

Challenges and Gains in Military Relations between the Philippines and the United States

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The depth and complexity of existing military arrangements between Philippine and US forces provide stability and continuity despite changes in the global security environment and the defense institutions of the two countries.

The Complex History of Philippine-US Relations

As a former colony, the Philippines fought alongside US forces in World War II. As post-colonial allies, the governments of the two countries signed several defense agreements with the primary objective of strengthening mutual defense capabilities. From the 1950s onward, changes in the global socio-political environment forced the Philippines and the United States to continuously re-calibrate the forms and mechanisms of their defense cooperation.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the two countries signed agreements that defined Philippine-US security relations, the Philippine-American Military Bases Agreement (MBA) and the Philippine-American Military Assistance Agreement (MAA). In furtherance of these agreements, the two countries also signed a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) on August 30, 1951. The treaty stipulates that “an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace” and declares either nation would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its own peace and safety and constitutional processes.

Through the MBA, the United States maintained twenty-three military installations in the country, including the Clark Air Force Base and the naval installation in Subic Bay for an initial lease period of 99 years. The MBA, however, was amended in 1979 and updated in 1983 to decrease the period to 25 years. In 1991, by a 12-11 vote, the Philippine Senate made the landmark decision to reject a ten-year lease extension on the bases, and the last US ship sailed out of Subic Bay in November of that year.

The decision not to extend the presence of US military bases in the country resulted in lukewarm bilateral relations. The United States downgraded its military and diplomatic ties with the Philippines by pronouncing that it could no longer guarantee the country's external defense. A 1996 Supreme Court decision requiring the Philippine Senate to ratify joint military exercises struck another blow against bilateral relations. The ruling suspended all large-scale Philippine-US military exercises.

This lull, however, proved temporary in the longstanding Philippine-US relationship. In February 1998, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) was signed and eventually ratified in 1999 by the Philippine Senate. The VFA stipulates the terms and conditions covering US personnel visiting the Philippines for bilateral military exercises. In furtherance of revived bilateral security ties, the Mutual Logistic Support Agreement (MLSA), which provides for the exchange of logistics support, supplies, and services on a reimbursable basis, was signed in 2002.

These political fluctuations are reflected in the amount of US military assistance the Philippines received across the years. US defense assistance peaked in the aftermath of the Second World War. Interestingly enough, a significant stream of this defense assistance came even before the signing of the MDT. From 1947 to 2020, US defense assistance averaged \$45 million a year. As expected, defense assistance drastically dropped after 1991

Leslie V. Advincula-Lopez, Development Studies Program and Institute of Philippine Culture Ateneo de Manila University, explains how, "changes in the global socio-political environment forced the Philippines and the United States to continuously re-calibrate the forms and mechanisms of their defense cooperation."

but picked up again after 1998. Moreover, assistance has been on the upswing since 2011, rising from \$39 million to \$226 million in 2019 according to US [government statistics](#).

A Continuous Evolution of Philippine- US military Relations

In the light of the changing security environment, a more expanded form of defense cooperation was forged between the two countries in 2014 through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). This agreement covers non-traditional security concerns such as terrorism, maritime security, transnational crimes, humanitarian assistance, and human-made disasters.

In a nutshell, the EDCA aims to improve the interoperability of Philippine and US forces and at the same time improve on the "short-term modernization and help maintain and develop additional maritime security, maritime domain awareness, and humanitarian assistance and relief capabilities." Many analysts perceive that the recent aggressiveness of China in staking its claims in the South China Sea pushed forward the EDCA, which was approved relatively quickly. Additionally, the US "pivot to Asia" was also a factor in the agreement's approval

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Implementation of the EDCA corresponded with a noticeable spike in US military assistance, climbing from US\$45 million in 2013 to US\$153 million in 2016. Some analysts welcome the reconfiguration of Philippine-US military relations and hope that it will assist the Philippines in developing a minimum defense posture. For example, renewed Philippine-US military cooperation could serve as an impetus for the Armed Forces of the Philippines to double down on its modernization efforts. At the same time, the regular presence of US forces in the region can also serve as a deterrent to China's growing maritime assertiveness

Since 2014, several joint military exercises involving Philippine and US forces have been regularly conducted. The VFA Commission's website lists about twenty joint military exercises/activities yearly. These exercises include the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), Amphibious Landing Exercise or PHIBLEX, and the Pandagat, Lupa, Himpapawid, PALAH.

Many of these military exercises, including Balikatan (Shouldering the Load Together), are geared toward improving the interoperability of Philippine and US forces against external aggression. The objective is to improve tactics, coordination, and maneuvers against a hypothetical external threat. The annual Balikatan exercises aim to enhance the combined planning, combat readiness, and interoperability through improved security relations. Balikatan also demonstrates America's resolve to support the Philippines against external aggression.

Bilateral Military Relations Have Survived the Test of Time

The Balikatan series of exercises is only one of many joint military exercises in which Philippine and US forces participate. Still, its design illustrates the basic blueprint for how Philippine and US military forces may address the fluid national and global security threats affecting both countries, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterterrorism, and anti-narcotics operations. Furthermore, the changing character of security threats is likewise reflected in the \$157 million in assistance the United States provided in 2020 to support cooperative threat reduction and counter-drug activities. However, the bulk of the US military assistance from 1947 to 2021 still went to military and defense operations.

With the Philippines facing various security challenges on different fronts, its robust military partnership with the United States boosts its military readiness to better address maritime security concerns, territorial integrity, counterterrorism, and disaster response and mitigation. Although sporadic political perturbations challenge this relationship, the 70 years of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) is the strongest indication of continuously evolving bilateral military relations that promote the Philippines' and the United States' unique but interconnected national interests.

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