



REVIEW ARTICLE

ENHANCING US-PHILIPPINE ALLIANCE AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL IMPACTS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th July, 2025
Received in revised form
16th August, 2025
Accepted 10th September, 2025
Published online 30th October, 2025

Keywords:

The United States, Philippines, alliance,
Marcos, US-China competition, Southeast
Asia, South China Sea.

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Citation: Vu Hai Nam. 2025. "Enhancing us-philippine alliance and its geopolitical impacts.". *International Journal of Current Research*, 17, (10), 35000-35004.

ABSTRACT

The United States (US) has continuously increased its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as strengthened its relationships with its allies. As America's oldest ally in Asia, the Philippines is emerging as an important "outpost" for the US in its restraint approach to China in the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue, and even greater areas of the Indo-Pacific region. During Marcos's presidency in the Philippines, the US-Philippines alliance has been strongly tightened, in contrast to the decline of this relationship during the tenure of President Duterte. An enhancing alliance between the US and the Philippines is considered a factor impacting regional security, both in positive and challenging aspects.

INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical tensions are increasing globally, especially since the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out on February 24, 2022, and US-China tensions in the Asia-Pacific tend to warm up. In that context, the US has been actively promoting military relations with the Philippines as part of its strategy to strengthen the "hub-and-spokes" security cooperation model in the region. The Philippines is a longstanding ally and a key partner for Washington in Southeast Asia, with Manila's role being more crucial to the US in the event of conflicts with China, particularly concerning the issues of Taiwan and the South China Sea. Developments in military relations between the United States and the Philippines significantly impact the current regional dynamics.

The current increase in US military cooperation with the Philippines: The Philippines is a key ally of the US in Southeast Asia. The Philippines is a former US colony and became a treaty ally of the US in 1951, five years after independence. During the Cold War, it was home to some of America's largest overseas bases and vital to the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Philippine nationalism forced Washington to abandon those agreements in the 1990s, but since then, the allies have cooperated against terrorism and countered growing Chinese military pressure in the South China Sea, where the Philippines is a claimant state. (David Brunnstrom and Karen Lema, 2023) Since 1991, the US military has no longer had a permanent presence in the Philippines after having to close Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Base due to disagreements over location lease conditions and the Senate of the Philippines ending the special status. However, the two countries' militaries still maintain cooperation, according to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) signed in 1999. By 2014, US soldiers were able to return to rotation at five military

bases in the Philippines, according to the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). However, relations between the US and the Philippines deteriorated during Rodrigo Duterte's presidency in the Philippines. President Duterte frequently criticised the US during his term and once threatened to ignore the two countries' EDCA. Since taking office in June 2022, President Ferdinand Marcos has sought to restore the Philippines' relations with the US, saying that it is impossible to see the future of the Philippines without the US as a partner. (Huang Ruili, 2023). Since the beginning of 2022, defence cooperation between the US and the Philippines has been increasing. In March 2022, the US and the Philippines held the largest-ever Balikatan joint military exercise, involving about 3,800 Filipino soldiers and 5,100 American soldiers. In June 2022, the US Defence Security Cooperation Agency announced that the US State Department planned the potential \$2.9 billion in arms sales to the Philippines, including 12 F-16 fighter jets, 10 sets of "Harpoon" anti-ship missiles, and 24 AIM-9 "Sidewinder" air-to-air missiles. (Ellen Nakashima and Christian Shepherd, 2023) On October 15, 2022, the US announced that it would provide \$100 million in military aid to the Philippines. At the end of November 2022, US Vice President Kamala Harris announced after a visit to the Philippines that the US would provide \$7.5 million in aid to enhance the capabilities of Philippine maritime law enforcement agencies to improve anti-attack capabilities, illegal capture, conduct maritime surveillance, and support search and rescue efforts. (The White House, 2022). The US military not only increased its military deployment in the Philippines but also actively persuaded Japan and other allies to strengthen military ties with the Philippines. From October 3-14, 2022, the exercise Kamandag, or "Cooperation of the Warriors of the Sea," has involved over 2,550 US Marines and 530 Filipino Marines. This exercise mainly focused on live-fire drills of the "Hippocampus" system, including amphibious assault operations and specialised

