

## Washington's 'Pivot to Asia': A Debacle Unfolding

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, October 25, 2016

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Military](#), [Military and WMD](#)

*In 2012 **President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter** launched a new chapter in their quest for global dominance: a realignment of policies designed to shift priorities from the Middle East to Asia. Dubbed the 'Pivot to Asia', it suggested that the US would concentrate its economic, military and diplomatic resources toward strengthening its dominant position and undercutting China's rising influence in the region.*

The 'pivot to Asia' did not shift existing resources from the Middle East, it added military commitments to the region, while provoking more conflicts with Russia and China.

The "pivot to Asia" meant that the US was extending and deepening its regional military alliances in order to confront and encircle Russia and China. The goal would be to cripple their economies and foster social unrest leading to political instability and regime change.

The US onslaught for greater empire depended on the cooperation of proxies and allies to accomplish its strategic goals.

The so-called 'pivot to Asia' had a two-pronged approach, based on an economic trading pact and various military treaty agreements. The entire US strategy of retaining global supremacy depended on securing and enhancing its control over its regional allies and proxies. Failure of the Obama regime to retain Washington's vassal states would accelerate its decline and encourage more desperate political maneuvers.

### Strategic Military Posturing

Without a doubt, every military decision and action made by the Obama Administration with regard to the Asia-Pacific Region has had only one purpose – to weaken China's defense capabilities, undermine its economy and force Beijing to submit to Washington's domination.

In pursuit of military supremacy, Washington has installed an advanced missile system in South Korea, increased its air and maritime armada and expanded its provocative activities along China's coastline and its vital maritime trade routes. Washington has embarked on a military base expansion campaign in Australia, Japan and the Philippines.

This explains why Washington pressured its client regime in Manila under the former President 'Nonoy' Aquino, Jr., to bring its territorial dispute with China over the Spratly Islands before a relatively obscure tribunal in Holland. The European ruling, unsurprisingly in favor of Manila, would provide the US with a 'legal' cover for its planned aggression

against China in the South China Sea. The Spratly and Paracel Islands are mostly barren coral islands and shoals located within the world's busiest shipping trade routes, explaining China's (both Beijing and Taipei) refusal to recognize the 'Court of Special Arbitration'.

### **Strategic Economic Intervention: The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)**

The US authored and promoted Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a trade and investment agreement covering 12 Pacific countries designed to ensure US regional dominance while deliberately cutting out China. The TPP was to be the linchpin of US efforts to promote profits for overseas US multi-nationals by undercutting the rules for domestic producers, labor laws for workers and environmental regulations for consumers. As a result of its unpopular domestic provisions, which had alienated US workers and consumers, the electorate forced both Presidential candidates to withdraw their support for the TPP – what one scribbler for the Financial Times denounced as “*the dangers of popular democracy*”. The Washington empire builders envisioned the TPP as a tool for dictating and enforcing their ‘rules’ on a captive Asia-Pacific trading system. From the perspective of US big business, the TPP was the instrument of choice for retaining supremacy in Asia by excluding China.



### **The Eclipse of Washington's "Asian Century"**

For over seventy years the US has dominated Asia, ravaging the continent with two major wars in Korea and Indo-China with millions of casualties, and multiple counter-insurgency interventions in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Timor, Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The strategic goal has been to expand its military and political power, exploit the economies and resources and encircle China and North Korea.

Under the Obama-Clinton-Kerry Regime, the imperial structures in Asia are coming apart.

Washington's anti-China TPP is collapsing and has been replaced by the Chinese sponsored Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with over fifty member countries

worldwide, including the ten nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASAEN), plus Australia, India, South Korea and New Zealand. Of course, China is funding most of the partnership and, to no one's surprise, Washington has not been invited to join...

As a result of the highly favorable terms in the RCEP, each and every current and former US ally and colony has been signing on, shifting trade allegiances to China, and effectively changing the configuration of power.

Already Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Indonesia have formalized growing economic ties with China. The debacle of the TPP has just accelerated the shift toward China's new trade pact (RCEP). The US is left to rely on its 'loyalist four', a stagnant Japan, Australia, South Korea and its impoverished former colony, Philippines, to bolster its quest to militarily encircle China.

### **The Dangers of 'Popular Democracy': President Duterte's Pivot to China and the End of US Supremacy in SE Asia?**

For over a century (since the invasion of the Philippines in 1896), especially since the end of WWII, when the US asserted its primacy in Asia, Washington has used the strategic Philippine Archipelago as a trampoline for controlling Southeast Asia. Control of the Philippines is fundamental to US Imperialism: Washington's strategic superiority depends on its access to sea, air, communications and ground bases and operations located in the Philippines and a compliant Philippine ruling class..

The centerpiece of US strategy to encircle and tighten control over China's maritime routes to and from the world-economy is the massive build-up of US military installations in the Philippines.

The US self-styled "pivot to Asia" involves locating five military bases directed at dominating the South China Sea. The Pentagon expanded its access to four strategic air and one military base through the 'Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement' signed by the Philippine President Aquino in 2014 but held up by the Philippine Courts until April 2016. These include:

- (1) Antonio Bautista Airbase on the island of Palawan, located near the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.
- (2) Basa Airbase 40 miles northwest of the Philippines capital of Manila, overlooking the South China Sea.
- (3) Lumbia Airbase located in the port of Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao, a huge US facility under construction.
- (4) Mactan - Benito Ebuena Airbase located on Mactan Island off the coast of Cebu in the central Philippines.
- (5) Fort Magsaysay located in Nueva Ecija, on Luzon, the Philippine Army's Central Training and command center, its largest military installation which will serve the US as the training and indoctrination base for the Philippine army.

