

US begins largest annual war games with the Philippines

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The United States and the Philippines are ramping up war games and joint naval patrols in the region together with other allies as Washington escalates its confrontation against China and prepares for war. The Philippines is being transformed into a frontline garrison with US troops and war materiel stationed across the country.

The largest military exercise of the year between the US and the Philippines, the 39th iteration of the Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder) exercises, will begin on April 22 and last until May 10. Some 11,000 US military personnel and 5,000 Filipino troops will stage drills in various locations, including at the northern tip of Luzon Island and on the Batanes Islands, which straddle the so-called first island chain regarded by US strategists as critical to confining the Chinese navy. They will be joined by troops from Australia and France as well as observers from 14 other countries, including Japan and South Korea.

The US and Philippine drills on the Batanes Island chain are highly provocative, with the northernmost Mavulis Island just over 140 kilometers from Taiwan. The Bashi Channel between the Philippines and Taiwan is a major choke point that could prevent Chinese military vessels, in particular its nuclear submarines, from reaching the Pacific Ocean from the South China Sea.

The drills are therefore a clear threat to China especially under conditions where Washington is deliberately goading Beijing into conflict over Taiwan by boosting the Taiwanese military and undermining the One China policy. Under the One China policy, which the US nominally recognises, Beijing is regarded as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan.

Exercises will also be held outside of the Philippines'

territorial waters for the first time as the US and Philippine militaries train to seize islands in the South China Sea. The naval drill component will be held near the disputed Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal that the US in league with the Philippines has exploited to stoke tensions with Beijing, including accusing it of "aggression" to justify its military build-up.

Beijing's Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian warned Manila against aligning closer with Washington, stating at an April 17 press conference, "The Philippines needs to be fully aware that when countries outside the region are brought into the South China Sea to flex muscles and stoke confrontation, tensions could get worse and the region will only become less stable. To hand over one's security to forces outside the region will only lead to greater insecurity and turn oneself into someone else's chess piece."

Neither Manila nor Washington, however, has any intention of backing away. Lieutenant General William Jurney, commander of US Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, stated recently, "Each year, we work closely with AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) senior leaders to make Balikatan more challenging. This year, we've increased the scope, scale, and complexity across all domains." He added, "We're building military readiness across the full range of combined and joint operations. It's our most expansive Balikatan yet."

One of the stated goals of the Balikatan war games is to increase the "interoperability" of US and Philippine forces; in other words, the development of a command structure that will allow the US military to integrate Philippine troops into any conflict with China. The US military is also beefing up bases, airfields and ports

across the country.

In particular, US military engineers are upgrading the main port in Basco on Batan Island, which is part of the Batanes Island chain. In last year's Balikatan exercises, the US military attempted to land a HIMARS missile launcher in Basco but found its main seaport could not accommodate the weight. The upgrading will allow landing craft to dock and unload heavier military equipment.

Underscoring the strategic importance of an upgraded port Grant Newsham, a retired Marine colonel and senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo, told the *Star and Stripes*: "Chinese ships trying to swing around the southern end of Taiwan or even land troops in the southern part of Taiwan will find themselves running a gauntlet of anti-ship missiles."

He added, "And the coverage provided by missile-armed ships operating out of Batanes makes things even worse for [China]—as the missile ranges are extended and from different attack vectors as well."

Furthermore, according to Philippine army Colonel Michael Logico, who is overseeing the conduct of the latest exercises: "This Balikatan will be a showcase of our capabilities in performing our mandate in accordance with the comprehensive archipelagic defense concept unveiled recently by the Department of National Defense."

The strategy, released in January, involves the transformation of the Philippine military, established under US colonial rule and maintained primarily as a counterinsurgency force for the suppression of social unrest, into a territorial "defense" force. In the words of Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro, this will allow "Philippine nationals, Philippine corporations, and those authorized by the Philippine government the unimpeded and peaceful exploration and exploitation of all natural resources within our EEZ and other areas we have jurisdiction."

This entails the allocation of massive funds for the modernization of the military at the expense of the desperate social and economic needs of workers in the country. Over the next 10 years, \$US35.5 billion will be provided for the purchase of military fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, surface and submarine naval vessels, and missile systems.

According to a recent report from data analytics firm

GlobalData, military acquisition expenditure is anticipated to grow at 4.9 percent with overall military expenditure is projected to increase at 6.2 percent from 2025 to 2029.

The Balikatan exercises are far from the only joint military drills taking place. On April 7, the US conducted a joint patrol with the Philippines, Australia and Japan in the South China Sea. The patrol involved three Philippine warships, one US combat ship, one Australian warship and, for the first time, a Japanese warship. More joint naval patrols in the disputed waters are set to be conducted following the war-planning summit held in Washington this month between US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

The following day, Exercise Salaknib 24, a two-week exercise between the US and Philippine armies began in the province of Nueva Ecija on Luzon Island, with multiple live-fire drills, jungle training, artillery and mortar live fire exercises. It included what the US military called the "historic" deployment of a missile system called "Typhon" in northern Luzon. Typhon is capable of launching Tomahawk cruise missiles with a range of 1,800 kilometers, putting major east coast Chinese cities and military installations at risk.

On the southern island of Mindanao, 50 US Marines from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force conducted the Marine Exercises 2024 with Philippine Marines and naval reservists from the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. The exercise ended on April 19.

On April 12, the Cope Thunder exercise between the Philippine and US air forces began at the Basa Air Base in Pampanga Province, on Luzon Island. The exercise, involving four Philippine FA-50 trainer fighters and four US F-16 fighters, is in part preparation for the Philippine air force's participation in the even bigger Pitch-Black exercise to be conducted in Australia from July to August this year. The Cope Thunder exercise also ended on April 19.



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