

The Way Forward in the US–Philippines Alliance and Air Force Relations

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Abstract

Out of the 11 Southeast Asian countries, this article focuses on the Philippines because it is the most important of two US allies in the region, has supported a rules-based international order and free and open Indo-Pacific in disputes with China over the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea (WPS/SCS), and has a defense and air force leadership with the willingness to collaborate with the United States Air Force (USAF). The article employs methods used in this author's research on USAF–Indian Air Force and USAF–Vietnam Air Defense–Air Force relations,¹ evidence from Southeast Asian and US sources, including semi-structured interviews,² and the author's recently published article on the collective action problem in confronting China in the WPS/SCS.³ First, the article analyzes the Philippines' security profile, the Armed Forces of the Philippines and PAF's status, and the alliance with the United States. Second, the article appraises what Philippine officials would like the United States and USAF to do to build capacity and develop capabilities and then what the United States and USAF would like Philippines and its PAF to do, especially to counter and deter China. Third, the article assesses how Washington and the USAF might overcome barriers, advance mutual interests, and be creative in working with the Philippines and the PAF.⁴ Finally, the article weighs different scenarios about how US and USAF engagement with the Philippines and the PAF may change and evolve to meet future security goals, including the provision of deterrence in the WPS/SCS.

Senior officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), including the Philippine Air Force (PAF), as well as leading government officials and their US counterparts share concerns about China's expansionism and militarized occupation of parts of Manila's 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea (WPS/SCS).⁵ These leaders are also concerned about China's threat to freedom of navigation (FON) in the wider SCS—a highly strategic waterway. The Philippines' security establishment wants greater assistance from its US ally in building the defense capacity and developing the military capabilities of the AFP, including airpower, to help defend the EEZ. US Air Force (USAF) cooperation with the PAF is part of the way

forward. The Philippines's possible acquisition of the US F-16 Block 70/72 (F-21) aircraft would set the stage for an accelerated relationship between the PAF and the USAF and could help Manila develop a more capable air force and assist the country in standing up to China's expansionism in the 2020s and 2030s.⁶

Since 2010, the Philippines has experienced military and paramilitary encounters and clashes with China over the WPS/SCS. In 2012, Beijing seized the Scarborough Shoal in the Philippines' EEZ and barred Philippine fishermen from their traditional livelihood. In 2013, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) began building and militarizing seven artificial "islands" in Manila's EEZ in the Spratly Islands and harassing the nine AFP outposts there. These provocative acts led the Philippines to take its case, based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to the International Court of Justice's Permanent Court of Arbitration (ICJ-PCA).⁷ In 2016, the court invalidated China's "nine-dash-line" claim of sovereignty over 90 percent of the SCS and recognized Manila's 200-mile exclusive EEZ in most of the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. However, Beijing rejected the ruling and has continued encroachment. The United States supported the Philippines case and has conducted FON operations around PLA bases in the SCS, rejecting China's sovereignty claims and upholding the UNCLOS ruling. In addition, the United States and the Philippines began implementing the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)—an addition to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which promised to bring greater US military presence in the Philippines and eventual US support in defense against China's encroachment in the WPS/SCS.⁸

Beijing has bolstered China's expansionism by influencing the Philippines' political elite. Starting in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte moved toward China and its promises of aid, trade, and investment and declined to enforce the UNCLOS ruling. Frequent meetings between Duterte administration officials and their Chinese counterparts indicated a warming of relations. As a result, Duterte did little to defend the Philippines' interests in its EEZ. While Manila's alliance with Washington has continued to bring vital security cooperation and diplomatic support, Duterte moved away from the United States. Starting in 2016, Washington stood behind democratic and human rights values in condemning Duterte's extrajudicial killing campaign against suspected drug dealers and users. This led Duterte to threaten the alliance and security cooperation, especially the VFA and EDCA.

It is uncertain if newly elected president Ferdinand Marcos II, who started his six-year term in June 2022, will maintain Duterte's tilt toward China or take a tougher line. Marcos and the new foreign minister have made statements supporting the UNCLOS ruling, criticizing China's encroachment, and welcoming

visits from high level US officials. At the same time, the new president is expected to maintain close economic relations with China. As for the United States, Washington must pursue its interests in the Philippines, while dealing with the troubling legacy of Marcos' father, who ruled as a corrupt dictator, 1965–1986. The contradiction between US interests and values illustrates the challenges that the US faces in developing its alliance with the Philippines and making it a force to help uphold the rules-based international order in the WPS/SCS. Washington must find ways to maintain political and economic ties, as well as foster the alliance and strengthen the AFP and PAF.