activities. (Priam Nepomuceno, 2022) The exercise was held both in Palawan, a western province facing the South China Sea, and on Batan Island, facing Taiwan in the northern Philippines. The US and Japan conducted another exercise simultaneously in Japan, with the participation of 1,400 members of the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force and 1,600 members of the US soldiers. Major General Jay M. Barger, commander of the 3rd Marine Division of the US Marine Corps based in Japan, said the simultaneous exercise aimed to strengthen the defence capabilities of the two allies, the Philippines and Japan, and ensure that they could respond to crises in the Indo-Pacific region at any time. Previously, a senior Philippine defence official said that the Philippines and Japan are considering resuming negotiations to sign a "Visiting Forces Agreement" (VFA) between the two countries so that the Japanese self-defence forces can conduct training in the Philippines like American soldiers. Previously, in 2015, the Philippines and Japan began negotiations on allowing Japanese military aircraft and naval ships to use bases in the Philippines to refuel and pick up supplies, helping them expand their reach. patrolling deep into the South China Sea. A Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), would clear the way for the Japanese military to use Philippine bases on a rotational basis, similar to a current US-Philippines agreement. The ability to refuel near the South China Sea would allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces to keep their aircraft on patrol longer and cover longer distances. (Tim Kelly, 2015).

On January 21, 2023, the US and Philippine governments were ready to resume (2+2) Ministerial Dialogue for the first time after a 7-year hiatus. During a two-day meeting (January 19–20, 2023) in Manila, Philippines, senior officials of the two countries agreed to resume the above dialogue, which would later be held in April 2023. The last meeting between Washington and Manila in this framework was in 2016. Under former President Rodrigo Duterte, relations between the US and the Philippines have become tense, resulting in the suspension of many bilateral cooperation mechanisms. The above statement also said that the two sides agreed to quickly complete procedures to increase the number of bases that the US military will be able to use in the Philippines. According to the current bilateral agreement, there are five such military bases. (U.S. EMBASSY MANILA, 2023). The visit of US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin to the Philippines in February 2023 has strengthened bilateral alliances in the context of increasing tensions across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Accordingly, the two sides also made a commitment to increase the US presence in the Philippines. The US military has access to four more bases in the Philippines as it seeks to deter China's increasingly aggressive actions towards Taiwan and the disputed South China Sea. The agreement was reached during the visit of the US Secretary of Defence to negotiate the deployment of US forces and weapons at many military bases in the Philippines. In a joint statement by the Philippines and the United States, both said they had decided to accelerate the full implementation of the so-called Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, which aims to support training, exercises, and combined interoperability. (CNBC, 2023) US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin is the second senior US leader to visit the Philippines, following US Vice President Kamala Harris's trip to Manila in November 2022. In addition, many signs show that relations between the US and the Philippines have warmed again after tensions under his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.

Washington and Manila did not sign a new agreement but only expanded and promoted the full implementation of the EDCA that has been in place since 2014. In a joint statement, the two countries' defence leaders affirmed: "The four new locations are located in strategic areas of the Philippines." With this new decision, the US can use a total of at least nine military bases in the Philippines. The five bases that the US military was previously allowed to access were within the framework of VFA in 1999 and EDCA in 2014. (Rene Acosta, 2023). Although the Philippines will grant the US access to four more sites under the 2014 EDCA, allowing for joint training, prepositioning of equipment, and construction of facilities such as runways, fuel depots, and military housing, it will not have a permanent presence. (David Brunnstrom and Karen Lema, 2023) The two countries also announced that, as part of the agreement, the US

