



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 4, 2023

Philippines Gives U.S. More Access to Military Bases as Tensions With China Rise

SINGAPORE — The Philippines has broadened access for American troops and equipment to four more Philippine military bases, after the visit of U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin amid mounting hostilities in the South China Sea and Taiwan's frosty relations with Beijing.

Austin met Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Defense Secretary Carlito Galvez, Jr., and other top government officials during his three-day stint.

Moreover, Austin also visited about 100 American soldiers based at a military camp in Zamboanga City in the southern Philippines. They are helping Philippine troops combat vestiges of militant groups related to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.



AP Images
Ferdinand Marcos and Lloyd Austin

The Philippines and the United States announced that they would be speeding up the complete enforcement of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) by allocating four additional Philippine military bases as part of the military deal.

Signed in 2014, the EDCA permits U.S. forces to build facilities, bring in equipment, and conduct joint training exercises in mutually agreed-upon bases in the Philippines.

Furthermore, the deal permits the United States to rotate troops into the Philippines for prolonged stays, but does not give American troops a permanent presence in the country.

With the latest development, the United States will now be authorized to access a total of nine bases in the Philippines under the EDCA. The five existing EDCA sites that were selected in 2016 are the Antonio Bautista Air Base in Palawan, Basa Air Base in Pampanga, Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija, Lumbia Airfield in Cagayan de Oro, and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base in Cebu.

The United States previously set aside more than US\$82 million for infrastructure investments at these five bases.

Most of the new bases will allegedly be situated in the northern part of the Philippines, the area nearest to Taiwan. One EDCA site is poised to be in Palawan, the island province closest to the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

In the event of a Taiwan-China conflict or an armed attack against the Philippines in the South China Sea, these sites could help U.S. efforts to address military incursions.

Galvez did not point out the exact locations of the four EDCA sites, as coordination with local officials is underway.



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The Philippines is one of America's oldest treaty allies, but relations took a nose-dive under former president Rodrigo Duterte as he wooed Communist China.

Manila and Washington are now rebooting ties under incumbent President Marcos, who is walking a diplomatic tightrope between boosting military relations with the United States and sustaining economic relations with Beijing.

Additionally, Manila's geographic location makes it a strategic ally for both superpowers, who are now competing for regional clout. The United States and the Philippines said the four additional EDCA locations will permit swifter deployment of support for humanitarian and climate-related disasters in the country.

"It is not about the US' permanent basing in the Philippines, but it is a big deal," said Austin.

"It is really a big deal in that it provides us again with the opportunity to interact a bit more in an effective way."

During a regular briefing in Beijing on Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Mao Ning said the Philippines giving the United States greater access to military bases increases tensions and undermines stability in the region.

"China has always believed that defense and security cooperation between countries should always be beneficial towards regional peace and stability, and should not be targeted towards or harm the interests of third parties," said Mao.

Marcos went on a state visit to China in January this year, despite Beijing's persistent efforts in conducting incursions in parts of the South China Sea that already fall within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

An international tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands, dismissed Beijing's wide-ranging claim over the South China Sea in 2016. The same tribunal ruled that the West Philippine Sea "exclusively belongs to Filipinos, and no one else."

The West Philippine Sea is Manila's official term to refer to the eastern parts of the South China Sea that fall within the country's EEZ.

During the Cold War, the Philippines was home to some of the United States' largest overseas bases, supplying land for facilities crucial to the U.S. wars in Korea and Vietnam. Eventually, Philippine nationalism prompted Washington to vacate those in the 1990s.

However, recent years have seen both countries collaborating on counter-terrorism and tackling rising Chinese pugilism in the region. Besides, the Philippines is key to U.S. plans to prevent and react to any Chinese forays into Taiwan, an island China claims as its own to be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Of the five U.S. treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific — Australia, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand — the Philippines is nearest to Taiwan, its northernmost land mass of Luzon just 200 km away.

Analysts such as Randall Schriver, who served in the Trump administration as the top Pentagon official for East Asia, said Luzon is of huge significance to the U.S. Army as a potential venue for rockets, missiles, and artillery systems that could be harnessed to fend off an amphibious incursion of Taiwan.

Schrive added that the political outlook for more military access seemed to be brightening under Marcos after a rocky period of relations during the six-year term of Duterte.



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In addition, Washington has strategically wooed Marcos, with Kamala Harris's visit last year after two meetings between U.S. President Joe Biden and Marcos as well as a visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Manila.

Nonetheless, it remains to be seen as to the degree the Philippines would permit its territory to be used by the United States to defend Taiwan from China. Romualdez, the Philippine ambassador to Washington and a relative of Marcos, said earlier that the country would allow U.S. forces to use its bases should a Taiwan conflict happen only "if it is important for us, for our own security."

That being said, South-east Asia specialist Gregory Poling at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies opined that it would be very tough for the Philippines to remain neutral in a Taiwan conflict given its proximity to the island and its treaty responsibilities to the United States.

"They have commitments to the Americans under the alliance," Poling said. "So if they want American support in the South China Sea, the Americans will expect Philippine support on Taiwan."

The country is also the most likely destination for people fleeing Taiwan, and the roughly 150,000 Filipinos living in Taiwan would be at risk should China invade the island.



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