The AFP has been slow to develop its maritime and airpower capabilities to counter China's encroachment in the WPS/SCS, despite US offers of security assistance to upgrade those capabilities. The AFP remains army-centric, under-resourced, and focused on defending against communist and Islamist insurgents. Despite these challenges, there is a way forward for the alliance and US security cooperation that can eventually create counterweight against China's encroachment. The USAF–PAF relationship promises to be part of the solution, with the possible F-16 acquisition and development.⁹ A growing USAF–PAF relationship promises to serve as a key part of the alliance in the 2020s, aid in Washington in helping the Philippines maintain its sovereignty and EEZ, and contribute to the US strategy of building partnerships and alliances in the Indo-Pacific region to support the rules-based international order.

The Philippines' Security Challenges and Alliance with the United States

Based upon the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), the 1999 VFA, and 2014 EDCA, the US–Philippine alliance provides the potential for US support to develop the Philippines' maritime and airpower to counter China in defending Manila's EEZ in the WPS/SCS.¹⁰ However, a fundamental challenge is that the country is a weak ally, which has been tilting toward China. State weakness stems from the Philippines' landed political elite who have long dominated the country and used government for their own benefit, while not contributing sufficiently to the development of state capacity. Insufficient resourcing helps to explain the AFP and PAF's lack of capacity and capabilities. Elite control of the land and the state has helped to create a mass of landless peasants, high inequality, and few opportunities and services for the majority.¹¹ These factors have fueled long-running communist and Islamist insurgencies that the AFP has had to fight for decades. Elites distract the majority's attention through populist and nationalist campaigns, including social media, that underdeliver on promises and stoke anti-

American sentiment. The powerful Chinese-Filipino community has economic and political clout and business and family ties to China,¹² and some tycoons have been able to influence politicians in the oligarchy that rules the Philippines and persuaded them to tilt toward Beijing.¹³

Thus, a combination of factors has made the Philippines a weak US ally and vulnerable to China's influence, causing the country to swing from seeking compromise (2001–2013); challenging Beijing (2013–2016); and again seeking compromise (2016–2022). During the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from 2001 to 2010, China influenced the Philippine position on the WPS/SCS with considerable increases in trade, aid, and investment. During this time, the Philippine government came close to a joint development agreement with China to tap energy resources in Philippine waters, which would have given Beijing a degree of control over Manila's resources. After his election in 2010, President Benigno Aquino III attempted to reach a compromise with China on the WPS/SCS issue. However, in April 2012, Philippine naval vessels attempted to arrest Chinese fishermen who were in Philippine waters in the Scarborough Shoal. China Coast Guard ships, backed by PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels, blocked the arrest, continued to patrol the area, and kept out Philippine vessels. President Aquino's subsequent negotiation efforts over the shoal with Beijing failed.

In 2013, Aquino and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert Ferreros del Rosario changed course and decided to challenge China. First, they moved to file the Philippines' UNCLOS case, which Manila delivered to the ICJ-PCA in May 2014.¹⁴ Manila requested invalidation of the nine-dash line and recognition of the Philippines' 200-mile EEZ applied to the WPS/SCS. Second, Aquino and del Rosario initiated negotiations with the United States for the EDCA, which promised to lead to joint US-Philippines base construction and advance the means to help defend Manila's EEZ. Manila was quite assertive in moving forward with the UNCLOS case in the face of pressure from China, which threatened to economically punish the Philippines, despite the latter's efforts to persuade Beijing to separate the case from other issues.¹⁵ In July 2016, Manila won the UNCLOS case with the nine-dash line declared invalid and the Philippines' EEZ confirmed.¹⁶ Washington voiced its support for the Philippines' UNCLOS victory and its EEZ in the interest of maintaining FON and a rules-based international order. However, the United States, in line with the ICJ-PCA ruling, did not support claims that artificial features constructed by the Philippines, China, or any other country in the SCS were "islands," with 12-mile zones of sovereignty and 200-mile EEZs surrounding them.¹⁷