has allocated \$82 million to improve infrastructure at five existing EDCA sites and expand its military presence to four new locations in the "strategic areas of Philippine soil." (CNBC, 2023) In addition, the US has also provided military support to the Philippines, including UAVs, to enhance the Philippine military's ability to monitor the South China Sea. (Zaobao, 2023). Recently, US military forces have increased and expanded joint training focusing on combat readiness and disaster response capabilities with Philippine troops on the Philippines' west coast, looking out into the South China Sea, and in the northern Luzon area, facing the Taiwan Strait. US forces have been granted access to five Philippine military bases, where they can rotate indefinitely under the 2014 EDCA defence pact. (Ellen Nakashima and Rebecca Tan, 2023). In an interview with *Nikkei Asia*, Philippine Ambassador to the US Jose Manuel Romualdez announced that the Southeast Asian country will allow US forces to use its military facilities in the conflict with Taiwan. However, the only caveat is that such permission will be granted if it is important to the security of the Philippines. (RYO NAKAMURA and YUICHI SHIGA2022) The Biden administration describes competition with China as "the most consequential geopolitical challenge" and will determine the pace of its defence strategy according to China's moves. Therefore, increasing the US military presence in the Philippines is an important part of "integrated deterrence," which emphasises cooperation with allies to increase the level of deterrence. The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, compiled in February 2022, emphasises integrated deterrence as its foundation. (RYO KIYOMIYA, 2023)

The emerging security issues for Southeast Asia: Firstly, America's "hub-and-spokes" cooperation mechanism has been promoted in the region, contributing to the increase in US presence in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific region. The Philippines was the US's earliest treaty ally in Asia and used to host the two largest US naval and air bases outside the US mainland. Although the bases closed in the early 1990s, under two agreements, the VFA (1999) and the EDCA (2014), the US military was able to return and conduct large-scale exercises with the Philippine military. According to US Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin III, the US can help secure the future of the Philippines and its ability to defend its own sovereignty and prevent the kind of coercion it faces on a day-to-day basis. (Jim Garamone, 2022) The Philippines and fellow ASEAN members, including Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan, are locked in increasingly tense territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The US is seen as an important counterweight to China in the region and has pledged to defend the Philippines if Philippine forces, ships, or aircraft are attacked in disputed waters. (CNBC, 2023) Previously, on July 22, 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called on China to comply with the 2016 arbitration ruling that invalidated Beijing's large territorial claims in the South China Sea and warned that Washington had an obligation to defend treaty ally the Philippines if its forces, ships, or aircraft were attacked in disputed waters. (JIM GOMEZ, 2022). The Philippines created a major turning point when welcoming the return of America. Philippine President Marcos also told Mr. Austin, "Obviously, our longest-term partner is the United States." The United States and the Philippines have been treaty allies since the two countries signed the "Mutual Defence Treaty" in 1951. After the withdrawal of US troops, not only the Philippines but also other ASEAN countries realised that China could take advantage of the US's absence during this period and militarise the South China Sea. Since 2014, China has built 10 bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea, including bases in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines. For these reasons, countries like the Philippines are increasingly distrustful of China. Secondly, the increase in bilateral military cooperation between the US and the Philippines in the current context is also the factor that erodes ASEAN's multilateral cooperation today, and at the same time, friction between major countries in the region will become stronger. The current lack of confidence among major countries in the role of ASEAN's multilateral cooperation in resolving regional security challenges through peaceful dialogue has also led the US to promote bilateral cooperation with allies in the region, including the Philippines. As a result, this promotion can entail Beijing's reaction to

