

Sonny Melencio (Party of the Labouring Masses, Philippines): ‘We oppose the US and China’s preparations for war’

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Sonny Melencio is a veteran Filipino socialist activist and chairperson of the Partido Lakas ng Masa (Party of the Labouring Masses, PLM). He is also the author of the semi-biographical book, [Full Quarter Storms: Memoirs and Writings on the Philippine Left](#). In this interview, Melencio discusses the current state of global imperialism, the looming threat of a US-China war and what approach the left should take to regional peace, security and anti-imperialist solidarity, with Federico Fuentes of *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal*.



Federico Fuentes - Before turning to the Asia-Pacific region, I would like to start by looking at the broader, international picture. Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, global politics seemed largely dominated by wars that sought to reinforce US imperialism’s role as the sole global hegemon. However, in more recent years, a shift appears to be taking place. At the same time as the United States has been forced to withdraw from Afghanistan, we have seen Russia invade Ukraine and nations such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia flexing their military power beyond their borders. In general terms, how would you view the current dynamics at play within the global imperialist system?

Sonny Melencio — At the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged as the world’s sole superpower. But this did not mean that other nations would simply subordinate themselves to the number one global power. Rising powers, especially China, have sought to expand their spheres of economic and political 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. This is one of the reasons why former US President Donald Trump called to end “costly” US military interventions in many parts of the world. Within this scenario, other military powers have filled the power vacuum left behind in certain regions, flexing their own military power outside their borders in order to establish a limited hegemony and regional sphere of influence. But, it

should be noted, that most of these military powers — including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which you mentioned — are close to, if not adjuncts of, US and Western interests. US imperialism remains entrenched in the economy and politics of these countries.

Turkey, for instance, has been a member of NATO since 1952 and has the second-largest standing military force within NATO, behind only the US. Turkey also maintains close bilateral relations with the US and has benefited from US political, economic, and diplomatic support. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has extended its economic and political relations deep into Central Asia. It also sealed its land border with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan (a Turkic state) during the first (1993) and second (2020) Nagorno-Karabakh Wars. And the Turkish armed forces have a relatively substantial military presence abroad, with military bases in Albania, Iraq, Qatar and Somalia, as well as 36,000 troops stationed in Northern Cyprus, which have been there since 1974.

Similarly, the Saudi Arabian-led intervention in Yemen was supported by the US, together with a coalition of nine countries from West Asia and North Africa. In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a bombing campaign and invasion of Yemen with US intelligence and logistical support, including for aerial refuelling. The Saudi foreign minister said US and British military officials were in the command and control centre responsible for Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen.

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 allowing these countries to carve out their own spheres of influence.

On the other hand, in terms of the breach in US imperialism's global hegemony, there is a different, more positive and significant scenario taking place in Latin America. We have to take this into account when talking about the weakening of US global hegemony. While the ALBA [Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our Americas] project of former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez in Latin America is on the backburner, the election of left and progressive governments in Colombia, Brazil and Chile are very encouraging. Regional support for US pressures on Venezuela has frayed, with countries such as Colombia re-establishing relations with the Nicolas Maduro government. At the very least, these are promising scenarios that point to challenges not only for US imperialism but for the left.

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

How have these global dynamics affected politics in the Philippines?

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 Jr's shameless subservience to US imperialist interests.

Under Marcos Jr, patronage to US imperialist interests has been duly restored, with Marcos Jr increasing the number of US military bases in the Philippines from five to nine under the expanded Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). In contrast, Duterte claims that increasing the number of US military bases directed towards China and the South China Sea pose an "imminent threat of war", one that would inevitably involve the Philippines.

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. On the other hand, China has deployed four nuclear submarines to guard the oceans, 350 warships (China is the largest naval

power in the world today), thousands of ground-launched missiles capable of retaliating against US bombs (and that can reach the west coast of the US) and air-defence systems scattered across China and its 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 for the dismantling of US bases established under the Visiting Forces and EDCA agreements, and for the withdrawal of all troops belonging to the US and its imperialist allies 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 in order 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.

How do you understand the growing tensions between the US and China? There is pretty broad agreement among socialists that the US is seeking to contain the rise of China as an economic rival through the use of its superior military might. But there is less consensus on China's role. As a socialist in a country in close proximity to China, how do you view China's role, both in terms of the broader conflict with the US and within the region?

There are left forces that view China becoming a major industrial power - and even outstripping the US - as a positive development. Parts of the left have fallen behind [Chinese president] Xi Jinping's slogan that what China is doing is advancing "socialism with Chinese characteristics". 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. Its economic output already surpassed the US in 2014. And China has increased its slice of the world pie at an extraordinary pace of 5% a year from 2000 to 2020. While the US has been perpetually overstretched militarily, especially in the Middle East, China had been busy converting itself into an economic powerhouse and integrating Africa, Asia, Latin America and, to a certain extent, Europe, by investing in foreign infrastructure projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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. For example, its naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, was offered up to China by the Pakistani government as gratitude for China developing a modern commercial port. China has also built a military facility in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa. Sri Lanka settled its billion-dollar debt to China by ceding its strategic port of Hambantota, in the epicentre of the Indian Ocean, which China used to create a dual-use port for military and commercial operations.

