artificial atolls for military airfields in the centre of the sea and has built permanent bases on seven shoals.

Left and progressive movements in the Philippines are opposed to China's bullying in the West Philippine Sea. The West Philippine Sea is the more than 370 kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that the international arbitration tribunal in The Hague has ruled belongs to the Philippines under the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS).

The West Philippine Sea is also part of the South China Sea, which China claims is exclusively its own. This unilateral declaration rules out any possibility of a negotiated settlement with countries that have claims to parts of the Sea — one that holds 12% of global fisheries and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves.

China continues to attack Filipino ships and fisherfolk fishing in the West Philippine Sea. These fisherfolk are not trying to further some geopolitical interests, they are simply eking out a living. We have to condemn these incidents of bullying by China.

China's foreign policy is the logical consequence of China becoming capitalist — or, at least, state capitalist — and trying to carve out its space in a global capitalist world still dominated by the US and other Western industrialised countries.

There is a capitalist class in China and it may well be the case that sections of this new capitalist class have imperialist ambitions. At this stage, China's foreign policy is driven by an aggressive nationalism based on economic integration.

FF: What about the US' role?

SM: The US's pivot towards Asia, which was started under the Barack Obama administration, is an attempt to militarily encircle China.

In announcing this pivot, Obama said the US was turning its attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific, home to more than half of the global economy. China is considered a threat to the "security" and economic interests of the US, especially in the Asia-Pacific.

Since then, the US has begun rebuilding its chain of military bases and strategic alliances along the Asian littoral. In 2014, a battalion of US marines was deployed to Darwin, Australia, on the Timor Sea — well positioned to access the strategic Lombok and Sunda Straits that lead to the South China Sea.

There is also the US-Australia Force Posture Agreement, which allows US troops and warships to be based at Darwin. Around the same time, the US signed the EDCA agreement with the Philippines.

We recognise that China's actions in the South China Sea are aimed at expanding its defence perimeter to protect its industrial heartland in South and South-Eastern China from a potential attack from US bases and US ships. That is why we have taken a more active position of focusing on campaigning against US military intervention and designs for the region.

Our position is: No to US military intervention in the region and No to China's military mobilisation and bullying of countries with sovereign rights in parts of the South China Sea.

FF: Taiwan seems to be the key flashpoint in US-China tensions. What is your stance on this issue?

SM: Taiwan is increasingly becoming a key piece in the US' militarisation plans for the region.

While China considers its sovereignty over Taiwan as non-negotiable, its strategy has been to promote cross-strait economic integration as the main mechanism towards eventual reunification.

But over the past two decades, China's overall defensive position in the region has changed to a "tactical offensive" position. The trigger for this was Taiwan.

China launched missile drills in 1995 as payback following then-Taiwanese President Lee Theng-hui's visit to the US. It did so again in 1996 after Taiwan held its first popular presidential election.

The Bill Clinton administration responded by sending *USS Independence* and *USS Nimitz* to the Taiwan Straits in March 1996. This was the biggest display of US power in the region since the Vietnam War and was intended to underline the determination of the US to defend Taiwan by force.

The US' intervention revealed just how vulnerable the coastal region of East and Southeast China was to US naval firepower. It was this realisation that prompted the change in China's strategy.

The PLM recognises Taiwan's national sovereignty. We also oppose US plans to use the unresolved status of Taiwan to pursue its war aims against China.

Read the full interview at links.org.au.

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