In July 2016, President Duterte took office and immediately downplayed his country's UNCLOS victory, instead seeking lucrative deals with China. Duterte's

shift in policy led noted Asian scholar David Shambaugh to assess the Philippines to be a “tilter” toward China.¹⁸ The Obama administration’s condemnation of Duterte’s campaign of extrajudicial killings led the Philippine president to retaliate by curtailing the EDCA with the United States in 2016 and threatening to cancel the VFA in 2020. However, under pressure from the Philippine security establishment and public opinion, Duterte compromised by agreeing to limited implementation of the EDCA for eventual joint construction at five military bases and to an extension of the VFA. After several PLA provocations around Reed Bank and other locations, including the killing of fishermen, the security establishment and public opinion finally succeeded in pressuring Duterte to challenge China diplomatically and to proceed with gas prospecting in Manila’s EEZ.¹⁹

Given the weakness of the Philippine state and the susceptibility of its presidents to Chinese influence, the country will continue to be a weak and less than dependable US ally in the SCS. There is considerable uncertainty about whether the Marcos administration will be more like Aquino’s or Duterte’s. The Philippines security establishment is concerned that, in the long run, China will continue to practice divide-and-rule among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states and might even push the United States out of the region. Nevertheless, it is important for Washington and Manila to stay engaged to defend their mutual interests and maintain the alliance.

The Security Forces of the Philippines and US Security Cooperation

The Philippine security establishment, including much of the AFP and PAF leadership, has remained committed to resisting China’s expansionist activities, maintaining the US alliance and VFA, and engaging in the EDCA to jointly develop bases. If the AFP and the Philippine Coast Guard receive sufficient resources and US security cooperation, the country has the potential in a decade to become a more capable US ally in defending the Philippines’ EEZ and the rules-based international order in the WPS/SCS against China’s encroachment.²⁰

For most of its history, the army has dominated the AFP and focused on counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations within the country. During the Cold War, the Philippines relied on the United States to lead in jointly protecting the country from external threats.²¹ As a result, the AFP remained internally focused and dependent on US security cooperation. The lack of force development and external orientation was evidenced in 2012, when the Philippine Navy (PN) was unable to counter escalation by China’s coast guard in the Scarborough Shoal. During the Aquino administration, the Secretary of National Defense, Voltaire Gazmin, continued to focus on the army and internal defense and not on the air force, navy, and external defense. Under his successor in the Duterte admin-

istration, Secretary Delfin Lorenzano, the AFP continued to concentrate on internal security, including CT operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR)—occasionally requiring US support to do both.²²

The PAF and PN struggle to secure a greater share of the budget, acquire essential assets, and develop the maritime, airpower, and other capabilities necessary to counter China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal, encroachment in the Philippines' EEZ, and harassment of the AFP's nine outposts in the Spratly Islands. Insufficient resources to defend an important national interest is a reflection of weak state capacity, inability to tax elites, army dominance, and decades of dependence on the US for defense.²³ Consequently, the Philippines has been slow to develop its maritime and air forces and, until recently, had no missile-armed ships or combat aircraft that could challenge China's forces.²⁴ In case of conflict escalation with China over the WPS/SCS, the Philippines does not have an adequate air defense system (for instance, like Vietnam's) and remains vulnerable to air and missile attack. The PAF and PN have insufficient operating planes and ships, suboptimal maintenance and training, and questionable assignment of skilled personnel. In 2019, operational readiness for the navy and air force was estimated to be around 30 percent. Because of limited capabilities, the navy and air force have difficulties participating in exercises with the US military and in dealing with China's encroachment in Manila's EEZ.²⁵

On a positive note, the Philippines has doubled the defense budget over the past decade and has been funding a gradual reorientation of the AFP toward providing external defense.²⁶ In 2012, Manila initiated a 15-year USD 40-billion force development package that included the acquisition of manned and unmanned aircraft and ships.²⁷ Even so, the country's defense budget has been consistently below USD 5 billion per annum and only about one percent of GDP, which is far below China's defense budget, estimated to be USD 229 billion in 2022.²⁸ The PN fleet has doubled in size since 2012 and has acquired new warships—including two frigates with cruise missiles—from the United States and stations the two frigates at Subic Bay on the WPS/SCS.²⁹ The navy has used these warships to make voyages in defense of the country's EEZ, including resupplying the AFP personnel on the Sierra Madre “rusting hulk” on Pag-asa Island in the Spratly Islands.³⁰ The PAF and PN are cooperating more in the WPS/SCS, with joint surveillance by air force planes and naval aircraft. In addition, the navy has converted World War II-vintage aircraft into unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to use in the WPS/SCS. The US is seeking to help the Philippines with intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR), especially with imagery and a greater number of cameras.³¹ The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has more than 24,000 personnel compared to the navy's 16,000, and the United States, Japan, and Australia are assisting the service's development. In particular, the US Coast

