

The Philippines Must Learn to Protect Itself

By Erick Nielson C. Javier

The Philippines has an unwanted front row seat for China's theater of maritime aggression in the South China Sea. It has tried to counter the threat with international diplomacy and international courts. It has also sought to appease China at times. None of this has worked.

Now, given the uncertainty of its alliance with the US, it is modernizing its military and upgrading its defense doctrine to focus on external threats. This must continue, writes Erick Nielson C. Javier, because the country must be able to defend itself.

THE YEAR 2035 is little more than nine years away. While it is tempting to think that the global landscape would have changed drastically in that time, especially in the wake of recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the current string of wars in the Middle East, any change to the regional order in Southeast Asia will be largely incremental. Barring an unforeseen incident, by 2035 both the United States and China will remain the world's two great powers, exercising major influence in the region, and with very large economies that by their size alone will act as magnets for exports and business opportunities.

For the Philippines, the differences in power and capability between the two superpowers, such as the exact balance of nuclear forces, forward-deployed capabilities and economic growth are less important than the specific behaviors that the two behemoths exhibit — toward each other and, of course, toward the Philippines.

CONTINUITY OF PHILIPPINE INTERESTS

Regardless of whether China's relative power has increased vis-à-vis the US by 2035, the Philippines' national interests and concerns will remain the same. Successive Philippine administrations will need to deliver economic growth, while preserving strategic and physical space and securing both food and energy resources for the people. China is an attractive economic partner, and Philippine-China economic engagement is already significant. However, no genuine rapprochement is likely so long as China's aggressive behavior and disregard for Philippine sovereignty persists.



Philippine Navy Colonel Dennis Hernandez looks on as US Marines Colonel Robert Bunn speaks at a briefing on the joint military exercise *Balikatan* near Manila on April 14, 2026. The exercise saw the Philippines military joined by six other countries. Photo: EPA/Rolax Dela Pena

It should be emphasized that no Philippine administration has started with an “anti-China” foreign policy. Even President Benigno Aquino III came into office in 2010 seeking robust economic engagement with China. The South China Sea disputes only escalated beginning in 2012 with the Scarborough Shoal standoff. The current president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., made Beijing the first of his foreign state visits. Indeed, he was elected on a platform that promised continuity and positive Philippine-China ties. His efforts were “rewarded” when the China Coast Guard (CCG) used lasers on the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), followed by an increasing cadence of illegal, coercive, ambiguous and deceptive (ICAD) activities against Philippine government vessels and civilian fishing boats.

China consistently failed to capitalize on what should have been a favorable climate for relations

with the Philippines. For instance, when President Rodrigo Duterte came into office in 2016, he soon declared a “separation” from the US during a state visit to Beijing in favor of closer ties with China and Russia. Reports of harassment and maritime incidents between Philippine maritime forces and China were downplayed during his first four years in office, which included the 2019 sinking of a Philippine fishing boat after it was rammed by a Chinese vessel. While the Covid-19 pandemic allowed China to gain positive public relations through “mask and vaccine” diplomacy, China squandered this goodwill with the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, a gathering of an estimated 200 Chinese vessels in Philippine waters. This was such a large-scale deployment of Chinese maritime militia that even the Duterte administration could not ignore it.

REVITALIZED ALLIANCE WITH THE US

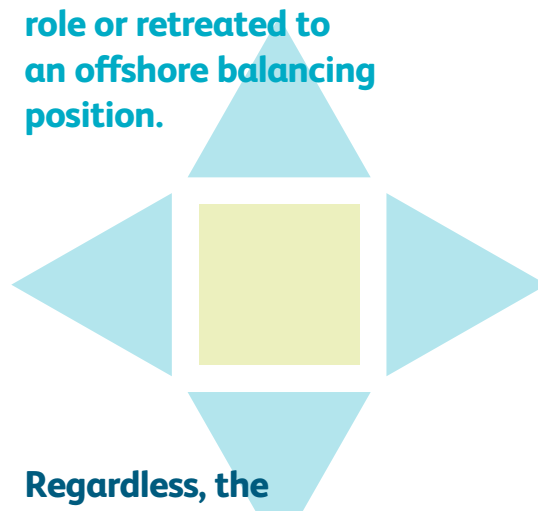
It is thus not a surprise that the Philippine-US alliance has been revitalized during the current administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. In April 2023, the two countries announced the expansion of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows the US to rotate troops into the Philippines for extended stays and operate facilities on Philippine bases for the use of both nations’ forces. The agreement now includes four additional Philippine military bases, beyond the first five agreed. The new locations, to the west and north of the country, reflect the Philippines’ increasing concern about Chinese activities in the South China Sea and the Bashi Channel, a narrow stretch of water separating Taiwan from the northernmost province of the Philippines. Furthermore, joint patrols and exercises with the US, rejected by Duterte, finally resumed.

The alliance continues to deepen, representing a key point of continuity between the Joe Biden and second Donald Trump administrations. The closer operational defense ties are exemplified by the annual *Balikatan* and *Salaknib* series of military exercises. Successive years saw *Balikatan*, in particular, demonstrate increased interoperability and ever more sophisticated joint capabilities, from air and missile defense to anti-ship live-fire exercises. The 2026 iteration of *Balikatan* notably featured live-fire use of the US Typhoon ground-launched cruise missile system, and a live-fire demonstration of the Japanese Type 88 anti-ship missile from Philippine soil.

Beyond building greater operational cohesion between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and its US counterparts, the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Industrial Cooperation outlines the two countries’ interest in exploring joint development, co-production and logistics support for key military technologies to be used by both the AFP and US forces.