China has also escalated its bid for exclusive territorial control of the South China Sea by expanding Longpo Naval Base, on its own 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 in accordance with its so-called nine-dash line “historical” demarcation. This unilateral declaration by China rules out any possibility of a negotiated settlement with countries in the region that have claims to various parts of the Sea. China is claiming an entire ocean, 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. There have been a number of cases of fishing vessels being sunk and other types of bullying in the West Philippine Sea. Chinese military boats targeting unarmed fishing boats borders on the absurd. These fisherfolk are not trying to further some geopolitical interests, they are simply trying to eke out a living. We have to condemn these incidents of bullying by China.

We don't see China's rise to superpower status as in any way a socialist advance. China's foreign policy is the logical consequence of China becoming capitalist — or, at least, state capitalist at this stage — 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.

In his book, [*To Govern the Globe*](#), which looks at the succession of global capitalist empires from the heyday of British imperialism through to the rise of US imperialism after World War II, leftist author Alfred McCoy writes about the possibility of China becoming the number one superpower with a capacity to carve out its own empire by around 2030. However, he adds that a Chinese global hegemony would likely be a “looser world order” than its US predecessor. Instead of hundreds of overseas military bases and worldwide troop deployments, China would likely concentrate its forces in the Pacific and Indian Ocean to carve out its own hegemonic sphere, while allowing other hegemonic powers to keep their spheres of influence — as long as this was not antagonistic to its own national and hegemonic interests. Such a scenario could possibly facilitate the emergence of a multipolar world but, most likely, not a long and stable one if imperialist powers sought to further re-divide spheres of influence in their own interests.

As to the US, its 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.

Obama started what became Trump's posturing of non-intervention in international affairs to save the US money. Obama scaled-down US military commitments in the Middle East, reduced US dependence on imported oil, withdrew most of the US forces in Iraq and refused to commit troops for regime change in Syria.

But, as Obama withdrew troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, the US began 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 for US troops and warships to be based at Darwin. Around the same time, the US signed the EDCA agreement with the Philippines, which facilitated its use of at first five, and now nine, military bases straddling the South China Sea.

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 are within striking distance of the Chinese coast. That is why we have taken a more active position of focusing on campaigning against US military intervention and US imperialism's designs for the region. And while China does not recognise the Arbitration Tribunal and the UNCLOS, the US has unilaterally declared itself as having the right to navigate the world's oceans for its own military purposes.

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.

It could be argued that just as Ukraine is the key flashpoint in the US-Russia conflict — one that has broken out into open war — Taiwan is the key flashpoint in US-China tensions. How are these two situations (Ukraine and Taiwan) generally viewed in your country? What stance has the socialist left taken towards them?

There's been diverging views on the war in Ukraine. The general view among the left is to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, some have viewed the invasion as Russia defending itself from NATO's encirclement. The PLM's position has been to condemn Russia's invasion, while also calling for an end to NATO expansionism and its withdrawal from the region.

Although Russia's war in Ukraine is the leading trouble spot today, the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea are a close second. 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 — the industrial heart of the country — was to US naval firepower. It was this realisation that prompted the change in China's strategy, which has been unfolding since.

The PLM recognises Taiwan's national sovereignty. At the same time, we oppose US plans to use the unresolved status of Taiwan to pursue its war aims against China.

Do you see any chances of building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles in situations such as these, taking into consideration that local movements might seek support from different imperialist countries? If so, how?

Building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles where local movements seek support from different imperialist countries can be very difficult. This is a tactic that ruling classes in local countries usually adopt, such as in the Philippines. Here, the former Duterte regime adopted a stance of favouring China, even on the West Philippine issue; of opening up the economy for China's investments and infrastructure projects; and of lambasting the United States' lack of military support and almost free use of Philippine military bases for its operation. Duterte threatened to scrap EDCA early on in his term of office, but later changed tack during Trump's visit to Manila. Duterte's stance indicates that the ruling classes in the region are divided on the question of how to

deal with China, with sections whose interests strongly align with China supporting it.

On the question of national sovereignty, while we acknowledge the importance of preserving and defending national sovereignty in dealing with imperialist countries, it is also important that we differentiate between the national interests of the ruling classes and the national sovereignty of the *masa* [masses]. In the Philippines, the ruling class has historically been so wedded and integrated into US interests — militarily and economically — that they are almost proxies for US interests.

The left should adopt a class line of independence from warring imperialist countries in the international arena. [Russian revolutionary Vladimir] Lenin pointed this out when he argued for the working class not to turn its guns against the working classes of other countries amid inter-imperialist wars; rather their guns should always be aimed at the bourgeoisie who took them to war, and that the working classes of other countries should do likewise. This is in a time of war. In our current situation, where war has not broken out, the working class should campaign for peace and negotiations between countries threatening to unleash a war that could involve several countries or even the entire planet, especially given the possible use of nuclear weapons.

Is it possible today to advance a position of non-alignment with blocs (neutrality) without abandoning solidarity? How do you view this dilemma from your local perspective and what (if any) debates are occurring within left/progressive circles in your country on this issue?

