

# Australia, Philippines conduct joint war games directed against China

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In a bellicose move aimed at ratcheting up tensions with China, Australia and the Philippines have conducted wide-ranging military exercises over the past week, including combined air and maritime drills, amphibious landings and a mock invasion of an island.

Exercise Alon began last week and concluded on Tuesday and was the first large-scale bilateral war-gaming operation between the Philippines and Australia. It was held amid a flurry of military exercises and war-gaming, particularly involving the US and Australia, but with other nations participating.

Whatever the precise constellation of participants, each activity has been aimed at solidifying US-led alignments ultimately directed towards preparing for war with China. That was particularly explicit in Alon, which was openly framed as being connected to the Philippines' territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Since 2011, when the US launched its "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up directed against China, longstanding conflicts between Beijing and Southeast Asian nations over the South China Sea have been deliberately inflamed, transforming them into a potential flashpoint for major conflict. Alon was held amid a recent flare-up of tensions, which has seen several stand-offs between Chinese and Philippine vessels near the disputed Second Thomas Shoal.

Alon involved 1,200 Australian troops, a substantial deployment for the country, and 560 marines from the Philippines. A contingent of 120 US Marines also took part. Stationed in Darwin, Northern Australia, they have been described by leading American military figures and in think tanks as a key strike force for any conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

In addition to the personnel, significant military assets were mobilised. They included Australian warships the HMAS Canberra and frigate HMAS Anzac, along with two F-35 fighter jets and an Australian army Abrams tank. The Philippines deployed amphibious assault vehicles together with smaller military vessels.

The centrepiece of the exercises was a major operation last

Friday in San Antonio, a town in northern Zambales that faces the South China Sea. The full contingent of Australian and Filipino forces staged a mock invasion, retaking the area from an imaginary adversary. This included an amphibious landing, soldiers arriving via parachute and US Osprey aircraft to storm a beach and secure control of an area inland from it. The drills also included joint maneuvers simulating aerial combat.

The retaking of territories and islands has been a particular focus of a series of recent war games. That includes the massive Talisman Sabre military exercises in Australia last month, which featured a similar mock invasion, and the Exercise Predators Run over the past week, which have also involved "area denial" and recapture operations in northern Australia.

The focus of all is clearly on preparing for combat in the Indo-Pacific, which would centre on maritime warfare and "littoral" conflict around islands, reefs and other maritime features.

The implications are very direct in the case of the Philippines. Successive Philippines governments, encouraged by Washington, have railed against China's construction of artificial reefs and structures in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. In that context, the mock Alon invasion can only be interpreted as a trial run for an onslaught on the Chinese controlled features.

There are broader possible applications of the drills, however. US military strategists have repeatedly drawn attention to the importance of China's Hainan Island. It is the southernmost point of China, and hosts a significant military facility. In the event of a war between the US and China, control of Hainan would be crucial, potentially providing a launching point for attacks on the Chinese mainland itself.

In an indication of the importance of Exercise Alon, they were directly viewed by Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and the Australian Labor government's Defence Minister Richard Marles.

Marcos openly placed the wargaming in the context of the

territorial disputes and tensions with China. “It is an important aspect of how we prepare for any eventualities, considering there have been so many events that attest to the volatility of the region,” Marcos told a press conference.

Marles added: “A whole lot of damage can be done to Australia before any potential adversary sets foot on our shores, and maintaining the rules-based order in Southeast Asia, maintaining the collective security of Southeast Asia, is fundamental to maintaining the national security of our country.”

That is a phony justification for the new defence doctrine that has been adopted by the Labor government.

As expressed in a Defence Strategic Review released earlier this year, it has dispensed with previous policies, under which the nominal purpose of the Australian Defence Force is the protection of the continental mainland and its approaches.

Now, the military is to develop “impactful projection” throughout the Indo-Pacific, including through the development of missile capabilities and the acquisition of a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS. This has nothing to do with protecting Australia, but is aimed at furthering the US confrontation with China, for which Australia serves as the central attack dog.

Marles announced that Australia and the Philippines would begin joint patrols of the South China Sea, and would expand broader military cooperation. The patrols will inevitably increase the risk of a clash with Chinese forces. They occur in a context where, over the past decade, US and allied warships have repeatedly carried out “freedom of navigation” operations, which were, in fact aggressive incursions near and into waters claimed by China.

The close collaboration with Marcos is significant from two standpoints. Firstly, before his election in May 2022, and in the initial stages of his presidency, Marcos had indicated that tensions with China could be diffused. This reflected the balancing act that sections of the Philippines’ ruling elite have sought to adopt, fearful of the economic implications of all-out alignment with the US war drive against China.

But over the course of his presidency, Marcos has been brought on board. The highpoint of this shift was a joint announcement with US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin of a further expansion of American basing in the country. This included the return to total operational capacity of five US basing facilities and the addition of four more to be used for forward deployment in the region against China.

Now, as elsewhere, Australia is functioning as a key partner of the US in solidifying the Philippines’ commitment to the anti-China press.

Secondly, the fawning over Marcos exposes the claims

that the US campaign in the region has anything to do with the protection of “democracy” and “human rights” against an “autocratic” China. Marcos is an extreme-right wing figure, who has openly presented his presidency as a continuation of the dictatorial rule of his father in the 1970s and 80s. That included the imposition of martial law, political killings and mass roundups of opponents.

The fawning over Marcos parallels the red-carpet treatment that has been rolled out by the US and Australia to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His Hindu-chauvinist government has carried out such a crackdown on civil liberties that some rights organisations have questioned whether India can be described as a democracy in any meaningful sense.

Alon took place under conditions of several interlacing military exercises. Just prior to it, the US, Australia, Japan and the Philippines conducted joint naval drills. And as it was ongoing, Australia also hosted Operation Predators Run, with US Marines and the military forces of several regional nations in northern Australia.

Exercise Alon is the centrepiece of the Australian military’s Indo-Pacific Endeavour (IPE) 2023. That is a series of continuous military exercises and operations throughout the region, from July until the end of October. A July defence press release explained that Australian forces would visit fourteen countries in the region over the four months.

It stated: “IPE supports the Australian Government’s focus on deepening our diplomatic and defence partnerships across Southeast Asia and the Northeast Indian Ocean and reinforces Australia’s commitment to a peaceful, secure and prosperous region. IPE 2023 will conduct activities with Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Maldives, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Thailand and Vietnam.”

That itinerary makes clear that while declaiming about Chinese “expansion” and “aggression,” it is, in fact the US and its allies, such as Australia that are going on a militarist rampage in the region.



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