

# US announces expanded maritime task force with the Philippines

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Speaking on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) defense summit in Kuala Lumpur on Friday, US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced the creation of Task Force Philippines, a joint military agency of Washington and Manila. The new task force will place the entirety of Philippine military's maritime oversight under the direct supervision of an American one star general.

The announcement was part of a flurry of escalatory measures targeting China and deals with Manila involving a number of countries that were concluded in the wake of Trump's visit to the region. Trump stomped his way through Asia last week, postured as a peace maker, sought to strongarm economic deals, and ordered the resumption of active nuclear weapons testing for the first time since the 1990s.

The chairmanship of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting rotated from Malaysia to the Philippines at the conclusion of the summit. Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the Philippines has come to play a more aggressive role against China than any other Southeast Asian country, serving as a spearhead for US imperialism.

The new task force, Hegseth declared, would "decisively respond to crisis or aggression and reestablish deterrence in the South China Sea."

Details remain limited but the function and character of the task force is clear. On Sunday, November 2, Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo Brawner told the press, "There was Task Force Ayungin, right? We're expanding that now... to cover the entire archipelago."

Task Force Ayungin, whose existence was made public in 2024, served as the auspices for American supervision and control of confrontations staged by Philippine vessels with China during rotation and reprovisioning missions at the Second Thomas Shoal—known in the Philippines as Ayungin Shoal.

Manila has long maintained a makeshift naval base on the Second Thomas Shoal, in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, on board the BRP Sierra Madre, a naval vessel deliberately scuttled on the reef in 1999. A handful of troops are stationed there, their presence sustained by regular rotational and resupply missions.

These missions have led to confrontations with China, which saw the Philippines as maintaining a permanent military presence on a feature which it claimed. Manila and Beijing concluded an arrangement for the peaceful resupply and rotation of the troops, provided no construction material was supplied to improve and expand the basing facility. China was content to let the Sierra Madre rust and collapse.

Here Task Force Ayungin entered in. Under the oversight of Washington, Manila supplied construction material to the Sierra Madre in addition to provisions. The Pentagon based US troops in the Philippines, under the auspices of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), who piloted US aerial and marine drones to supervise and coordinate Manila's confrontations with China. The basing facilities used for these activities were visited by then Vice President Kamala Harris in November 2022.

In June 2024, the resupply confrontations overseen by Washington led to a deliberate collision between Chinese and Philippine vessels, and injured Philippine sailors. It was a direct armed confrontation on the South China Sea. In the wake of the crisis, the existence of Task Force Ayungin was announced.

Task Force Philippines, a name clearly dreamed up in Washington, will create a military body of 60 service members headed by a one star general, to oversee maritime confrontations in all of the waters surrounding the Philippine archipelago. These include the South China Sea, the Philippine Sea to the east of Luzon, the Celebes and Sulu Seas in the south, and, most vitally, the northern

straits separating Luzon from Taiwan.

The commander of this force will be an American officer, as was made clear in Brawner's remarks. "Instead of us talking to Admiral Paparo [the head of the US Indo-Pacific Command] were going to talk to him [the head of Task Force Philippines]," he told the press.

The new command, which already exists, began as an operational agreement between Brawner and Paparo and was elevated to a Task Force by Hegseth and Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr over the weekend.

Using the 13 official sites reserved for basing US troops in the Philippines under EDCA, Task Force Philippines will spy on Chinese vessel and coordinate maritime confrontations with aerial and marine drones, some of which can carry weapons payloads. The Pentagon has deployed NMESIS land-based anti-ship missile systems to the Philippines and, most provocatively, the Typhon missile system, which can launch intermediate range missiles capable of targeting Beijing.

As the colonial ruler of the Philippines in the early 20th century, Washington commanded the Philippine Constabulary, a hated force of domestic repression. A century later, US imperialism directly supervises the Philippine military, as Washington positions its forces for war with China.

Washington's escalating preparations for war have set off a frenzy among the imperialist powers, all looking to be part of the action.

On November 2, the Philippines signed a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA) with Canada. Canadian Defense Minister David McGuinty, speaking at a joint press conference in Makati, declared that Canada was committed to maintaining three naval ships in the Pacific.

He announced that Canada intended to take part in next year's Balikatan military exercises, the largest of the annual war games staged by the US with the Philippines. Balikatan has grown over the course of recent years into a dress rehearsal for the opening acts of World War III in the Pacific.

While Canada has long been close to Washington's machinations in the South China Sea, observing Balikatan and providing the Philippines with a Dark Vessel Detection system to monitor Chinese ships, the SOVFA will allow the direct integration of Canadian troops into ongoing war preparations.

The Philippines has now concluded SOVFAs with the United States, Australia, Japan and New Zealand. Discussions with France, Singapore, Britain, Germany

and India are ongoing to establish similar arrangements. Sweden, abandoning the pretense of neutrality, announced last week that it would be deploying a permanent defense attaché to Manila. A new body involving military leaders from the United States, Japan, Australia and the Philippines was formed out of meetings at the ADMM: the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Cooperation Council.

This rapidly expanding network of agreements and treaties is the legal framework for interoperable warfare that is developing under the auspices of Washington.

Australia, which already has a SOVFA with Manila, is preparing to sign a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the Philippines. The deal, which moves beyond the existing Status of Visiting Forces Agreement, is bound up with the creation of eight infrastructure projects in the Philippines connected to "maritime awareness" and "sovereign rights."

The agreement, an unnamed Australian official told the press, "gives us more rights for our militaries in one another's countries... the agreement between our two countries will allow more Australian troops to come in should we want to."

Australia is also preparing to base troops in the Philippines at facilities alongside those of the Americans.

There are fracture lines between the imperialist powers encircling China, sharp and widening differences of interest. Trump's economic warfare has polarized and riven world capitalism.

Vast social anger and unrest fuels a desperate uncertainty in the elite. In the Philippines this has found initial expression in a battle over corruption between factions of the elite with rival orientations to Washington or to China that destabilized the entire political system. These widening conflicts of interest and explosive social tensions give added volatility to the danger of war.



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