

Washington to deploy more medium-range missiles to the Philippines

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On February 16, at the 12th Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD) in Manila, Washington and Manila announced that the US military would “work to increase deployments of US cutting-edge missile and unmanned systems to the Philippines.” The US Congress appropriated an additional \$144 million in 2026 to invest in Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites—the network of Philippine bases opened to American forces. The two governments also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on critical minerals supply chains and jointly condemned China’s “illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive activities” in the South China Sea.

The missile systems at the center of these plans are the Typhon Mid-Range Capability launchers—ground-based platforms manufactured by Lockheed Martin that fire Tomahawk cruise missiles, with a range exceeding 1,600 kilometers, and SM-6 multi-role missiles. The Typhon is the first US ground-based intermediate-range missile system deployed overseas since the Cold War. Such weapons were banned under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty from 1987 until the Trump administration withdrew from it in 2019, clearing the way for a new generation of land-based strike systems aimed at China.

The first Typhon battery was deployed to the Philippines in April 2024, ostensibly for use during several weeks of joint military exercises, part of the annual Balikatan war games. It never left. In January 2025, the launchers were relocated to an undisclosed second site on Luzon to test how rapidly they could be repositioned—a rehearsal for wartime survivability. A second Typhon system arrived for Balikatan 2025, alongside the first-ever deployment of the Marine Corps’ NMESIS anti-ship missile launchers to Batan Island in Batanes, directly across the Luzon Strait from Taiwan.

These are not Philippine weapons. They are US assets, operated by US Army personnel, under US command. The framing adopted by Washington and Manila—that these deployments represent “training” or the transfer of military technology to an ally—is a lie. Philippine Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez conceded as much when he told the Associated Press that the systems are deployed “in the hope that, down the road, we will be able to get our own.” The

Philippines is not being armed. It is being used as a forward staging ground in preparation for American offensive operations against China.

The scale of preparations is staggering. More than 500 joint military activities have been approved for 2026—more than one a day—the most in the history of the alliance. Balikatan 2025 involved over 14,000 troops, F-16 fighter jets, live sinking exercises, and integrated air and missile defense training, with observers from four NATO countries. Philippine military officials have announced that Balikatan 2026 will expand into “multi-domain” operations incorporating “different missile systems.” The Tomahawk missiles on Luzon are capable of striking targets deep inside southern China.

Chinese embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu denounced the deployments: “The introduction of strategic and offensive weapons that heighten regional tensions, fuel geopolitical confrontation, and risk triggering an arms race is extremely dangerous. Such actions are irresponsible to the people of the Philippines, to Southeast Asian nations, and to regional security as a whole.” Presented as deterrence, these deployments are hugely escalatory and destabilizing. They are preparations for war.

Until recently, the dispute within the Philippine ruling elite over integration into the US war drive expressed itself between two rival factions: that of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and former President Rodrigo Duterte. Marcos Jr. had himself been part of the Duterte political camp until shortly after his election to the presidency in 2022, when he pivoted sharply toward Washington. The Duterte faction has called for a more conciliatory stance toward Beijing—not out of any principled opposition to militarism, but in pursuit of its own factional interests and Chinese investment ties.

Now, however, fault lines are emerging within the Marcos coalition itself. Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Secretary Theresa Lazaro has been the most consistent voice for restraint, calling for “circumspection in language and actions” so as not to “unnecessarily derail the diplomatic space needed to manage tensions.” In a leaked letter to Senator Risa Hontiveros, she cautioned against public provocations that could narrow the country’s room for maneuver—a clear rebuke to certain provocateurs in uniform and their allies in the legislature,

particularly the pseudoleft Akbayan party of which Hontiveros is the leading representative.