US moves in the region, especially in the context of increasing US-China tension. The South China Sea has become one of the focal points of friction between the US and China in the region, and the potential flashpoint has become a key front of US-China rivalry. China believes that greater US access to Philippine military bases undermines regional stability and increases tensions. (David Brunnstrom and Karen Lema, 2023) For example, US Vice President Kamala Harris's two-day visit to the Philippines on November 21–22, 2022, made China no less angry than the event when US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022. A notable point about the reaction to US and Western pressure on China is that on March 6, 2023, the Chinese President had an unusually strong blow against US policy, attributing some of China's recent challenges to what he said was a US-led campaign to suppress China. He asserted, "Western countries led by the United States have taken comprehensive measures to prevent and suppress me, bringing unprecedented serious challenges to the country's development." (Xinhua News Agency, 2023) The comments appeared to deviate from the leader's usual style, although Xi Jinping's decades-long tenure in power has tended to be pessimistic about Sino-US relations, and he often avoids direct criticism of the United States in public speeches. (Chun Han Wong, Keith Zhai, James T. Areddy, 2023) This also reflects the level of tension in US-China relations during the current period. Therefore, the risk of miscalculation leading to direct conflict between the two countries in East Asia is increasing.

Thirdly, the more important role of the US is affirmed in the South China Sea; it will contribute to preventing China's tough moves to change the status quo in the South China Sea. Not only is the US the US committed to protecting allies, but it has also directly condemned China's actions in the South China Sea. For example, on July 22, 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the United States called on China to comply with its obligations under international law and bring its provocative behaviour to an end. (JIM GOMEZ, 2022) Also in July 2022, Philippine Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo said that the arbitration court's ruling would be a pillar of his new government's policies and actions in the disputed area and rejected efforts to forcefully sabotage the "indisputable" verdict. (JIM GOMEZ, 2022) It was the turn of new Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office on June 30, 2022, after his landslide electoral victory. He also announced that the arbitration ruling would be upheld and not a single "square millimetre" of Philippine waters would be trampled. (The Asahi Shimbun, 2022). In December 2022, the Philippine military was ordered to increase its presence in disputed waters after reports that China is once again expanding and reclaiming projects on uninhabited reefs in the South China Sea. US Secretary of State Blinken and US Vice President Harris visited the Philippines in August and November 2022, respectively. The US also sent a signal to the Manila government that if the Philippines is attacked in the South China Sea, Washington will defend its ally. (DW, 2023).

Furthermore, the deployment of Philippine troops to Palawan, near the islands and the main areas where the Philippines and China dispute sovereignty in the South China Sea, will enable the US military to support the Philippines more effectively amid the escalating pressure from China in those maritime regions. The Philippines' agreement to open four additional military bases for US forces, increasing the total number of US bases in the Philippines to nine, has triggered a reaction from China. China stated that this move will escalate tensions in Southeast Asia and pose a threat to peace and stability in the region. In response to the inauguration of the Philippine-US military base, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Mao Ning criticised the US at a press conference on February 2, 2023, saying that the US "continuously increased military deployment in the region, and highlighting that this is exacerbating tensions in the region and endangering peace and stability in the region." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023) China calls on "countries in the region to be cautious, resist this, and avoid being coerced and utilised by the US." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The escalating provocative actions by China and recent warnings from the US military have raised concerns. During Secretary of Defence Austin's visit to the

Philippines, he highlighted the increasing destabilising behaviour of China in the region, including the growing danger and frequency of air intercepts, as well as the widespread use of maritime militia forces in disputed areas in the South China Sea. According to the US-based Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), a report released on January 30, 2023, revealed that in 2022, the China Coast Guard (CCG) maintained almost daily patrols in strategically important entities in the South China Sea, including those held by the Philippines. The report stated, "The presence of the China Coast Guard in the South China Sea is stronger than ever. Alongside the ubiquitous maritime militia, CCG patrols demonstrate Beijing's determination to assert control over a vast expanse in the nine-dash line they claim sovereignty over." For example, the number of days of patrols at Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas), where a Philippine outpost is located, increased from 232 days in 2020 to 279 days in 2022. Panatag Shoal (Scarborough), a fishing ground traditionally in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, has 344 days of patrols from 287. AMTI reported that data on coral reefs around Pag-asa Island, held by the Philippines, was not collected in previous analyses, but CCG vessels were present in the area for 208 days in 2022.