The situation is intractable, and Philippine defense planning would not necessarily be altered if the US reduced its role or retreated to an offshore balancing position.

Regardless, the Philippines will still need to defend its maritime entitlements and territories with or without the US.



WORRIES ABOUT US RELIABILITY

Despite the “ironclad bond” between the Philippines and the US, there remains lingering concern that this can yet be undone, especially if Washington’s overall commitments to the region decline. Such fears have taken on new meaning in light of the second Trump administration’s heavy-handed approach to issues such as trade deficits, and its inconsistent language regarding how it will approach China on Taiwan.

Fears of American abandonment of the Philippines are not new. The Philippine-US alliance has seen breakdowns before, particularly following the Philippine Senate’s refusal to extend the lease on US military bases in 1991. There is also a widespread perception that the US failed to support the Philippines during the 2012 stand-off between Philippine and Chinese government vessels, and to hold China to account when it reneged on an agreement to deescalate mediated by the US. Duterte used the Americans’ inability to halt Chinese activity to justify his own policies of acquiescence and appeasement toward China.

ENHANCED DOMESTIC DEFENSE CAPABILITY

Efforts to deepen the Philippine-US alliance since the end of the Cold War, such as the 1997 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the 2014 EDCA, have been a way for the Philippines to strengthen US defense commitments without the domestic complications that would arise from permanent US defense installations. This is due to the perception that only the US is strong enough to really deter China, due to its status as a superpower and its own strategic interests in the Philippines.

There is the expectation that the US will continue to support the Philippines, if only to preserve its foothold in the First Island Chain and to ensure access to Philippine military facilities in anticipation of a Taiwan contingency. In turn,

the Philippines would expect American support in any feared worst-case scenarios with China regarding the Filipino presence in what Manila calls the West Philippine Sea.

The Philippines is continuing its military modernization program to safeguard against future shifts in the alliance with the US, as well as to project greater agency in its own affairs. This is a way to allow the Philippines to assert and enforce its maritime entitlements independently, especially in situations where it may not make sense to invoke the Philippine-US alliance. Key developments include the expansion of the Philippine Navy’s surface fleet to include guided-missile combatants, and the procurement and deployment of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles jointly developed by India and Russia. These assets are meant to support the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC), a shift in Philippine strategic thinking from the previous focus on internal security to external threats. Launched in 2024, the defense concept aims to hold potential adversaries at risk at the edges of the country’s exclusive economic zones (EEZ). The Philippine Coast Guard has also embarked on an expansion program to increase the number of ships it can deploy for forward presence enforcement missions.

The Philippine government certainly knows it needs to be able to defend itself, especially if the US were to be less present. Apart from the development of CADC and the ongoing AFP modernization program, the Revitalized Self-Reliant Defense Posture Act of 2024 aims to build the foundations for a viable defense industry by marshalling domestic resources and opening opportunities for defense industrial partnerships with other countries.

The Philippine defense establishment has also long sought to broaden its base of military partners beyond the US. It signed a status of visiting

forces agreement (SOVFA) with Australia in 2007, and has purchased weapons systems from Israel, India, South Korea and Turkey. Most recently, the Marcos administration concluded SOVFA-type agreements with France, Canada, New Zealand and Japan. Apart from material hardware, countries such as France, Japan and South Korea have counterpart capabilities, particularly in intelligence and surveillance (ISR), where co-operation could jumpstart and supplement Philippine development efforts in those fields.

PROSPECTS FOR 2035

Current strategic efforts are unlikely to be reversed by 2035. Despite the landmark 2016 ruling issued by the UNCLOS Annex VII Arbitral Tribunal in favor of the Philippines over China regarding the South China Sea, Beijing just ignored the judgment. But as amply demonstrated by the Duterte administration, appeasing China won't yield any significant rewards either. Any future Philippine administration attempting a similar approach would face similar challenges unless China ceases its coercive activities and tones down its "wolf warrior" diplomacy. The prospect of such a policy U-turn from Beijing is far-fetched, given the precedents set by Xi Jinping's government. Furthermore, the costs of coercion seem very low for China, which appears willing to suffer modest reputational damage.

The situation is intractable, and Philippine defense planning would not necessarily be altered if the US reduced its role or retreated to an offshore balancing position. Regardless, the Philippines will still need to defend its maritime entitlements and territories with or without the US.

While military modernization is expected to significantly increase Philippine defense capacity, the US remains indispensable to ensuring deterrence. The presence of the US Indo-Pacific Command and the provision of essential force mul-

tipliers — such as strong command and control capability, expansive intelligence and surveillance, and space capabilities — remain vital for regional security.

The essential enablers that the US contributes to the alliance will most likely still be available should the US adopt an offshore balancing position that reduces its forward-deployed forces. The US and the Philippines have experience in this kind of operational arrangement, as the US has provided essential ISR support for Philippine counterterrorism operations, particularly in the 2017 Marawi crisis.

Should the US, for whatever reason, decide to reduce or renege on its treaty commitments to the Philippines, there will be increased pressure on the AFP to find alternatives to US-led C2, ISR and space enablers. While the ideal would be for the AFP to develop its own counterpart capabilities, doing so would be expensive and add additional strains on Philippine fiscal resources. It would take considerable time to develop these capabilities internally and to build the necessary experience.

Such expenditures may be necessary, however, if the Philippines intends to continue asserting its agency and its interests. Even as the Philippines has continued to prioritize diplomacy and international law to address security challenges, it understands that it must build up its own strength, and, where possible, join with like-minded partners.

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