

# US and the Philippines move rapidly to implement military deal

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Following the Philippine Supreme Court decision on January 12 upholding the Enhanced Defense Cooperative Agreement (EDCA) as constitutional, Washington and Manila are moving swiftly to activate the military basing deal.

Both governments have shed any pretence that the agreement merely seeks to enhance the US military's ability to provide rapid humanitarian assistance and facilitate the modernization of the Philippine military. Instead, EDCA is rapidly being revealed as a key aspect in the comprehensive American military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region, as part of the US pivot to Asia aimed at subjugating China to its diktats.

Within hours of the Supreme Court decision, the Philippine military announced that all major military installations in the country had been offered to the US as the "agreed locations" under EDCA. Talks were underway to iron out the rules and regulations required for implementation. Eight military installations were initially identified.

The facilities include three on the main Philippine island of Luzon—Basa Air Base in Pampanga province, Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija province and Clark Air Base in Pampanga; two on the central island province of Cebu—the Cebu naval base and Benito Ebuen Air Base; one on Mindanao—the Lumbia airfield in Cagayan de Oro; and a naval base and the Antonio Bautista Air Base on Palawan facing the South China Sea.

Other installations soon to be included are the headquarters of Philippine Special Operations Command, the Armed Forces General Headquarters and the headquarters of the Central Command and Western Command. The last HQ is responsible for the Philippine's territorial defense, including its claims in the South China Sea.

According to Reuters, the US also sought access to three civilian seaports and airfields on Luzon, including the port at Subic Bay, the former US naval base and headquarters of the US 7th Fleet. The US Congress has earmarked \$66 million for the construction of military facilities in the Philippines as part of EDCA.

Subic Bay and Clark Air Base were the two major permanent US bases in the Philippines that played a key role during the Vietnam War. The US was forced to withdraw from the bases in 1992 after the Philippine Senate rejected a proposal to renew the basing agreement. EDCA is premised on the fiction that US forces will simply "rotate" through existing Philippine military bases.

Philippine defense department spokesman Peter Galvez announced that joint patrols in the South China Sea had been proposed to the US during a ministerial dialogue in Washington.

Galvez stated, according to the *Philippine Star*: "The 2+2 meeting extensively discussed the South China Sea issue, with the US side reiterating the US's ironclad commitment to the defense of the Philippines while the Philippines batted for joint patrols. Thus, in addition to the freedom of navigation operations of the US, we are suggesting that we also patrol the area together."

On January 24, the US Navy, using the Subic Bay as a forward operating base, launched a second provocative freedom of navigation operation, dispatching the guided missile destroyer, USS Curtis Wilbur, in the South China Sea. On January 30, the US warship sailed within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in the Paracel Islands, which are occupied by China. The destroyer then sailed back to the Philippines, docking at the Subic Bay base on February 5.

The operation provoked an angry response from China. Its defense ministry described the US action as

“intentionally provocative” and “irresponsible and extremely dangerous.”

The expansion of the US military activities from Philippine bases was outlined in a detailed and comprehensive review of the US military build-up in Asia by the Washington-based Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The report released in late January was commissioned by the US Department of Defense and hence has a semi-official status.

After explaining that key US military bases in South Korea and Japan were vulnerable to attacks from Chinese missiles, the CSIS explained that US was dispersing forces to forward operational bases throughout South East Asia, in particular in the Philippines. The report explained that the “geography of the Philippines will enable US forces readier access to the South China Sea, and access to Philippine facilities would provide US aircraft operational bases much closer to possible conflict areas.”

In the early 20th century, the US colonization of the Philippines was aimed at establishing a forward operating base for asserting its interests in China against rival imperialist powers. From the outset, the US established the Philippine military as a counterinsurgency force, aimed and trained to ruthlessly suppress resistance by the working class and peasantry to US colonial rule. Since the US relinquished direct rule to the Philippine bourgeoisie, the local armed forces have played the same role for decades in crushing internal opposition.

The CSIS report complained that the Philippine military had focussed on the army, which had developed at the expense of the air force, navy and coast guard, and was thus not of much use in a war with China. It declared that the country’s armed forces were “too small, too poorly equipped, and too badly funded to hope to catch up with larger and more established regional neighbors in the short term.”

The CSIS referred to the comments of Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario that the Philippines had to develop its military to at least ensure that any attacker “would end up with a bloodied nose.” The report concluded that even this goal would be difficult to attain. “As such, the best hope the Armed Forces of the Philippines has of meeting its short- and medium-term defense goals lies with the successful implementation of the EDCA.”

In essence, the Philippine military, in particular its navy and air force, was ill-adapted for the new role demanded by the US, as a front line state to spearhead the escalating confrontation against China. As the CSIS explained, the US and its allies Japan and Australia are seeking to boost Philippine military capabilities, particularly its coast guard.

The US military web site *Stars and Stripes* cited the comments of David Johnson, an analyst with the Washington-based Center for Advanced Defense Studies, who declared that EDCA would put “real teeth” into the US pivot to Asia, but warned that it would greatly heighten tensions with China. China could regard missiles carried by US ships rotating into Palawan the same way Americans thought about Russian missiles in Cuba in the 1960s, he said.

Johnson noted that EDCA would send “a strong signal” of commitment to regional American allies. However, he expressed concern that “when implemented, it will vastly increase the risk of US involvement in a regional conflict with China over issues that may not be of vital national interest to us, creating a near permanent state of brinksmanship.”

In other words, in aggressively confronting China and encouraging allies to do the same, the US is recklessly heightening tensions throughout the region and setting in motion processes that could have unforeseen, catastrophic consequences.



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