

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **A Strategic Reset?: The Philippines-United States Alliance under President Marcos Jr.**

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*US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (R) speaking during a meeting with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (L) at the Pentagon in Washington, DC on 3 May 2023. Photo: Mandel NGAN/AFP.*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The Philippines-United States alliance has been reinvigorated since Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was elected president in May 2022.
- Marcos Jr's US policy radically departs from his predecessor given his appreciation of the Philippines' security vulnerabilities in the South China Sea and intensified US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Since Marcos took office, the two countries have increased the tempo of high-level interactions and military engagements. The US has pledged to increase its support for the modernisation of the Philippine armed forces.
- However, an increasingly influential pro-China lobby composed of national and local politicians, pundits and media are acting in concert to undermine the initial revitalisation of the security cooperation between Manila and Washington.
- The Philippines-US alliance needs to be more holistic and well-rounded. This can be achieved by integrating security cooperation with economic, diplomatic, and multi-sectoral initiatives to match China's increasing economic investments in the archipelago.

## INTRODUCTION

On taking office in June 2022, President Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos, Jr. placed the Philippines-United States alliance front and centre in his foreign policy. The pace, scope and magnitude of changes have surprised many observers both at home and abroad given the anti-US rhetoric and stance of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, and Marcos’ seemingly non-committal approach to foreign affairs during the election campaign.<sup>1</sup> Under the Duterte administration (2016-2022), America’s relations with its oldest security ally in Asia had deteriorated to the point that Duterte threatened to abrogate the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the legal framework that allows US military personnel to deploy to the Philippines for training and exercises.<sup>2</sup> And while Marcos Jr. ran on a campaign platform of continuing Duterte’s economic engagement with China, his apparent embrace of the US has further complicated the country’s position in addressing its most important strategic challenge: the intensification of Sino-US rivalry.

This *Perspective* analyses the transformation of Philippine-US security relations since Marcos was elected in May 2022. It argues that this strategic reset is a confluence of both domestic and exogenous factors. As the architect of Philippine foreign policy, the president has a significant role in setting the direction of the country’s security strategy and relations with external powers.<sup>3</sup> Apart from Marcos Jr.’s desire to impose his imprimatur on Philippine foreign policy, the regional strategic environment has drastically worsened in recent years due to China’s aggressive policy in the South China Sea, which undermines the Philippines’ national security. As Marcos stated, “we are now confronted with a different and complex security environment, it brings with it new challenges that require us to adapt”.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Marcos has also sought to promote the interests of the Marcos dynasty by forging more cordial relations with the US.<sup>5</sup>

## A RENEWED PHILIPPINES-US ALLIANCE

While on the campaign trail, Marcos ran on a promise of policy continuity, influenced by Duterte’s popularity and his ironclad political alliance with his daughter Sara Duterte.<sup>6</sup> For example, Marcos agreed to the Philippines’ neutral position regarding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, despite it being a radical departure from the country’s consistent position against blatant violations of international law and the United Nations Charter.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, it is quite common for Filipino politicians to diverge from their campaign positions once in office, and Marcos demonstrated this on the foreign policy front. In a move that surprised the pro-Duterte flank of his political coalition, President Marcos proactively and cordially engaged the US. It should be noted that officials from the Biden administration had met with him extensively during the election campaign. The US was one of the first countries to congratulate Marcos on his electoral victory, something it declined to do when Duterte won in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Marcos manifested a different interpretation of pursuing an independent foreign policy for the Philippines, one that is not necessarily anti-West or pro-China. Duterte’s revisionist rhetoric

portrayed the US as an unreliable military ally and China as a generous neighbour and dependable partner. Marcos, instead, promoted a “new normal”, one that is open to pursuing strategic partnerships without reservations as captured in his “friends to all” foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> On the surface, this position could be driven by balancing competing domestic and external security priorities (i.e., dealing with communist insurgency and improving national defence) within the broader context of intensified great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region. To this end, Marcos moved quickly to pick up where his political nemesis — deceased former President Benigno Aquino — had left off, by reinvigorating the Philippines-US alliance.

In the 12 months since Marcos was elected president, Washington and Manila have signalled their commitment to alliance renewal in two important ways: regular high-level exchanges and dialogue; and increased military and security cooperation.