Guard is providing training in gray-zone tactics to counter China's forces. The coast guard's two *Hamilton*-class cutters have a much higher level of operational readiness than the navy's ship, thanks to US assistance with maintenance. However, the PCG, as part of the Department of Transportation, must focus on security challenges inside the Philippine archipelago and not as much on the WPS/SCS.³²

The EDCA addition to the VFA was intended to bring about joint base construction, US forward operating locations, and rotation of US forces for temporary assignments in the Philippines.³³ In January 2016, the Philippine Supreme Court ruled that the EDCA did not violate the law forbidding permanent US basing, which led to the implementation of the agreement.³⁴ Joint base construction targeted HADR, especially given the high frequency of typhoons that devastate the Philippines—such as Hurricane Haiyan in November 2013 in which the US provided a considerable amount of assistance.³⁵ The first base to be jointly developed was Cesar Basa Air Base, Floridablanca, Pampanga, with USAF pre-positioned assets for HADR operations.³⁶ The second was the army's main base at Fort Ramon Magsaysay, Nueva Ecija, also on Luzon. Other EDCA sites include Lumbia Air Base, Barangay Lumbia, Cagayan de Oro, in northern Mindanao Province (out of range for most of the PLA's missiles);³⁷ Antonio Bautista Air Base, Puerto Princesa, on Palawan Island,³⁸ close to the Spratly Islands; and the Mactan-Benito Ebuen (MBE) Air Base, Mactan, in Cebu Province in the central Philippines. Initially, Philippine and US officials rated the MBE base highly, as the site is located close to “typhoon alley,” where HADR needs are great. Some officials believed that Mactan could provide the US military with an “air and naval alternative to Okinawa and Guam.” However, there are issues with the Mactan commercial airport that have continued to expand, rendering the sharing of the runway with the PAF increasingly difficult.³⁹

By most estimates, the navy, air force, and coast guard are a decade away from the capabilities and doctrine needed to defend maritime territories from China's encroachment. Active archipelagic defense strategy with a projected submarine force is a long-term project. As a result, the country's maritime and air forces will continue to struggle in the Philippine EEZ in the WPS/SCS against China's creeping annexation strategy and “salami-slicing” tactics and will remain dependent on the United States for security cooperation and assistance. The prospect of Manila using the AFP to regain the Philippines' full rights in Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands is a long-term prospect. While the alliance with the United States brings security cooperation and diplomatic support, Washington will not intervene to defend the Philippines' EEZ, which largely leaves the country alone in countering China in the WPS/SCS. However, US and USAF engagement with the AFP and PAF has been part of providing reassurance that Washington will abide by the MDT if skirmishes with China in the Philippines'

EEZ, including the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, escalate to war. In sum, the Philippines struggles to defend its lawful claims in its EEZ, requiring US security cooperation and assistance to do so.

The Philippines Air Force and Relations with the US Air Force

During the Cold War, the PAF was dependent on US and especially USAF security cooperation, given the threat from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The USAF helped provide air defense; command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR); airlift; and tactical air control.⁴⁰ With the end of the Cold War and the termination of US basing rights in 1992, the PAF declined. Resource constraints on the PAF became so severe that, in 2005, the air force retired its F-4 fighter planes with no replacement. In the meantime, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) was developing into a world-class air force. Today, the PLAAF has 500 combat planes in southern China. Thirty aircraft are capable of loitering over the Spratly Islands, albeit for only a few minutes.⁴¹ The PAF has recently been engaging in two or more encounters per week with PLAAF and/or PLAN aircraft and has sought to avoid escalation. The PAF supports the PN in maintaining maritime domain awareness. Besides countering China's air forces, the PAF is involved with CT operations, mainly in the southern Philippines, most notably in the battle of Marawi City in 2017. The PAF cooperates with the air forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, and Australia in CT operations. In addition, the PAF is heavily involved in HADR. This troika of responsibilities strains the air force's resources.