Non-alignment generally refers to a state foreign policy approach that aims to maintain independence and neutrality in the context of international conflicts and power struggles. It involves avoiding alignment with major power blocs and pursuing an independent stance in global affairs. Non-alignment can also mean advocating negotiations or peaceful means for resolving conflicts among warring blocs. I think this is basically what left/progressive circles in the Philippines try to do. Conflicts among warring blocs can escalate into extended, prolonged wars — or even nuclear holocaust — to the disadvantage or ruin of both warring blocs, the working classes and, potentially, the whole world.

In the case of the Ukraine war, this translates into a call for both Russia and NATO to pull out from Ukraine and allow the various forces in Ukraine to chart their independent course. This is a difficult thing, but it is something that most left and progressive forces in the Philippines aspire for. We should always be seeking to create space for progressive class forces to build their forces and pursue a position that will strengthen the working class in its battles against local class enemies.

We have never been advocates of war. We should expose and fight efforts to bring us and our country into a proxy war between imperialist countries. Our call for “war against war” is part of our class war against our bourgeoisie.

A statement released by a group of South-East Asian left parties in June 2022 raised the important need to “promote and advance progressive regional peace initiatives as building blocks toward a common security policy to foster a more peaceful and cooperative global order, especially for the Asia-Pacific region.” What kind of peace initiatives do you think could help in this regard? And how do you envision a common regional security policy that prioritises the needs of small nations over larger powers?

Aside from PLM’s campaign to withdraw all US, British and other imperialist troops and bases from the Asia-Pacific region, we are also campaigning for:

- The closing down of the Five Power Defence Arrangements established between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom, which are all Commonwealth members

belonging to the British Empire. These arrangements constitute a militarisation of the Asia-Pacific region.

- The dismantling of the Asia-Pacific-based physical forces and intelligence interception infrastructure of the imperialist-controlled Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance and the Echelon intelligence network. This network includes the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The intelligence alliance is designed for war and for monitoring the data of entire populations, as exposed by Edward Snowden.
- Upholding the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty to urgently demilitarise the area, and advocating for a broader Asia-Pacific-wide nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty and regime.
- Advancing a common security policy by promoting progressive regional peace initiatives to foster a more peaceful and cooperative global order, especially for the Asia-Pacific region.
- Supporting worldwide moves to boost the Non-Aligned Movement, especially its historically progressive principles to decrease and de-escalate great power contentions.
- Popularising the idea of a Shared Regional Area of Essential Commons, with a progressive code of conduct for the South East Asian Sea.
- Intensifying the struggles to dismantle authoritarian, ultra-rightist and fascist regimes in the Asia-Pacific region that serve to support US imperialism. Replace them with working-class states that will advance and build socialism.
- Rejecting the US' AUKUS, IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework) and Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) — the “Triad of Aggression”. Push ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), its member-states and other non-ASEAN countries in the Asia-Pacific region to adopt an actively neutral and non-aligned stance concerning inter-imperialist rivalries, while rejecting any efforts to join the Triad of Aggression.
- Expanding and consolidating working-class solidarity and internationalism to resist and defeat US imperialism's global manoeuvres. Renew all efforts to bolster anti-imperialist/anti-fascist united fronts for militant mass struggles at the national, regional and international levels.

Some have likened the current situation to a “New Cold War”. But unlike the original Cold War — and putting aside one's assessment of the character of the Soviet Union — it is hard to argue that the current tensions pit different economic systems against each other. Rather, as you note, it seems to be largely driven by disputes over seats at the table of big powers and exerting control over “spheres of influence”. The contradiction that arises from this for the left is that while the erosion of the US' capacity to play global hegemon is generally something to be welcomed, the space being left open in this emerging “multipolar world” is being filled, in large part, by right-wing authoritarian — and in some cases fascist — regimes. In light of all this, what should a 21st internationalism that is both anti-imperialist and anti-fascist look like?

An internationalist approach should prioritise building solidarity with left, progressive and grassroots parties, organisations and movements around the world. There are various networks that exist to campaign around specific issues. But these mostly focus on single issues and on engaging the powers-that-be at the level of influencing or changing governmental and corporate policy issues. I am referring here to the approach adopted by NGOs and the nebulous idea of civil society organisations (CSO). We have to go beyond these types of approaches.

Twenty-first-century internationalism needs to be based on putting forward a socialist alternative built through people's power governments. Otherwise, internationalism will be built on foundations of sand and has no future. We need to organise and mobilise the broadest mass forces possible, through a coalition of left, progressive and grassroots parties, organisations and movements, to thwart the designs of imperialist and fascist forces and build up forces capable of capturing popular power based on transitional socialist programs and a socialist alternative. Even popular theoreticians such as Thomas Piketty argue for such a vision; the left should do so even more.

We live in a situation where we have to grapple with multiple crises: economic, political, environmental, health, war, among others. That is why it is not enough to merely "engage" with the enemy and scatter ourselves into different movements that fight for reforms while forgetting the strategic goal of capturing power and building socialism. It's now or never: more barbarism or socialism.

P.S.

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