*High-level Exchanges*

Since Marcos was elected on 9 May 2022, the US and the Philippines have substantially raised the tempo of high-level exchanges. Senior officials from the two countries have talked or met on an almost monthly basis (see Table 1).

**Table 1: US-Philippine High-level Exchanges(May 2022-May 2023)**

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>
President Biden calls President-elect Marcos	11 May 2022	Washington and Manila
Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman meets President-elect Marcos	9 June 2022	Manila
Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets President Marcos	6 August 2022	Manila
President Marcos meets President Biden	22 September 2022	New York
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin meets Acting Philippine Defense Secretary Jose Faustino	29 September 2022	Honolulu
Vice President Kamala Harris visits the Philippines	21-22 November 2022	Manila & Palawan Island
Assistant Secretary of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink attends US-Philippines Strategic Dialogue	18-21 January 2023	Manila
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin meets Acting Philippine Defense Secretary Carlito Galvez	2 February 2023	Manila
US-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue	11 April 2023	Washington D.C.
President Marcos pays official visit to US	30 April-4 May 2023	Washington D.C.

Source: Media reports and US government read outs.

These engagements have provided both sides with an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of their alliance relations using language that Duterte himself never used. For example, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with President Marcos in June 2022, he called the Philippines an “irreplaceable ally”, while Marcos described ties as a “special relationship”.<sup>10</sup> Since taking office, Marcos has visited the US twice in September 2022 and April-May 2023 (Duterte never went once). On the first visit, President Marcos highlighted America’s key role in upholding the rules-based international order and freedom of navigation, asserting “I cannot see the Philippines in the future without having the United States as a partner. When we are in crisis, we look to the United States.”<sup>11</sup> On the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, President Biden met with Marcos and reiterated America’s “ironclad” commitment to the defence of the Philippines under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT).<sup>12</sup> During Marcos’ second visit, President Biden reiterated America’s “ironclad” security guarantee to the Philippines, including in the South China Sea.<sup>13</sup> In response, Marcos said “It is only natural for the Philippines to look to its sole treaty partner in the world to strengthen and to redefine the relationship that we have and the roles that we play in the face of those rising tensions that we see now around the South China Sea, Asia Pacific and Indo-Pacific region.” Marcos was also able to secure pledges of economic investments from Washington amounting to US\$1.3 billion that included nuclear energy, climate change mitigation, agricultural development and technology. President Biden also promised to send a first-of-its-kind Presidential Trade and Investment Mission to further explore economic investment opportunities in the Philippines.<sup>14</sup>

As well as declaring their commitment to the alliance, these meetings have provided an opportunity for the US to express its support for the Philippines’ maritime rights in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and to criticise China’s assertive actions in Philippine waters. The most striking example was during Vice President Kamala Harris’ visit to the Philippines in November 2022. She visited Palawan Island, the closest of the main Philippine islands to the country’s claimed atolls in the South China Sea. On Palawan, she met with fishermen, visited a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel and gave a speech in which she said the 2016 judgement by an arbitral tribunal (which ruled China’s nine-dash line claims to be incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) must be upheld, and that “As an ally, the US stands with the Philippines in the face of intimidation and coercion in the South China Sea.”<sup>15</sup> The Marcos administration’s stance that the 2016 ruling is binding on China is a significant departure from Duterte who shelved the award. At the 2+2 meeting of US and Philippine defence and foreign ministers in April 2023 — the first in seven years — the two sides expressed “strong objections” to China’s unlawful maritime claims and provocative behaviour in the South China Sea, and called on Beijing to fully comply with the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling.<sup>16</sup> Following the most recent Sino-Philippine incident on 23 April 2023 — when two Chinese coast guard vessels almost collided with two Philippine vessels near Second Thomas Shoal — the US State Department called on Beijing to “desist from its provocative and unsafe conduct”.<sup>17</sup>

### *Defence Cooperation*

Despite President Duterte’s disparaging of the US-Philippine alliance, security cooperation between the two countries continued between 2016 and 2022, including combined exercises (which were scaled-down, partly on Duterte’s orders, but also because of the COVID-19

pandemic), military education programmes and defence sales. But under President Marcos, the pace and scope of bilateral military cooperation has been ramped up significantly.