In 2014, the PAF acquired KA/FA-50 light attack aircraft from South Korea and rejuvenated the 5th Fighter Wing at Cesar Basa Air Base, which gave the air force the means to intercept PLAAF and PLAN aircraft over the WPS/SCS. However, the planes require sufficient armaments for air combat, upgraded maintenance, and improved runways. The United States is continuing to supply C-130 mobility aircraft, as well as other air frames, weapons, and capabilities to the PAF.⁴² Given the country's diverse security challenges, PAF leadership sees the strengthening of ISR as a top priority.⁴³ The USAF is working with the PAF on ISR development as well as on other capabilities.⁴⁴

The PAF and USAF engage in joint exercises, such as the CT-focused, annual Balikatan. Foreign military financing has funded fighter, radar, and other exchange programs, which enable USAF subject-matter experts to deploy to the Philippines for two weeks at a time to conduct training.⁴⁵ At Basa, the United States and the Philippines constructed EDCA HADR facilities and worked to strengthen runways and other facilities to better accommodate US C-17 mobility aircraft and potentially US UAVs and fighter aircraft.⁴⁶ For the USAF and Pacific Air

Forces (PACAF) strategic concept of dispersal to the Philippines and away from Japan and Guam to mitigate the China missile threat is developing slowly. If the F-16 Block 70/72 purchase materializes, the PAF would most likely station the aircraft at Basa. In sum, the PAF is developing its capabilities, and acquisition of the US fighter would accelerate PAF growth and relationship with the USAF.

What Would the Philippines and the United States Like Each Other to Do?

The answer depends on the entity queried. President Marcos and his political associates probably would like Washington to avoid criticizing the government over human rights and over ties to China, while seeking more assistance for internal security and for countering China in the WPS/SCS. Additionally, President Marcos would like the United States to not escalate beyond its current FON operations in the WPS/SCS. However, some in the security establishment would prefer the United States adopt a more assertive strategy of denial, which would enable the Philippines to take a stronger stand and regain its rights. This path would be even stronger if Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia were to go beyond diplomatic support and provide military backing—along with the United States—for the Philippines. The security establishment would like even more US security cooperation, advanced weaponry, and reassurance, as the AFP (including the PAF) and coast guard strive to push back China in the WPS/SCS. Expanded EDCA joint base construction is also a priority. The AFP (including the PAF) would like more US International Military Education and Training (IMET) support for officers to attend US professional military education institutions.⁴⁷ The PAF would like more ISR resources, including the US Scan Eagle, C-130 mobility aircraft, and fighters.

Washington would like Manila to become stronger politically and more capable of standing up to China. Additionally, the United States would like the AFP (including the PAF) to develop its capacity and capabilities, so that it can take a greater role in countering China in the WPS/SCS, as well as carrying out CT and HADR responsibilities. One US objective is for the PAF, PN, and coast guard in the not-too-distant future to conduct routine maritime security and maritime domain awareness patrols in the vicinity of the WPS/SCS and the seven major sea lanes of communication between the WPS/SCS and the Pacific Ocean,⁴⁸ which would enable the Philippines to deter and respond to illegal and/or coercive activity within its EEZ, ensure FON and regional stability, and protect natural resources. The United States also would like to develop bilateral command-and-control and interoperability and conduct contingency operations under the MDT. This would include fully implementing the General Security of Military Information Agree-

ment (GSOMIA), as well as renewing the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) every two years.⁴⁹ Additionally, Washington would like to use the EDCA to accelerate joint base construction that would facilitate the PAF's ability to counter the PLAAF and PLAN with greater US support. While the EDCA is not a basing agreement, the United States and USAF would like the Philippines to serve eventually as a location to where US noncombat aircraft—tankers, ISR planes, and air mobility aircraft—could disperse if Okinawa or Guam come under attack from the PLA. Finally, Washington would like the Philippines to avoid acquiring Chinese or Russian military hardware.

Scenarios

The most likely scenario is that China continues to incrementally expand in the WPS/SCS and woo Philippine leaders. Although China continues to expand, there is little sign that Beijing will escalate China's activities toward open conflict. In the meantime, Washington and Manila will continue to slowly build the alliance, including toward stronger security cooperation and USAF–PAF relations, with a possible F-16 program. Given the rising level of mutual Philippine and US interest in the WPS/SCS, the prospects for the alliance and constructive USAF–PAF relations are generally positive. Much depends on the behavior of the Marcos administration and US policy toward his administration. The relationship will occasionally stagnate, depending on political conditions and the security-cooperation situation. EDCA joint base construction will continue at a methodical pace. The Philippines may acquire the F-16, which would strengthen relations with the USAF and enhance interoperability. However, Manila could decide to acquire another fighter instead of the F-16, which would lead to a plateau in USAF–PAF relations.