CCG also increased patrols from 142 days in 2020 to 310 days in 2022 at Tu Chinh Reef (or Vanguard Bank) off the coast of Vietnam, Vietnam's main oil and gas development location. Luconia Shoals, near Malaysia's key oil and gas operations, witnessed 316 patrol days compared to 279. The total observed patrols lasted 1,703 days, though AMTI's Automatic Identification System (AIS) data analysis does not encompass the entire narrative of CCG's impact at sea. (Frances Mangosing, Nestor Corrales, 2023). Fourthly, one of the US goals of strengthening the US-Philippine alliance is to respond to the risk of conflict across the Taiwan Strait and, more broadly, to prepare for the risk of direct armed conflict between the US and China in the region. Regarding the situation in the Taiwan Strait, China claims Taiwan as its territory and can take it by force if necessary. Beijing has sent warships, bombers, fighter jets, and aid planes into airspace near Taiwan almost daily, raising concerns about a possible blockade or military action. Faced with increasing tensions across the Taiwan Strait, US Air Force Commander Mike Minihan predicted that the US could have a military conflict with China by 2025 and urged his subordinates to truly prepare for war in 2023. Minihan said that because both Taiwan and the US will have presidential elections in 2024, the US will be "distracted" and Chinese President Xi Jinping will have the opportunity to advance on Taiwan. (NBC, 2023) Meanwhile, the former US Indo-Pacific commander assessed that China could attack Taiwan by 2027. He emphasised the threat from Beijing, saying that a conflict scenario could include attacks on small, remote islands held by Taipei, an overlooked potential flashpoint. Taiwan controls a number of islands near China, including Kinmen and Matsu islands, which lie just 10 kilometres off the mainland coast, as well as Pratas Island in the South China Sea. All of these islands are inhabited, but only weakly defended. (Jesse Johnson, 2023) Meanwhile, in October 2022, the head of the US Navy, Admiral Mike Gilday, warned that the US military must prepare for the possibility of China invading Taiwan before 2024, as Washington becomes increasingly wary about the threat to this island. At the opening ceremony of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping condemned the US for supporting Taiwan, accusing "external forces" of exacerbating tensions across the Taiwan Strait and suggesting that outside actors would be responsible if China felt forced to attack the island. Moreover, the United States has underscored the growing concern over China's military activities near Taiwan, which escalated following the visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in August 2022. President Joe Biden, on four occasions in his capacity as President, has warned China that the United States would intervene to protect Taiwan from an unprovoked attack. (Demetri Sevastopulo, 2023). Of America's five treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific region—Australia, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand—the Philippines is closest to Taiwan, with the country's northernmost enclave of Luzon only 200 km (120 mi) away. Experts say Luzon is of great interest to the US military as a potential location for rocket, missile, and artillery systems that could be used to counter an amphibious invasion of

