



BALIKATAN 2019 AND PHILIPPINE POLICY ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

BY CHRISTIAN VICEDO

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The United States and the Philippines **conducted** the 35th iteration of the Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder) military exercises at multiple locations in the Philippines on April 1-12, 2019. Conducted under the auspices of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 (MDT), Balikatan seeks to strengthen the US-Philippine alliance by promoting interoperability and exchanges in expertise across a spectrum of operations including mutual defense, maritime security, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief (HADR). This year, 3,500 American, 4,000 Filipino, and 50 Australian personnel **participated** in 28 interoperability events, including an amphibious landing exercise (AMPHIBEX), a combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX), counterterrorism operations, aviation operations, and urban operations. However, operational exercises are only a part of the overall solution to improving the relationship. The allies also need to expand defense cooperation to develop a sustainable partnership in protecting mutual interests in the South China Sea (SCS).

Mindful of the regional security challenges facing the US-Philippines alliance, Balikatan 2019 improved in terms of focus, assets employed, and inclusivity. Since the beginning of President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, Balikatan 2019 is the first iteration that focused more on territorial defense. Following Duterte's policy of improving politico-economic ties with China and reducing tensions in the SCS, previous Balikatan exercises focused on counterterrorism and

HADR. This year's exercise, featured two simulated territorial defense scenarios that demonstrated joint air, naval, and marine capabilities. The **AMPHIBEX** in Zambales involved seizing a beach from an unspecified enemy by conducting an air assault, landing ashore with amphibious assault vessels, and concluded with ground operations. The other scenario involved **re-taking** an airfield on Lubang Island from unspecified terrorist elements. Conducted at the request of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), this training activity holds deeper meaning in addressing potential threats at Pag-asa (Thitu) Island, the Philippines' largest controlled feature in the SCS and the only one with a runway. In terms of assets, Balikatan 2019 was the first iteration to **integrate** the USS Wasp LHD-1 and its **complement** of four MV-22 Ospreys, two MH-60S Sea Hawks, and at least 10 F-35Bs, the US stealth fighters with short take-off and vertical landing and electronic warfare capabilities. During the exercise, the USS Wasp **sailed** through the SCS together with the Philippine strategic sealift vessel BRP Tarlac and offshore patrol vessel BRP Ramon Alcaraz. Balikatan 2019 was also the most inclusive exercise under the current administration as it featured the largest number of participating troops from the US, Philippines, and Australia. Furthermore, while Japan did not participate in the interoperability exercises this year, it did **join** six other security partners as observers, namely Canada, United Kingdom, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. Most of these countries have publicly expressed their interest in preserving a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and stability in the SCS.

Recent regional political and security developments explain the observable tactical shift in the Philippine government's SCS policy. First, China's assertiveness in the SCS has now extended to Pag-asa Island where Manila is currently enhancing the existing runway. According to the AFP, during the first quarter of 2019, over **600 Chinese fishing vessels** had been spotted around Pag-asa Island, occasionally accompanied by Chinese Coast Guard vessels. The AFP suspects these vessels are monitoring Manila's construction activities. Xu Liping of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences further **explains** that the presence of Chinese vessels around Pag-asa Island was meant as a "mild warning" to the Philippines for changing the

feature's status quo. According to Liping, Beijing fears that Pag-asa Island might be used as a forward deployment platform for US air and naval assets, which could directly threaten the "safety of China's island reef outposts in the Spratly islands."

Second, there is growing domestic pressure on the Duterte administration to take action in the SCS. Based on a public survey [released](#) by the Social Weather Station this April, only two out of 10 Filipinos believe that China has good intentions for the Philippines. The survey is consistent with the realities on the ground. For instance, on April 9, 2019 around 1,000 protesters [rallied](#) in front of the Chinese Embassy in Manila, decrying Beijing's activities as "almost an invasion." Even Philippine government officials have expressed dismay over China's assertiveness. Two senators – [Sen. Richard Gordon](#) and [Sen. Panfilo Lacson](#) – have already expressed that China's non-friendly behavior of encircling Pag-asa Island with its maritime militia must not be allowed. Most recently, in response to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang's criticism of the presence of USS Wasp during Balikatan 2019, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana expressed that China is the one ["stirring trouble"](#) in the SCS by militarizing its artificial islands.

Finally, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's recent [clarification](#) that "as the SCS is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the SCS will trigger mutual defense obligations" under the MDT might have influenced the change in the tone of the Philippine government concerning SCS features that China claims such as Pag-asa Island and Scarborough Shoal. Although the Philippine Defense Department [insists](#) on the review of the MDT to "cope-up" with the "geopolitics and security dynamics within the Indo-Pacific region," the policy clarification from the US was welcomed as a positive development. Notably, after this clarification, President Duterte became more assertive in his SCS policy pronouncements, calling on China to ["lay off"](#) Pag-asa Island.

Although the reorientation of Balikatan toward territorial defense indicates progress in enhancing the credibility of the alliance, the Philippine government's SCS policy remains inadequate to fully

address China's assertiveness. Hence, the allies should pursue the following strategic actions to deter China. First, the allies must conduct joint patrols in the SCS. It is high time for the Philippine government to join other countries in supporting US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). Those FONOPs should be area specific to guarantee the rule of law within Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone and nearby waters. Next, the allies should continue to explore the possibility of providing the Philippines with a missile system. According to the Center for a New American Security, the US [offered](#) a high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) to the Philippines but it was declined due to the cost it entails. As allies Washington and Manila must work around resource issues by identifying alternatives within the limits of Philippine defense budget. Finally, the allies should explore the possibility of transferring defense technology to the Philippines through public or private joint development projects. Cooperation in the defense industry will not only provide an economic incentive for closer defense relations but will also support the long-term development and modernization of the AFP, thereby transforming it into a more capable and reliable ally. Through these long-term initiatives, the allies will have a better chance of deterring China's assertiveness in the SCS.

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