

# US-Philippine military drills: A “full battle test” for war with China

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On Monday, April 21, Washington launched the largest and most openly aggressive set of joint military exercises ever staged with the Philippines. The exercises, which involve 17,000 troops and will be staged until May 9, are a combined and coordinated simulation of war with China over Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Termed Balikatan, or shoulder-to-shoulder, the exercises are the 40th iteration of the annual war games. Balikatan exercises used to involve domestic operations, largely targeting the Muslim population of the southern island of Mindanao. They were, in a sense, colonial affairs. Over the past decade, this character has utterly changed. Discreetly at first, now openly and explicitly, Balikatan has turned into joint preparations for war with China.

Marine Lt. Gen. James Glynn, US exercise director for Balikatan 2025, told the press on Monday that the war games were a “full battle test.” Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff, added, “We will assess our readiness in all domains—air, land, sea, cyber, information and the emerging frontier of space.”

The exercises will be led by 9,000 US troops alongside 5,000 Filipinos. They are joined by participating contingents of soldiers from Australia, Japan, Britain, France and Canada. Sixteen countries have joined as observers, the largest number ever, including Germany, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and South Korea. The front row seats at the war games are intended to demonstrate what Lt. Gen. Glynn termed the “lethality” of US arms.

Japan joins the war games for the first time this year. Eighty years after it departed the land it ravaged during its three-year occupation during World War II, Tokyo

returns bearing arms. Last year, Manila and Tokyo signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), granting limited basing rights to Japanese forces in the Philippines. Under the auspices of this deal, Japan’s so-called Self-Defense Forces deployed 150 personnel and a warship, the Mogami-class frigate Yahagi, to take part in Balikatan.

The Balikatan exercises are a combined battle situation, including countering missile threats, conducting invasions at sea and sinking a decommissioned Philippine naval ship with missile strikes.

The most provocative aspect of the war games is Washington’s deployment of the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), a remotely controlled unmanned vehicle armed with Naval Strike Missiles, to the Batanes islands in the midst of the Bashi Channel just south of Taiwan.

This is the closest to mainland China that US land-based missiles have been deployed since the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1958. The Batanes islands stretch halfway across the channel, reaching the midway point to Taiwan. The Bashi Channel is a vital strategic water route from the South China Sea to the Pacific.

The US troops based on the Batanes islands will be staging a live-fire exercise, sinking a naval vessel in the waters south of Taiwan.

The deployment of NMESIS follows last year’s deployment of the Typhon missile system to the Philippines, with the capacity of launching missiles at much of eastern mainland China. At least 16 SM-6 and Tomahawk Land Attack missiles have been deployed to the Philippines with the Typhon system, according to the Associated Press.

While Typhon directly targets China, the anti-ship

missiles of NMESIS are designed to establish control over the critical waterways, above all the Bashi Channel. From its point of deployment in the Batanes islands, and with a range of 110 nautical miles on its Naval Strike Missiles, NMESIS has the capacity to target any ship in the straits, all the way to the southern tip of Taiwan.

The open targeting of the waters around Taiwan is immensely provocative, the island being the most sensitive of all of Beijing's national security concerns. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun told the press, "The parties concerned are advised not to provoke the Taiwan issue, and those who play with fire will burn themselves."

Zhang Junshe, a Chinese military affairs expert, in an interview with the *Global Times* stated: "By deploying two types of missile systems, the US has established a comprehensive long-, medium-, and short-range strike network, with a maximum range of 1,800 kilometers, covering China's southeastern coastal areas, the Taiwan Straits, the Bashi Channel, and the northern South China Sea. ... In the event of a conflict, these locations where missiles are deployed will inevitably become targets for counter-strikes."

On Wednesday, in a clear response to the Balikatan exercises, China deployed its People Liberation Army Navy carrier strike group, led by the Shandong aircraft carrier to the Philippine Sea in the western Pacific, immediately off the east coast of Luzon island. The rival deployments place the US live-fire ship-sinking exercises within approximately 100 nautical miles of China's strike group.

US Third Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) is testing a new short-range surface to air counter-drone system, named the Marine Air Defense Integrated System (MADIS), in a live-fire drill. Designed for the detection and destruction of unmanned aircraft, MADIS was first tested in Hawaii in January. Balikatan marks the first deployment of the new technology outside of the United States.

The Third MLR is based in the Philippines. Lt. Col. Matthew Sladek, commanding officer of the MLR Anti-Air Battalion stated that "the more repetitions we get to integrate it [MADIS] with the Philippine Marine Corps in training, the more it will enhance our collective lethality."

The war games take place in the midst of an ongoing

build-up of US-led forces targeting China in the Asia-Pacific region

Last week, the US deployed its first Bomber Task Force mission to Japan, sending four B-1B Lancer bombers to Misawa Air Base. On April 2, the US approved the sale of \$US5.5 billion in F-16 fighter jets to the Philippines. On April 9, the Philippines acquired two corvette class warships "with advanced weapons and radar systems" from South Korea.

In early April, the Philippines received the first of three batches of BrahMos cruise missiles, a supersonic anti-ship missile system, from India. Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr told the press on Wednesday that a second batch was already en route. The purchase of three batteries of the BrahMos system for \$US375 million was arranged in 2022.

Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru will be travelling to Manila for an official visit on April 29, to oversee a series of high-level talks between Manila and Tokyo for further military integration.

Washington is preparing the Philippines to serve as a staging ground for conflict over Taiwan. These preparations are alarmingly advanced. In March, AFP Chief Brawner told the Northern Luzon Command to prepare for a Taiwan invasion contingency. "If something happens to Taiwan," he said, "inevitably we will be involved. Start planning for actions in case there is an invasion of Taiwan."

Balikatan 2025 is a key part of these plans. The entire event is a calculated provocation. Washington is staging a dress rehearsal for the opening salvos of World War Three.



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