

Balikatan 2026: US turns Philippines into forward base for war against China

John Malvar
5 May 2026

The United States fired a Tomahawk cruise missile from a civilian airport in Leyte on May 5, striking a target in the farming province of Nueva Ecija as part of Balikatan 2026—the largest US-Philippines war games in history, involving 17,000 troops from seven countries, roughly 10,000 American, and, for the first time since the Second World War, Japanese combat forces firing anti-ship missiles on Philippine soil.

The launch was the first live firing of the Typhon mid-range missile system since its deployment to the Philippines in April 2024. The Typhon system carries Tomahawks capable of striking targets thousands of kilometers away with a conventional or nuclear warhead. That such a weapon was launched from a civilian international airport and aimed at agricultural land in Nueva Ecija is not incidental: it reveals the character of the exercise.

Balikatan 2026 is not a training exercise. It is a declaration of intent. One Philippine security analyst described it without equivocation as “a multilateral dress rehearsal in light of China’s irredentist and aggressive agenda against Taiwan in 2027.” Washington was not rehearsing the defense of the Filipino people. It was rehearsing a war that will be fought on Filipino soil, at Filipino expense, and against which the Filipino population will serve as the human shield for billions of dollars in dispersed US weaponry.

The scale alone marks an escalation, but the qualitative developments are more significant. Japan has deployed approximately 1,400 Self-Defense Force personnel and, for the first time since the Second World War, is conducting live-fire combat exercises on Philippine soil. Japanese Type 88 anti-ship missiles have been fired in the Philippines—the first use of that system outside Japanese territory.

US Navy Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction

System (NMESIS) anti-ship launchers have been deployed to Itbayat Island in the Batanes, a speck of land inhabited by a few thousand Ivatan fishing families that lies approximately 100 miles south of Taiwan, squarely astride the Bashi Channel through which Chinese naval forces would necessarily pass in any Taiwan contingency. The Philippines has simultaneously integrated its own newly acquired BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles into the joint operational framework alongside these US and Japanese systems. For the first time, a multi-nation anti-ship missile network covering the Luzon Strait is operational, however temporarily, on Philippine soil.

A rehearsal of maritime pre-positioning logistics—offloading military supply ships at Cagayan de Oro and distributing materiel across Luzon—practiced the war-time supply chains that would sustain large-scale combat operations throughout the archipelago. Balikatan is not an isolated annual exercise; it is the annual peak of more than 500 joint military activities scheduled between the United States and the Philippines for 2026 alone—more than one per day, the highest in the history of the alliance.

The United States has constructed an elaborate legal fiction to obscure what is in fact taking place. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of 2014 grants US forces access to nine designated Philippine military facilities on a rotational basis, and Philippine officials ritually insist, particularly since Iran threatened retaliatory strikes on US bases following Washington’s attacks in February, that “there are no American military bases in the Philippines.”

But US forces are not confined to EDCA-designated facilities. The former colonial ruler moves with impunity across the entire archipelago. They launch a Tomahawk from Tacloban’s civilian airport and

position anti-ship missiles on Itbayat, which appears in no EDCA document. Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan—an EDCA site in the north of Luzon, a short flight from Taiwan—is being developed as a refuelling depot for US and Philippine aircraft. The US Defense Logistics Agency has simultaneously issued a solicitation for a fuel depot on the Davao Gulf—outside any EDCA designation—capable of holding approximately 977,000 barrels of US government fuel for warships and aircraft over a four-year period.

This is the operational logic of the Pentagon’s own “deterrence by denial” strategy and its Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept, which explicitly calls for dispersing missile systems, fuel stocks, and logistics nodes across allied territory to complicate an adversary’s targeting calculus—but it does so by embedding US weaponry in civilian airports, fishing communities, and farming provinces, making the Filipino civilian economy the physical medium through which US forces operate. The counter-drone drills at Balikpapan—preparing Philippine and US forces for saturation drone strikes—confirm that Washington anticipates exactly this. It is preparing defenses against the very attacks its own provocations are designed to invite.

The integration of Japan into this war preparation carries a specific historical charge that the Philippine ruling class is studiously avoiding. Japan is conducting combat exercises on Philippine soil for the first time since its wartime occupation, during which it carried out some of the worst crimes in Philippine history—the Manila Massacre of February 1945 alone killed an estimated 100,000 civilians. The legal vehicle for this return is the doctrine of “collective self-defense,” a reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan’s postwar constitution—the clause that formally renounces war and prohibits Japan from maintaining “war potential”—introduced by the Abe cabinet in 2014, which permits Japan to use force when an ally is attacked and Japan’s “survival” is deemed at stake.

The phrase “collective self-defense” is doing today precisely the work that “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty” did in the 1940s: it is the threadbare legal and moral pretext for regional military projection. Yesterday’s “co-prosperty sphere”—under which Japan conquered, enslaved, and massacred its neighbors under the banner of Asian liberation from Western

imperialism—is today rebranded as a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” defended by Japanese “Self-Defense Forces” firing anti-ship missiles from the Philippines at the behest of Washington.

This entire war mobilization is unfolding across a landscape already economically devastated by the criminal US-led war against Iran. The Philippine economy was brutally hit by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. The Philippines, which imports nearly all its oil, was the first country in Southeast Asia to declare a national energy emergency. Diesel prices at the pump doubled, from ₱55 to ₱130 per liter. Jeepney drivers—the backbone of much of the country’s transit—were forced off the roads.

Rising fuel costs have driven up the price of every commodity dependent on transport and agriculture. Philippine headline inflation surged to 7.2 percent in April 2026, its highest level in over three years, driven by food prices rising 6 percent year-on-year—corn up 9.4 percent, fish and seafood up 7.7 percent, vegetables up 6.1 percent. The burden falls most heavily on the poorest: inflation for the bottom 30 percent of income households has outpaced the headline rate, compressing already desperate budgets.

The Filipino working class has no interest in this war. Washington is not defending the Philippines; it is using the archipelago—its airports, its fishing communities, its farming provinces, its young soldiers—as the forward launching platform and expendable buffer zone for a war against China over Taiwan and US regional hegemony. The interests being defended are those of US imperialism, of the Philippine oligarchy aligned with it, and of a remilitarizing Japan now sending combat troops and missiles back to the country its forces once occupied and massacred.

What is needed is the independent political mobilization of the Filipino working class—alongside workers in the United States, Japan, China, and across the region—in active opposition to imperialist war. The fight against war is inseparable from the fight against the capitalist system that produces it.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)