Pentagon planners had envisioned targeting Chinese shipping and air bases in the South China Sea from its new bases on western shores of the Philippines. This essentially

threatens the stability of the entire region, especially the vital Chinese trade routes to the global economy.

Washington has been intensifying its intervention in the South China Sea relying on decrees issued by its previous proxy President Benigno (Noynoy) Aquino, III (2010-2016). These, however, were not ratified by the Congress and had been challenged by the Philippine Supreme Court.

Washington's entire "*pivot to Asia*" has centered its vast military build-up on its access to the Philippines. This access is now at risk. Newly elected President Rodrigo Duterte, who succeeded Aquino in June 2016, is pursuing an independent foreign policy, with the aim of transforming the impoverished Philippines from a subservient US military colony to opening large-scale, long-term economic trade and development ties with China and other regional economic powers. Duterte has openly challenged the US policy of using the Philippines to encircle and provoke China.

The Philippine "pivot to China" quickly advanced from colorful rhetoric to a major trade and investment meeting of President Duterte and a huge delegation of Philippine business leaders with his Chinese counterparts in Beijing in late October 2016. During his first 3 months in office Duterte blasted Washington for meddling in his ongoing campaign against drug lords and dealers. Obama's so-called 'concerns for human rights' in the anti-drug campaign were answered with counter-charges that the US had accommodated notorious narco-politician-oligarchs to further its military base expansion program. President Duterte's war on drugs expanded well beyond the alleged US narco-elite alliance when he proposed two strategic changes: (1) he promised to end the US-Philippine sea patrols of disputed waters designed to provoke Beijing in the South China Sea; and (2) President Duterte announced he would end military exercises with Washington, especially in Mindanao, because they threatened China and undermined Philippine sovereignty.

President Duterte, in pursuit of his independent nationalist-agenda, has moved rapidly and decisively to strengthen the Philippines 'pivot' toward China, which in the context of Southeast Asia is really 'normalizing' trade and investment relations with his giant neighbor. During the third week of October (2016) President Duterte, his political team and 250 business leaders met with China's leaders to discuss multi-billion-dollar investment projects and trade agreements, as well as closer diplomatic relations. The initial results, which promise to expand even more, are over \$13 billion dollars in trade and critical infrastructure projects. As the Philippine's pivot to China advances, the quid pro quo will lead to a profound change in the politics and militarization of Southeast Asian. Without total US control over the Philippines, Washington's strategic arc of encirclement against China is broken.

According to a recent ruling by the Philippine Supreme Court, the controversial US military base agreement (Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement) imposed by the former President Aquino by fiat without congressional ratification can be terminated by the new President by executive order. This ruling punches some major holes in what the Pentagon had considered its 'ironclad' stranglehold on the strategic Philippine bases.

The Duterte government has repeatedly announced its administration's commitment to a program of economic modernization and social reconstruction for Philippine society. That agenda can only be advanced through changes that include multi-billion dollar infrastructure investments, loans and technical cooperation from China, whereas remaining a backward US

military colony will not only threaten their Asian economic partners, but will condemn the Philippines to yet another generation of stagnation and corruption. Unique in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has long been mired in underdevelopment, forcing half of its qualified workforce to seek contract servitude abroad, while at home the society has become victims of drug and human trafficking gangs linked to the oligarchs.

## Conclusion

Washington's 'pivot to Asia', enshrined in its effort to corral the Asian countries into its anti-China crusade is not going as the Obama-Clinton-Kerry team had envisioned. It is proving to be a major foreign policy debacle for the outgoing and (presumably) incoming US presidential administrations. Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton has been forced to denounce the Transpacific Trade Partnership (TPP), one of her own pet projects when she was Secretary of State. The Pentagon's military base strategy stuck in a 1980's time-warped vision of Southeast Asia is on the verge of imploding. The Philippines, its former colony and vassal state, is finally turning away from its total subservience to US military dictates and toward greater independence and stronger regional ties to China and the rest of Asia. Southeast Asia and the South China Sea are no longer part of a grand chessboard subject to Pentagon moves for domination.

In desperation, Washington may decide to resort to a military power grab- a coup in the Philippines, backed by a coalition of Manila-based oligarchs, narco-bosses and generals. The problem with a precipitate move to 'regime change' is that Rodrigo Duterte is immensely popular with the Philippine electorate - precisely for the reasons that the Washington elite and Manila oligarchs despise him. The mayor of Manila, Joseph Estrada, himself a former victim of a Washington-instigated regime change, has stated that any US backed coup will face a million-member mass opposition and the bulk of the nationalist middle and powerful Chinese-oriented business class. A failed coup, like the disastrous coup in Venezuela in 2002 against Hugo Chavez could radicalize Duterte's policy well beyond his staunchly nationalist agenda and further isolate the US.

See **James Petras** latest book from Clarity Press: ISBN: 978-0-9972870-5-9, \$24.95 / 252 pp. / 2016 <http://www.claritypress.com/PetrasVIII.html>

The original source of this article is Asia-Pacific Research  
Copyright © [Prof. James Petras](#), Asia-Pacific Research, 2016

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Prof. James Petras](#)**

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). Asia-Pacific Research will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. Asia-Pacific Research grants permission to cross-post Asia-Pacific Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to

the original Asia-Pacific Research article. For publication of Asia-Pacific Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [editors@asia-pacificresearch.com](mailto:editors@asia-pacificresearch.com)

[www.asia-pacificresearch.com](http://www.asia-pacificresearch.com) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [editors@asia-pacificresearch.com](mailto:editors@asia-pacificresearch.com)