Taiwan. (David Brunnstrom and Karen Lema, 2023). It will be difficult for Manila to remain neutral in a conflict with Taiwan due to its proximity and treaty obligations to Washington. This would be the most likely destination for Taiwanese refugees, and the approximately 150,000 Filipinos living on the island would be at risk from any Chinese attack. (David Brunnstrom and Karen Lema, 2023). Furthermore, during the Marcos era, Philippine officials began developing contingency plans for a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan. Following the visit of former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022, China reacted by conducting military exercises in various areas near Taiwan, including the Bashi Channel separating Taiwan and the Philippines. According to experts' assessments, in the event of a war erupting in Taiwan, the "battlefield would include the Philippines," and China's actions in the Bashi Sea "have indeed raised concerns among Philippine leaders." (Huang Ruili, 2023). As the US and the Philippines enhance military cooperation, tensions between the US and China are escalating over the Taiwan Strait issue. Given its geographical location, the US hopes that the Philippines will play a strategically important role if it needs to militarily defend Taiwan against Chinese attacks. From this perspective, the US consistently aims to arrange more extensive military cooperation between the US and the Philippines, such as the use of Philippine military bases. Jose Manuel Romualdez, Manila's ambassador to Washington and a relative of Marcos, also said that Manila would only allow US forces to use its bases in the event of a conflict in Taiwan "if it is important to us, for our own security." (DW, 2022a). The Biden and Marcos Jr. administrations intensifying military cooperation is evident against the backdrop of escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait. China has repeatedly declared its intention to reunify the island, even through military force. In the event of an armed conflict, the Philippines is the nearest location to the potential hotspot, much closer than US military bases on Okinawa Island, Japan. Washington is particularly concerned about the strategic significance of Luzon. It could serve as a potential storage site for rockets, missiles, and other defence systems in the event of a Chinese military "incursion" into Taiwan. Luzon's proximity to Taiwan and the permission to use military bases there would significantly enhance the US military's capabilities to respond to crises in the Taiwan Strait, thereby deterring Beijing from resorting to force against Taiwan.

Fifthly, the US is building the foothold of the US-Japan-Philippines alliance to strengthen the first island chain in the strategy to contain China: Greater US access to northern Luzon near Taiwan effectively ensures that the Philippines and US allies will play frontline and central roles in the security and deterrence of Northeast Asia. Concurrently, the US, Japan, and the Philippines are establishing a foothold, making it more challenging for China to launch an attack. The US military is focusing on safeguarding the Taiwan Strait, with bases in the Philippines being closer to Taiwan. Providing assistance from the Philippines would be relatively quicker than from Okinawa, Japan. US fighter jets and warships can also be rapidly replenished and repaired from Philippine bases, quickly returning to the Taiwan Strait theatre and increasing the continuous intensity and density of the ongoing attacks. Furthermore, the US military will rely on Philippine bases to conduct a counterattack in the South China Sea, much closer than Singapore's bases. Philippine bases are also part of the US military's distributed deployment to counter potential missile attacks from China. If China attacks Taiwan, it is likely to simultaneously target US military bases in Okinawa, Japan. However, attacking and neutralising numerous US military bases simultaneously may prove challenging. The US military can ensure that they will launch a counterattack at the first instance, maintaining the continuity and intensity of the counteroffensive. This strategy will expand their military advantage over China significantly and considerably enhance their deterrent capabilities.

CONCLUSION

The Philippines is America's oldest treaty ally in Asia. The US-Philippines relationship deteriorated during the six-year term of

former President Rodrigo Duterte, ending in 2022, but improved as the US increased its presence in the country. Since President Ferdinand Marcos took office in June 2022, both sides have sought to enhance cooperation to address China's unfounded sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and its threats to use force against Taiwan. Following Marcos' assumption of the Philippine presidency, the implementation of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the US and the Philippines accelerated, and joint military exercises between the two nations increased in scale. US efforts to strengthen military cooperation with the Philippines are yielding results. Despite President Marcos's balanced approach between the US and China, he remains strongly committed to preventing China from exerting pressure on the Philippines in the South China Sea. It can be said that the true intention behind the increase in US relations with the Philippines is to take advantage of the Philippines' geostrategic location to prevent China's actions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait and, at the same time, increase efforts to curb China's growing influence in the region. Experts suggest that the US is preparing for a potential military conflict with China, and the military bases in the Philippines can not only monitor China's activities in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait but also quickly support the frontline, filling gaps in the First Island Chain, which includes the Philippines. In the event of conflict, the US military must have sufficient military bases to respond rapidly, providing support to the frontline. While strengthening military alliances with the Philippines contributes to restraining China's increasing military presence in the South China Sea, it also intensifies the US-China competition in the region. The risk of military clashes between the two nations is growing, escalating the pressure on the regional security environment.

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