Senator Erwin Tulfo, a Marcos loyalist installed as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 3, has moved in the same direction. Tulfo took over the post from Sen. Imee Marcos, sister of the President and a leading figure in the Duterte faction. Within weeks of assuming the post, Tulfo met with Lazaro and Chinese Ambassador Jing Quan and emerged announcing that the Philippine and Chinese coast guards would sign a Memorandum of Understanding by end of March for joint patrols and search-and-rescue operations in the South China Sea. The idea of joint Coast Guard patrols between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea is a remarkable shift from the ongoing barrage of maritime confrontations, water cannon blasts, and occasional collisions between what are effectively warring parties in hotly disputed waters.

The unease in the Philippine elite, spreading now into the Marcos camp, is fueled by the volatility, criminality, and unreliability of the Trump White House. In the space of two months, Washington kidnapped the president of Venezuela, threatened the military annexation of Greenland, launched a criminal war of aggression against Iran, and whipsawed tariff policy—the 19 percent duties imposed on Philippine exports were struck down by the Supreme Court and reimposed in altered form within days. Even Philippine lawmakers allied to the war drive have been forced to acknowledge that Washington’s conduct is indistinguishable from the aggression they falsely attribute to Beijing. The memory of 1942—when the United States abandoned the Philippines to the Japanese Occupation—haunts these calculations. The Typhon launchers on Luzon, along with the marine drones that supervise confrontations between Philippine and Chinese vessels, are controlled by American soldiers who can be ordered home at a moment’s notice.

Operating in sharp contrast to the Lazaro-Tulfo diplomatic track is Rear Admiral Jay Tarriela, the Philippine Coast Guard’s spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea, who has emerged as one of the most provocative figures in the confrontation with China. Marcos promoted Tarriela to rear admiral on February 23—days after the BSD meeting—making him the youngest flag officer in the history of the Philippine uniformed services.

Tarriela’s background is revealing. He left the Philippine Military Academy before graduation amid allegations of academic dishonesty. His subsequent career was shaped by deep institutional ties to the US and Japanese security establishments. He was a fellow of the East-West Center US-Philippines Alliance Fellowship in Washington, DC, and a member of the inaugural cohort of the Pacific Forum’s US-Philippines Next Generation Leaders’ Initiative—a Honolulu think tank closely tied to US Indo-Pacific strategic planning. His graduate degrees are from the National Graduate Institute

for Policy Studies in Tokyo, obtained on Japanese government scholarships in conjunction with the Japan Coast Guard Academy. He has published in *The Diplomat* and *The National Interest*, standard outlets of US-aligned strategic thinking, and received the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Medal of Excellence.

Though nominally subordinate to civilian authority, Tarriela operates as an independent political actor. He publicly displayed grotesque AI-generated caricatures of Xi Jinping at a university forum, provoking a diplomatic firestorm with the Chinese Embassy. He dismissed Beijing’s protests as “not his concern” because diplomatic relations are “a DFA concern”—using his military status as a shield while conducting what amounts to freelance foreign policy provocation.

Tarriela’s closest political alignment is with Sen. Hontiveros and Akbayan. He flew with Hontiveros to Thitu (Kalayaan) Island on February 22 in a staged publicity operation. Hontiveros and Tarriela raised the Philippine flag together and Hontiveros gave a jingoistic speech that strengthening the Philippine claim to the South China Sea was “our patriotic duty.”

The pseudoleft Akbayan has become the leading proponent of Washington’s aggression against China in the region and has made hawkish and racist anti-China politics the centerpiece of its electoral strategy, winning 2.78 million votes and three congressional seats in the 2025 midterms. Hontiveros is positioning herself for a 2028 presidential run, and confrontation with China is central to her profile.

The working class in the Philippines, China, and the United States has no interest in the catastrophic war being prepared. The missile launchers on Luzon, the 500 joint military exercises, the billions in base construction are not acts of defense. They are the infrastructure of a conflict between nuclear-armed powers that US imperialism and its allies cannot control and whose consequences they cannot foresee. Only the independent mobilization of the international working class against imperialist war can halt this drive toward disaster.



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