



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 31, 2024

Philippines Eyes Bigger Military Drills With U.S., Cooperates With Vietnam in South China Sea

The Philippines and the United States hope to conduct what could be their largest military exercise in April, in a display of the strength of their alliance in the wake of escalated tensions in the South China Sea.

The annual exercises — known as “Balikatan” — will showcase “more complex drills,” including cyberspace and information warfare, Armed Forces of the Philippines spokesman Colonel Francel Margareth Padilla revealed in a briefing on January 30.

“Balikatan” is a Filipino word that can be translated as “shoulder-to-shoulder.”



AP Images

“We are going to have more exercises in key positions all over the country,” Padilla admitted. “Aside from quantity, we will heavily lean towards quality training.”

Notably, the mutual defense allies held their [largest war games in more than 30 years in 2023](#), involving 17,600 military troops from both countries. The exercises entailed live-fire drills in waters near the South China Sea, where Beijing has staked claims.

This plan for expanded drills came as the United States and the Philippines are in the midst of enhancing [bilateral security ties](#) following skirmishes and tensions in the disputed waters.

The Philippine Navy has monitored about 200 vessels [operated by Chinese maritime militia](#) in the South China Sea, Navy spokesperson Commodore Roy Vincent Trinidad said in the same briefing. “We have seen them being more aggressive, and that has carried on until now,” Commodore Trinidad said.

On January 30, the Philippines and Vietnam also inked [deals to boost their maritime cooperation in the South China Sea](#), ramping up trust between the two nations as they encounter a more pugilistic Beijing.

Both countries signed two memorandums of understanding (MOUs) during Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.’s two-day state visit to Hanoi.

The first MOU seeks to avert untoward incidents in the South China Sea, with both sides agreeing to increase efforts to “promote trust, confidence and understanding through dialogue and cooperative activities.”

The second MOU hopes to boost cooperation between both countries’ coast guards, including establishing a direct hotline communication mechanism between them.

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire the South China Sea, including parts of the exclusive economic zones of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 [decreeed that China’s claims had no legal basis](#).

However, Beijing has rejected this ruling, increasing its military presence and artificial island-building activities in the South China Sea instead.



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Consequently, relations between the Philippines and China have taken a nosedive, with Chinese vessels shadowing and firing water cannons at Philippine ships transporting supplies to troops stationed at a remote military outpost on the Second Thomas Shoal.

On January 12, Chinese Coast Guard personnel were also caught on video chasing Filipino fishermen who were collecting sea shells near Scarborough Shoal.

In his meeting with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Marcos said the Philippines is committed to working with a “like-minded state” such as Vietnam to ensure a rules-based international order in the Asia-Pacific region.

“As maritime nations, we share a similar assessment of the current state of our regional environment with other maritime nations of the Asia-Pacific. Our countries have crucial roles to play in shaping the regional security discourse and in upholding the rules-based international order,” he said.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not respond to queries regarding the signed agreements.

These agreements will permit both Southeast Asian nations to “enhance confidence-building measures” to improve conditions along their maritime border, said defense analyst Don McLain Gill of the De La Salle University in Manila.

He said they could also set the groundwork for a potential breakthrough similar to what Vietnam attained with Indonesia in 2022 to set the boundaries of their exclusive economic zones within the South China Sea.

Manila and Hanoi have overlapping claims in parts of the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, which is regarded as traditional fishing grounds for Filipino and Vietnamese fisherfolk.

“Such a breakthrough will be crucial for strengthening the value of international law in the tumultuous waters of the greater South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea in particular,” said Gill, employing the term with which Manila alludes to parts of the South China Sea that lie within the country’s exclusive economic zone.

The latest agreements indicate that it is possible for countries with competing interests in the South China Sea to find areas of cooperation to tackle a more influential and powerful neighbor like Beijing, said maritime security expert Collin Koh of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

“Perhaps we might not reach unanimity on the South China Sea among all 10 members [of ASEAN], but we can at best seek convergences. So I think this latest set of agreements between the Philippines and Vietnam appears geared towards that aim,” said Dr. Koh, while adding that the pacts will also permit Manila and Hanoi to be more strategic in using their scarce resources and capacities “where they’re most needed” as they counter China’s superior maritime forces.

If all goes well, said both analysts, the Manila-Hanoi pacts could help the ASEAN bloc of Southeast Asian countries finalize the long-delayed code of conduct (COC) in the South China Sea that it has been negotiating with Beijing.

“Hopefully this helps in the code-of-conduct discussions at the intra-Asean level concerning various issues, before the bloc sits at the table with China,” said Dr. Koh.

In 2023, Marcos began courting Vietnam and Malaysia to create a separate COC, citing slow talks between ASEAN and Beijing.

During the meeting with Marcos, Chinh said that claimants in the South China Sea should work on an



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“effective and substantive” Code of Conduct that complies with international laws, in particular the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The 2016 tribunal ruling that slammed Beijing’s nine-dash line claim was based on the UNCLOS.

The agreements, nonetheless, are just a start to grow trust between the Philippines and Vietnam, with analysts saying it is still too early to conclude just how united the duo would be against Beijing.

“Vietnamese foreign policy would prevent such an eventuality, unless it is a drastic resort as a result of certain Chinese behavior that could push Hanoi towards that direction. Until then, I’ll think Vietnam will seek to avoid giving Beijing the impression that it’s ‘ganging up’ with Manila against it in the South China Sea,” opined Dr. Koh.

For his part, Gill said that at the moment, Manila and Hanoi have expressed their acknowledgement of the need to “work more closely together amid the uncertainties of regional politics.”



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