A second scenario is escalation and aggression by China in the Philippine EEZ and Manila reaching out to Washington for alliance support. The United States would have to carefully calibrate a proportionate response that would cause China to deescalate, while reassuring the Philippines of US support. If Washington responds appropriately, this would be followed by a strengthening of the alliance, including increased security cooperation with the AFP (including the PAF) and coast guard and acceleration of EDCA joint base construction. It could even mean moving forward with the F-16 program and the PAF developing some degree of interoperability with the USAF. However, if a conflict does ensue, the United States may have to choose to either take the Philippines' side and provide support or refrain. While the United States, Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), and USAF/PACAF have shown that they want a stronger alliance and eventual interoperability with the PAF, coming to the rescue of the Philippines will risk escalation to war with China.

A third scenario is friction resuming and mounting in US–Philippine relations, especially if President Marcos behaves in an authoritarian manner that forces Washington to react. A decline in relations could slow or scupper the EDCA and the F-16 program, leaving the United States and the Philippines to pursue their interests in the APS/SCS independent of one another. Also, the Marcos administration could draw increasingly closer to China, which could lead to a decline or rupture in the alliance.

Conclusion

Looking forward, Philippine and US officials believe that China will continue to expand and seek greater control of the WPS/SCS and its resources. The United States and USAF and Philippines and the PAF want a stronger alliance, but there are barriers to stronger relations and a more capable Philippine military and air force. However, there are ways in which the United States and USAF can creatively engage. Both sides want a stronger alliance but for somewhat different reasons and at varying levels and rates of speed. The challenges are considerable, but with the right amount of will and creative effort, the United States and the Philippines (including the USAF and the PAF) can work together to overcome them and move the relationship forward. Washington has signaled that it is prepared to exert greater will to try to increasingly include the Philippines as part of a growing multilateral network supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific.

US engagement with the Philippines can eventually contribute to greater burden sharing and deterrence in the WPS/SCS and Indo-Pacific region. Burden sharing is necessary for the United States, with rising security challenges from China in the Indo-Pacific region. The continued rise of China and Beijing's grand strategy of eventually dominating Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific will require sustained burden sharing and stronger alliances. Defense cooperation, including between Washington and Manila, is the optimal way in which Indo-Pacific countries can develop regionally capable militaries, including air forces, and enhance deterrence in the region.

The development of deterrence of China in the region will require the United States and the Philippines to commit themselves to acting in concert in case the PLA acts aggressively in the WPS/SCS. Regional deterrence will require the methodical buildup of marmite and air forces with US aid. The leaders of the United States and the Philippines and their air forces ought to continue to discuss the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific and their respective roles in providing deterrence. This includes discussions about the WPS/SCS and sovereignty issues, as well as FON and overflight. The USAF and PAF can play roles in preventing China from achieving regional dominance by developing a shared outlook and

respective strategies and capabilities to deter China from further encroaching in the WPS/SCS and on the rights of the Philippines.

In overcoming obstacles, Washington can undertake initiatives to help the APF, including the PAF, to become a regionally significant force. The United States and USAF can aid with training and equipment, including developing the possible F-16 Block 70/72 program and working toward the Philippines enabling training and squadron development to proceed faster. US engagement could also provide the country with a substantial capability boost, with bilateral mechanisms to develop ISR. The United States and USAF working with the Philippines and PAF in increasing logistics and information sharing would advance the strategic and operational aspects of the alliance, enhance joint exercises involving the PAF and the USAF focusing on HADR scenarios, and aid EDCA joint base construction and secure forward operating locations. INDOPACOM and the USAF/PACAF should step up their level of engagement, planning, and resource allocation regarding the AFP and PAF.⁵⁰ The State Partnership Program involving the Hawai'i and Guam National Guards has) been a valuable engagement vehicle and should be further developed.

In closing, Washington should continue to build the alliance with the Philippines primarily through expanding and strengthening high-level dialogue, simulations, and exercises as well as security assistance and exchanges. The USAF and PACAF can lead in partner development, while avoiding a paternalistic and transactional relationship. Secondarily, the United States and USAF should continue to promote US aircraft, weapons, and other equipment with the long-term aim of the USAF developing increasingly complex exercises with the PAF. Washington should work with Manila to build capacity and develop capabilities in making the PAF a regionally significant force. 🌟

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Notes

1. Stephen Burgess, "A Pathway toward Enhancing the US Air Force-Indian Air Force Alliance and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific Region," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 1–36, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Stephen Burgess, "The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership and the Key Role of Air Force Relations," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 9 (Winter 2021): 47–62, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

2. In July 2019, this author conducted field research in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. A future article will analyze the US-Indonesia partnership and air force relations.

