



**BALIKATAN EXERCISES 2018:  
PHILIPPINES-US SECURITY  
COOPERATION FORGING AHEAD**

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With attention focused on growth in Philippines-China relations, a significant improvement in Philippines-US security relations has gone largely unnoticed. An important indicator is the recently [concluded](#) *Balikatan Exercise 2018*. An annual bilateral military exercise between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and those of the United States under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, *Balikatan* enhances joint capabilities and interoperability of both forces. The [34<sup>th</sup> iteration](#) was held May 7-18, 2018 at multiple locations in the Philippines and focused on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR), counterterrorism, and mutual defense operations. Together with other recent examples of Philippines-US security cooperation, the exercise shows how both countries strive to maintain the relevance of the alliance.

### **The 34<sup>th</sup> *Balikatan***

Highlights of *Balikatan 2018* include simulated joint operations in different threat situations and operational environments. Activities included a [joint operations on urban terrain exercise](#), which involved defensive position construction and tactics training; an [Amphibious Exercise \(AMPHIBEX\)](#), which aimed at improving tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), and enhancing readiness and response capabilities during operations ashore; and a [Combined Arms Live Fire Exercise \(CALFEX\)](#),

designed to share field artillery TTPs and improve capabilities in coordinating multilateral responses.

There are three examples of how the alliance remains intact and how it has improved. First, compared to *Balikatan 2017*, which included [approximately 2,800 AFP personnel and 2,600 US personnel](#), *Balikatan 2018* involved [around 5,000 AFP personnel and 3,000 US personnel](#). Given political uncertainties, conducting the [largest Philippines-US joint military exercise](#) since the beginning of the Duterte administration is a highly encouraging development. Next, the range of activities for mutual capacity-building expanded beyond simulated exercises and joint drills to include [subject matter expert exchanges \(SMEE\)](#) in the areas of command and control, flight operations, pararescue procedures, and mass casualty response. Finally, *Balikatan 2018* included personnel from the Australian Defense Force and the Japan Self-Defense Forces, enhancing security cooperation among the four countries and underscoring the relevance of the US-led system of alliances and security partnerships in the Asia Pacific.

### **Security cooperation forging ahead**

Other significant engagements over the past months support the idea that Philippines-US security cooperation has improved under the Duterte-Trump administrations. From March to April, two US naval assets made routine port visits to the Philippines – the attack submarine [USS Bremerton](#) and the aircraft carrier [USS Theodore Roosevelt](#). On May 13, the Joint US Military Assistance Group turned over a [Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial System \(UAS\)](#) to the Philippine Air Force (PAF) for improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. The UAS, which will be operated by the PAF from the Antonio Bautista Air Base in Palawan, is expected to enhance the AFP's maritime domain awareness, counterterrorism, and HADR initiatives. Further, the ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of the AFP-US [HADR Warehouse](#) was held April 17 at Cesar Basa Air Base in Pampanga. This marks the first of five military facilities to be constructed under the Philippines-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014.

## Enduring politico-security challenges

While these developments indicate that security cooperation will continue, two enduring challenges must be addressed if the alliance is to remain robust and relevant. The first is projecting [credible deterrence](#) in the South China Sea (SCS). While the allies underscore that bilateral military exercises such as *Balikatan* are not directed against a particular country, it must be understood that deterrence remains an essential aspect of an alliance. Aside from conducting freedom of navigation operations, extended deterrence against actors that seek to change the rules-based regional order is facilitated by joint military exercises. Credible deterrence, however, must demonstrate the intent and capabilities to use force when necessary. In view of China's assertiveness in the SCS, which it has militarized by reportedly [deploying a nuclear-capable bomber aircraft](#) and [anti-ship cruise and surface-to-air missiles](#), deterrence remains a core issue for the Philippines-US alliance.

The second challenge is embedded in the Philippines and US relationship with China. For the Philippines, the [modus vivendi](#) that President Duterte established with President Xi and deepening economic relations between Manila and Beijing have reduced the urgency for an assertive stance on the SCS. Consequently, a shift in the thrust of *Balikatan* from traditional to nontraditional security threats became apparent in 2017. For the US, the [primacy of the North Korean nuclear threat](#) in Trump's Asia policy demands a calibrated diplomatic approach toward Beijing. In view of its [unique relations](#) with North Korea and historical significance in the Six-Party Talks, China will continue to play an indispensable role in negotiations to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, China's cooperation, whether in the form of diplomatic talks with or economic sanctions against Pyongyang, will be an essential component of Trump's North Korea policy.

## Imperatives for the alliance

In responding to these challenges, the allies must consider the following imperatives. First, *Balikatan* must be reoriented from counterterrorism and

HADR to external defense and maritime security for a credible deterrent, both in terms of intent and capabilities. A renewed focus on these areas will achieve two short-term objectives: 1) reaffirming the shared intent of the allies to address regional security threats of mutual concern, and 2) aligning the thrusts of the military exercises with the requirements of combined operations during [SCS contingencies](#). Additionally, as a long-term objective, the allies must adopt a viable defense technology transfer framework to support the AFP Modernization Program and the [nascent Philippine defense industry](#) to assist the Philippines in developing a self-reliant defense posture and steer the alliance in a sustainable direction.

Second, together with Australia and Japan, the allies must explore a quadrilateral maritime security exercise that combines elements of the [KAKADU](#) and [CARAT](#) exercises to insulate the alliance from the political dynamics driving Philippines and US relations with China. These exercises are effective because 1) the *KAKADU* exercises focus on combined air and naval forces operations and 2) the *CARAT* exercises are hosted on a rotational basis. By focusing on [air-sea battle](#), a quadrilateral exercise can demonstrate the collective intent of the security partners to deter China from further militarizing the SCS disputes. At the same time, in adopting a rotational hosting arrangement, the quadrilateral maritime security exercise can have a multilateral character and offer the plurality of interests essential in preventing China's diplomatic backlash against the alliance. Taken together, these elements may allow allies to engage in collective activities that promote conventional deterrence while avoiding diplomatic risks.

In summary, although politico-security challenges continue to constrain Philippines-US security cooperation, both countries must find ways to work around existing limits to keep the alliance relevant and robust.

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