The frequency and size of US-Philippine military exercises have increased over the past 12 months. In 2023, 496 bilateral military engagements are planned, up from 461 in 2022, 353 in 2021 and 300 in 2020.<sup>18</sup> The 2023 engagements will also include a larger multilateral component with the participation of troops from other US allies such as Australia, Japan and South Korea. For example, the annual US-Philippine exercise, Balikatan, held on 11-28 April 2023, was the largest ever and involved 5,400 personnel from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and 12,200 US troops, up from 3,800 and 5,500 respectively in 2022.<sup>19</sup> Over one hundred military personnel from the Australian armed forces also took part in the 18-day exercise, while Japan and Britain sent military observers. In October 2022, 500 Philippine Marines and 2,550 US Marines participated in Exercise Kamandag, as well as small contingents from the Japanese and South Korean armed forces. The multilateralisation of exercises is in keeping with the Biden administration's strategy of networking America's alliances to improve interoperability in support of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' policy.<sup>20</sup> In addition to exercises, the US and the Philippines have announced they are planning to conduct joint naval patrols in the South China Sea, an initiative that Duterte nixed.<sup>21</sup>

The most significant development in alliance relations has been the decision to accelerate the implementation of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Signed in 2014 during the administration of President Aquino, EDCA allows US forces to rotationally deploy through, and pre-position equipment at, five designated Philippine military bases. Under Duterte, however, moves to implement EDCA completely stalled. To make up for lost time, the Marcos administration has not only made expediting EDCA a priority but also agreed to increase the number of facilities available to US forces from five to nine.<sup>22</sup> On 3 April, the location of the four new sites were revealed: one on Palawan Island and three in northern Luzon near the Taiwan Straits. The US has allocated US\$100 million to upgrade military infrastructure at the nine EDCA bases.<sup>23</sup>

The Philippines has long been the largest recipient of US security assistance in Southeast Asia. Since 2015, the US Department of State has provided the Philippines with over US\$463 million in security assistance for the purchase of military equipment, educational and training programmes, and peacekeeping operations. Since 2018, the US Department of Defence has provided an additional US\$237 million in capacity-building support.<sup>24</sup> Since 2019, the US has approved the sale of 12 F-16 fighter jets, 48 Black Hawk helicopters, six attack helicopters and C-130 military transport aircraft. At the 2+2 ministerial talks, the US agreed to increase support for the modernisation of the AFP over the next five to ten years, including the transfer of drones, patrol vessels, and coastal and air defence systems.

President Marcos' visit to the US in April-May 2023 led to further improvements in the alliance. For the first time, the two sides issued bilateral defence guidelines which serve as an update to the 1951 MDT. The six-page document recognised the changing regional strategic environment and specifically stated that contingencies in the South China Sea and/or involving attacks on non-military targets such as coast guard vessels were covered by the MDT.<sup>25</sup>

## ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The renewal of the Philippines-US alliance is not without its domestic critics. It also poses problems for the Philippines' relations with China.

In the Philippines, the alliance has always been a lightning rod for critics—often on the left-wing of the political spectrum—of the country's foreign policy, and particularly the Philippines' relations with its former colonial power, the US. America's military presence in the Philippines—especially the major US bases from 1947 until 1992, but also the deployment of counter-terrorism advisors in the south of the country post-9/11—has been criticised as a violation of Philippine sovereignty, a symbol of Washington's neo-colonial relationship with Manila, and a source of social ills including crime and prostitution. EDCA has provided a new source of disquiet. While the US has insisted that the rotational deployment of US forces through the EDCA bases is for the purpose of conducting exercises, training and disaster relief activities, critics have argued that in reality they would be used for logistical support in the event of a US-China military contingency in the Taiwan Straits, especially the three new EDCA facilities announced on 3 April which are located in northern Luzon close to the Taiwan Straits. In September 2022, Philippine Ambassador to the US, Jose Manuel Romualdez, remarked that the Philippines would allow US forces to use its bases in the event of a Taiwan conflict “if it is important for us, for our own security”.<sup>26</sup> But critics of EDCA have warned that it would not be in the Philippines' interests to be dragged into a Sino-US conflict over Taiwan. These critics include the president's sister, Senator Imee Marcos, chair of the senate foreign relations committee, who has argued that the new EDCA bases are driven by escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and not developments in the South China Sea.<sup>27</sup> Others have accused Washington of including the Philippines in a US-led containment strategy of China, that would not only make the country a target of China during wartime but also undermine Sino-Philippine economic ties.<sup>28</sup> It was for that latter reason that the governor of Cagayan, where three of the new EDCA facilities are located, opposed their inclusion for fear of losing investment from China.<sup>29</sup> His objections were overruled.