3. Stephen Burgess, “Confronting China’s Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea: A Collective Action Problem,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 112–34, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

4. Stephen Burgess, “Rising Bipolarity in the South China Sea: The Impact of the US Rebalance to Asia on China’s Expansion,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37, no. 1 (April 2016): 111–43.

5. Security experts and US officials, interviews by the author, Manila, July 2019.

6. “The Philippines—F-16 Block 70/72 Aircraft,” Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 24 June 2021. The USD 2.43 billion foreign military sales deal includes 10 F-16C Block 70/72 and two F-16D Block 70/72 (generation four-plus) aircraft, plus weapons and maintenance packages. The Philippines is weighing the F-16 versus Sweden’s Gripen and is looking at second-hand options with cost in mind. Manila has already rejected Chinese and Indian fighter aircraft.

7. US Embassy officials, interviews by author, Manila, July 2019. Interviewees provided expert assessments of the Philippines, Manila’s grand strategy, and defense policy as well as the AFP and PAF. The US officials stated that the Philippines considers the Scarborough Shoal to be just as important as the Spratly Islands, given the proximity of the Shoal to Manila and main population centers. Nevertheless, the Philippines needs the energy resources that lie beneath both, as well as Reed Bank.

8. Burgess, “Confronting China’s Maritime Expansion.”

9. “The Philippines—F-16 Block 70/72 Aircraft,” Defense Security Cooperation Agency.

10. Burgess, “Confronting China’s Maritime Expansion.”

11. Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

12. Victor Andres “Dindo” C. Manhit, director, Stratbase ADR Institute and Renato de Castro, De Le Salle University, interviews by the author, Manila, July 2019.

13. David Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” *International Security*, 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 85–127.

14. US Embassy officials, interview.

15. US Embassy officials, interview.

16. Justice Antonio Carpio, Supreme Court of the Philippines, interview by author, July 2019. Justice Carpio was one of the leading forces behind the UNCLOS case. He has proposed joint US–Philippine patrols to protect FON and the EEZ in the WPS/SCS, with Vietnam and Malaysia eventually joining. He believes that a binding code of conduct between ASEAN and China might have been effective in 2010 but that the PLA’s militarized outposts in the Spratly Islands have rendered moot such an agreement.

17. Security experts in Manila, Hanoi, and Jakarta, interviewed by author, 2019. Opinions differed over the significance of the Philippines’ UNCLOS victory before the ICJ–PCA. Several interviewees viewed the victory as mainly symbolic. In contrast, there are some who thought that ICJ–PCA invalidation of the nine-dash line would provide leverage over China and that could lead Vietnam and Malaysia to file cases.

18. Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” 100–02.

19. Richard Javad Heydarian, “Philippines challenging China in South China Sea,” *Asia Times*, 27 June 2020. The Philippines has been attempting to open Reed Bank (northeast of the Spratly Islands in Manila’s EEZ) to oil and gas prospecting without China’s participation or interference.

20. Hunter Stires, ed., *Maritime COIN: Pushing Back in the South China Sea*, US Naval Institute, 48/7/1,433, (July 2022).

21. Renato Cruz De Castro, "Special Relations and Alliance Politics in Philippine-U.S. Security Relations, 1990-2002," *Asian Perspective*, 27, no. 1 (2003): 137-64. During the Cold War, the AFP, including the PAF, remained dependent on the US military to defend against external and internal security challenges. The Philippines ended the basing agreement with the United States in 1992, which set the stage for a decline in US security assistance and deterioration of the AFP, including the PAF.

22. Manhit and de Castro, Stratbase ADR and US officials, interviews with author, Manila, July 2019.

23. Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," *International Security*, 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017), 78-119.

24. Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia."

25. US officials, interviews with the author, Manila, July 2019. If China attacked the Philippines, Manila would probably ask the INDOPACOM to come to the country to run the fight.

26. Felix K. Chang, "Comparative Southeast Asian Military Modernization," *Asian Forum*, 1 October 2014, 7-10. In 2012, the United States offered the Philippines Customs and Border Patrol King Air 350s with antisubmarine warfare capability, but President Aquino rejected the offer. Afterward, the Philippines could have procured more ISR capability but instead purchased FN Minimi machine guns. Several different US military commands want to double the size of exercises with the Philippines, but Manila is not prepared to do so.

