

The United States and the Philippines are discussing enhancing military ties partly in response to increasing Chinese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region.

Because the biggest threats to the Philippines' security have long been internal, Manila has some of the weakest external defense capabilities in Southeast Asia. However, Manila will balance attempts to increase these capabilities against a potential backlash from both China, a top trading partner with increasing economic influence, and from its own people, for whom increasing the U.S. military presence remains a controversial issue.

U.S. and Philippine defense officials met recently to discuss increasing cooperation on a range of security issues, including counterterrorism, border security and military exercises, a Pentagon spokeswoman confirmed on January 26th.

The talks came amid a U.S. re-engagement in the Asia-Pacific region as well as Chinese efforts to assert maritime claims in the Pacific Ocean, particularly the South China Sea. In fact, Manila's most immediate security concerns remain the active ethnic and communist insurgencies as well as Islamist militancy. This focus on the insurgency has left Manila little additional resources to focus on potential external threats.

As China grows more active in its assertion of territorial rights in disputed areas of the South China Sea, the deficiencies of the Philippine armed forces in patrolling and protecting its claims become more apparent. While the government is in part seeking to expand the systems and capabilities of the armed forces, with a look toward sea- and air-based maritime patrol, Manila is also looking to the United States to help balance the Chinese activity. Manila will walk a careful line, however, as it does not want to rupture the significant economic ties with China, nor upset a population that retains a fair amount of opposition to the stationing of foreign - and particularly American - troops on Philippine soil.

In addition to discussions with the Philippines, the United States has recently discussed proposals to deploy military assets in several countries in the region, including up to 2,500 Marines in northern Australia and permanently stationing littoral combat ships in Singapore. The aim of these deployments, increased frequency and location of bi- and multilateral military exercises, as well as various diplomatic measures to enhance the U.S. presence, is part of a broader effort to rebalance China's rising political, economic and military influence in the Asia-Pacific.

For decades, the main threats to the Philippines' security have been from domestic insurgent groups such as the Abu Sayyaf and Bangsamoro groups like the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the communist New People's Army. With a strong interest in increasing its presence in the strategic island nation, the United States has at times had a rocky security relationship with the Philippines. The countries signed the Military Bases Agreement in 1947 and Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951, under the auspices of which the Philippines hosted several U.S. military bases, most notably Naval Base Subic Bay and Clark Air Base.

U.S. forces nevertheless were forced to leave the country twice: first in 1992, at the end of the Cold War after the Philippine Senate rejected a treaty that would have extended the lease of U.S. bases, and again in 1995, during an incident on Mischief Reef in which China began building construction and effectively occupied the reef - 209 kilometers (130 miles) away from the southwestern island of Palawan. This incident largely prompted Manila to renew its military cooperation with the United States, and in 1999, the two signed the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which allows the United States to dispatch troops to, and undertake joint military exercises and training with, the Philippines.

This cooperation gathered additional momentum following 9/11, after which Southeast Asia was initially identified as the potential "second front" for U.S. counterterrorism efforts. But with the perception of threat fading from terrorism groupings in

Southeast Asia and increasing focus in the Middle East, U.S. attention in the region also gradually diminished. As a result, U.S. and Philippine defense cooperation remained largely focused on counterterrorism efforts, and what cooperation there has been is largely focused on insurgent groups such as the jihadist Abu Sayyaf Group or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern island of Mindanao.

This dynamic began to change again in 2006-2007, when China, along with its economic expansion, began accelerating efforts to acquire blue-water naval capabilities - and at the same time began reasserting maritime claims in its near abroad. This also came along with the deadline for filing claims with United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea that spurred all claimant countries to reassert their territorial claims. The Philippines' attempt to defend its maritime buffer and stake its claim in the resource-rich South China Sea that largely overlaps with other countries has resulted in a number of rhetorical disputes and small-scale incursions in the area in the past two years, particularly with China.

The Philippines' ability to deal with external threats is extremely limited. It has one of the weakest militaries in the region, with no air defense, anti-ballistic missile or anti-submarine capabilities; nor does it have adequate combat ships for naval defense. Manila in the past decade has been attempting to modernize its military, and the need is only growing in response to China's increasing assertiveness with the goal of better territorial defense. To that end, the Philippines obtained a Hamilton-class cutter (formerly belonging to the U.S. Coast Guard) in May 2011, and on Jan. 27 it announced the completion of a \$1 billion defense procurement plan with the United States, focusing on improving air force and naval capabilities with purchases such as two more Hamilton-class ships, long-range patrol boats and F-16 fighters. At the same time, it is in talks with South Korea over the purchase of military hardware such as aircraft, helicopters and boats, with similar talks also taking place with Japan.

Amid this buildup and negotiations with the United States for an increased military presence are pragmatic concerns, however. Washington is using disputes in the South China Sea as a way to enhance its presence in the Asia-Pacific, and the Philippines - as one of the most vocal countries in claiming territorial rights and calling for third-party involvement to assist its claim and defense capability - is among the most at risk of a backlash from Beijing. China is the Philippines' most immediate neighbour and third-biggest trading partner, and the fear of a backlash is heightened by the perception that U.S. security guarantees may not necessarily extend to a disputed area or include a direct confrontation with China if tensions escalates.

Domestically, there is a wide perception that the U.S. security alliance has neither adequately helped the Philippines' military nor guaranteed the country's security from external threats. The VFA, in particular, has proved controversial to the public over the perception of unequal provisions, especially the criminal jurisdiction, and has faced persistent public pressure for revision.

With these considerations in mind, Manila will attempt to increase its external defense capabilities while balancing between Beijing, Washington and its own public.

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