China's ambassador to the Philippines, Huang Xilian, doubled down on criticism of EDCA by linking the Taiwan issue to the presence of 158,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) on the island. In a speech, Huang advised the Philippines to “unequivocally oppose ‘Taiwan Independence’ rather than stoking the fire by offering the US access to the military bases near the Taiwan Strait if you care genuinely about the 150,000 OFWs”.<sup>30</sup> This enraged the Department of National Defence and the National Security Council. Manila responded to the ambassador's remark with a categorical statement that the Philippines firmly abides by the One China policy. Marcos also stated that perhaps the envoy's comments were “lost in translation”.<sup>31</sup> As Filipino public opinion remains distrustful of China while supportive of the US, Beijing's consistently aggressive stance is hurting its image.

EDCA has also become the whipping boy for China-friendly politicians who have invoked historical anti-US sentiments. In a Senate hearing, for instance, Senator Imee Marcos argued that EDCA heavily benefits US strategy while undermining the country's strategic interests. She also warned that EDCA will anger China and increase the Philippines' strategic vulnerabilities.<sup>32</sup>

Some commentators have called for EDCA not to be renewed when it expires in 2024.<sup>33</sup> This is unsurprisingly consistent with Beijing's view as amplified by pro-China pundits and think tanks. The military, however, remains steadfast that EDCA is aligned with the modernisation of the AFP and its contribution with a more credible national defence posture.<sup>34</sup> In response to the criticism of EDCA, President Marcos has stated that the bases would not be used for "offensive actions".<sup>35</sup>

Another potential challenge to the renewal of the alliance is the foreign policy preferences of future administrations, both in the Philippines and the US. Post-Cold War, the Philippines has had a tendency to "flip flop" in its relations with China, from accommodation (Presidents Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Duterte) to a more hard-line position (Presidents Fidel Ramos and Benigno Aquino). If Marcos' successor decides to prioritise economic relations with China over upholding Philippine claims in the South China Sea, as both Arroyo and Duterte did, US-Philippine military ties could once again be downgraded.

Similarly, a future US president could, like Donald Trump, pursue a more transactional approach to America's alliances, or a more confrontational approach towards China, placing the Philippines in an uncomfortable strategic position. Ultimately, the future of the alliance is contingent on domestic political developments in both Manila and Washington.

## CONCLUSION

The current revitalisation of strategic relations between the Philippines and the US is the latest episode in the oscillating nature of one of Asia's oldest security alliances. This partnership remained impregnable even with the avowedly pro-China and anti-US President Duterte. Under Marcos, it did not take a huge amount of effort to recalibrate Manila's defence posture despite China's successful overtures to the government between 2016 and 2022. But sustained US and Philippine attention to the alliance necessarily means going beyond security matters given China's increasing economic footprint in the country.

In a policy speech delivered in Washington D.C., Marcos emphasised that improving national security also entailed focusing on the economic growth and resilience of the Philippines towards which the US can make significant contributions.<sup>36</sup> Having a more well-rounded and holistic relationship will further enmesh the Philippines to the US given the possible impact of domestic politics in the future of Philippines-US relations. In the meantime, China will automatically heavily criticise and oppose any future moves towards a stronger alliance. Beijing may even impose punitive economic measures on the Philippines, such as introducing tariff barriers on Philippine exports and curtailing investment in the Philippines. So far, the Marcos administration's strategic reset is influenced more by the country's security interests than by China's expected acerbic reactions or promised economic largesse.

While there are still lingering challenges, a stronger security alliance between the US and the Philippines is a reality that China must learn to live with.



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