27. US International Trade Administration, "Philippines—Country Commercial Guide," n.d., <https://www.trade.gov/>. Under the 15-year force development package, there have been, "opportunities for the sale of aircraft, ships, unmanned vehicles, intelligence and surveillance systems, communications, personal protective equipment, and weapon systems."

28. "Philippines Military Spending/Defense Budget, 1960-2022," macro.trends.net

29. US officials, Manila, interviewed July 2019. Some joint Philippines-US exercises are being run out of Subic Bay.

30. Eric Wertheim, "Jose Rizal-Class Frigates: A Giant Leap for the Philippine Navy," *Proceedings* 148, no. 6 (June 2022), <https://www.usni.org/>.

31. US officials, interview with author, Manila, July 2019.

32. US officials, interview with author. In 2013, the United States injected USD 30 million into the Philippines Coast Guard with the promise of more to come. Japan has a much-increased presence and is providing security assistance to the Philippines, including maritime security facilities.

33. Security experts and US officials interviews. Regarding the WPS/SCS, some experts think that EDCA cooperation will eventually enable Philippines to defend its EEZ. A few think that EDCA includes a "tripwire" that will lead the United States to intervene against encroachment by China.

34. Rommel C. Banlaoi, "US-Philippines Alliance: Addressing 21st Century Challenges," *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror* (London: Taylor and Francis CRC Press, 2010), 55-66.

35. US officials interview and INDOPACOM, PACAF and MARFORPAC officials, interviews with author, September 2016. Cooperation in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan created basic HADR interoperability between the US and Philippine militaries.

36. Visit to Basa Air Base and Clark International Airport, July 2019. The US Navy was using Clark for P-8 surveillance flights over the SCS. Basa Air Base is in eastern Luzon Island, 150 miles from Scarborough Shoal and 600 miles away from PLA bases on Hainan Island—well within PLA missile range. The PAF and US Navy still have facilities at Clark.

37. US officials interviews. EDCA funding enabled extension of the runway at Lumbia Air Base and construction of a HADR warehouse.

38. Security experts and US officials interviews. Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC)—the special operations component of INDOPACOM—is particularly interested in EDCA development in Palawan. EDCA construction could take place on Ulagong Bay on the WPS/SCS with dredging or in Puerto Princesa, which is not on the WPS/SCS but where the AFP has a base.

39. Security experts and US officials interviews. The United States could use EDCA development to come to the defense of the Philippines in case of a conflict with China, but Washington must tread carefully given political sensitivities.

40. Col Thad Rufino P. Candelario, PAF A5 (Plans), Lt Col Joel Inacay, PAF A2 (Intelligence), and other PAF senior staff officers, interviews with the author, Manila, July 2019.

41. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 100–07.

42. Assistant Secretary of Defense Teodoro Torralba, interview with the author, Manila, July 2019.

43. Chief of Staff, PAF, US Air War College briefing, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 21 August 2019.

44. US officials interviews. Some officials rank-ordered PAF requirements: (1) air mobility, (2) search and rescue, (3) an integrated air defense system (IADS), (4) air-to-ground attack (the PAF has acquired A-29 Super Tucanos for this task), (5) air-to-air attack, and (6) C4ISR. The PAF flies air mobility missions practically every day, especially with the high rate of natural disasters. Concerning an Integrated Air Defense System, the US Patriot (PAC-3) system is too expensive for the Philippine defense budget, which means searching for, acquiring, and developing a lower cost system. The Cessna 208 provides low-cost air mobility and ISR.

45. Col Candelario, Lt Col Inacay, and other PAF staff, interviews with the author, Manila, July 2019.

46. US officials interviews, and author’s visit to Basa Air Base and Clark International Airport, July 2019.

47. US officials interviews. The AFP mandatory retirement age of 56 years and the short tenure of AFP and PAF chiefs present problems that limit the effectiveness of IMET and professional military training for AFP and PAF senior officers in the United States.

48. The sea lanes of communication are the Luzon Strait, Mindoro Passage, Balabac Strait, San Bernadino Strait, Basilan Strait, Surigao Strait, and Sibutu Channel.

49. US officials interviews. The GSOMIA enables the sharing of information in cyberspace and for encryption

50. US officials interviews.

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