

THE NORTHERN CONNECTION: WHAT COULD BE THE PHILIPPINES' ROLE IN A TAIWAN CONTINGENCY?

by
Kurt Abalos

After former United States (U.S.) House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan, [China responded](#) by conducting unprecedented drills around the self-governing island. Unlike previous instances of [Chinese military incursions](#) and ['grayzone' tactics](#) against Taiwan, these drills showcased China's latest military assets, including the J-20 stealth fighter. The drills also demonstrated the [launching and landing of missiles](#) around waters administered by Taiwan.

Less than [170 kilometers away](#), the [Philippines' presidential office](#) stated that the country's defense and foreign ministries were "closely monitoring the situation as they would in any other similar circumstance." The Philippines' National Security Council Deputy Director General Michael Eric Castillo then said, "While we don't have an intention in engaging in a war with any country we might be caught in crossfires with warring countries. And what we need to prepare for is not the capability to fight a war but what we need to prepare for immediately and urgently is the capability to respond to any foreseeable contingencies."

For the Philippines, Taiwan has been an important economic partner that [invests billions of pesos](#) throughout the country and houses more than 150 thousand Filipino workers (a fifth of [Taiwan's total migrant workforce](#)). However, the Philippines also acknowledges its position in the flashpoint-laden region and has been preparing to respond to such situations. Although the Philippines no longer diplomatically recognizes Taiwan, it does not ignore the consequences of a potential Cross-Strait contingency. This begs the question of what could be expected from the Philippines in a potential Taiwan conflict. This blog post examines three aspects that may hint at the Philippines' role during such a contingency.

An Important U.S. Ally

Throughout most of its history as an independent country, the Philippines and the U.S. have had ["iron clad" relations](#), most importantly regarding security. Throughout the Cold War, the Philippines was among the major forward operating bases for the U.S. military as it hosted the [largest U.S. military bases in the world](#). As a result, the country aided the U.S.' campaigns in the Korean War, Vietnam War, and even the first two Taiwan Strait crises.

Nowadays, U.S. military presence in the Philippines is significantly less than before under the [Visiting Forces Agreement of 1991 and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement \(EDCA\) of 2014](#). Under the [current Marcos Jr. administration](#), the Philippines has expanded military base access for the U.S. with four more bases, to a total of nine, but has stated "no plan[s] to open, (or) to establish more EDCA bases". Among the additional EDCA sites, two Philippine military bases are near the Luzon Strait, facing Taiwan. Based on these recent developments, the Philippines may be instrumental for the U.S. should it conduct any military actions during a Taiwan contingency.

International Partners

Other than strengthening its relationship with its long-time ally, the Philippines has been proactive in establishing new security relationships with traditional and non-traditional allies, such as Canada, Vietnam, Germany, the United Kingdom, among others. In the 2024 'Balikatan' military drills, the Philippines [welcomed France](#) to strengthen its defense capability and interoperability among allies and like-minded partners. The drills were the largest of their kind to date. Among the several security scenarios during the drills, there were certain exercises linked to the increasing instability in the Taiwan Strait, such as [deterring a foreign invasion](#) in one of the Philippines' northern provinces and [conducting drills in the country's northernmost island](#).

Moreover, the [Philippines and Japan](#) recently concluded the Reciprocal Access Agreement, a VFA-like agreement, and are waiting for legislative



concurrency. Former Taiwan Foreign Minister and current National Security Council Secretary General Joseph Wu also [expressed interest](#) in strengthening bilateral security cooperation in 2023. So far, the Philippines has been [cooperating](#) with Taiwan on coast guard relations. The Philippines has been proactive in strengthening and substantiating its relationships with other international stakeholders for its security. Given that the Philippines's developing but limited military capabilities of addressing territorial insecurities, there is [support](#) for the current government's strategy of maximizing its diplomatic capital to internationalize the country's security.

Philippines' Northern Response

Despite the Philippines' derecognition of Taiwan in the 1970s, the country has been interacting with the self-governing island on various matters, although in a reserved and discrete manner. Under the Marcos Jr. Administration, the Philippines has been adopting a [Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept](#), which seeks to reorient the country's defense policy towards territorial defense via a whole-of-government approach.

The Philippine government has [increased its defense budget to acquire new assets](#) and equipment, repositioning and reallocating resources to focus on external defense. It has also broadened and strengthened international agreements to develop the country's defense capabilities, among other efforts. As a result, the [Philippine Coast Guard opened a station](#) in the northernmost islands of the country amid China's military buildup. The Philippine government has also been drafting [plans for evacuating](#) hundreds of thousands of Filipino workers based in Taiwan in the event of a Taiwan contingency. Amid China's "Joint Sword 2024A" drills, the AFP kept a [close watch](#) on the developments.

Despite a growing concern among Filipinos for the country's security, some [Philippine local officials](#) criticize the administration's policies arguing that China 'will be forced to count us as their enemy'. Even [former President Duterte](#) criticized the Marcos Jr. Administration's foreign policy for being too aligned with the U.S. and provoking instability in the region. In this connection, there are [claims](#)

that the Philippines could be useful in disrupting and complicating China's Taiwan invasion plans. However, should the Philippines play a role amid a Taiwan contingency, the Philippines' ambassador to the U.S. stressed that it would be based on the country's national security interests.

Conclusion

Irrespective of how a potential Taiwan contingency unfolds, the Philippines is fully aware of the security impact such an event would have. Among the major collateral effects are the billions of pesos worth of Taiwanese investments for the country and the greater value of regional trade. The Philippine government would also have to address the ensuing complex humanitarian challenges associated with the tens of thousands of Filipino citizens based in Taiwan, and even other Southeast Asian and foreign nationals. Furthermore, the close distance between the Philippines and Taiwan increases the stakes for the country in the event of a Cross-Strait contingency as its national territory may be involved in such a conflict.

The Philippines' current government has been vocal in its concern over the possibility of a Cross-Strait contingency for its national security. It has also been reinforcing existing cooperation, establishing new security partnerships, and being proactive in the country's territorial defense. Given the increasingly tense situation in the Taiwan Strait, the Philippines is preparing itself for any and all contingencies, whether it be reprising its role as a U.S. support base, creating and participating proactively in an international coalition, or actively responding to the situation in its capacity. Regardless of the nature of a Taiwan contingency, the Philippines acknowledges its position as a regional stakeholder and is preparing itself to safeguard its national security as well as protect and pursue its other interests. This entails repatriating its citizens from potential danger, maintaining the integrity of its national territory amid Chinese actions, and securing the well-integrated Philippine economy from a Taiwan contingency.

Kurt Abalos was a 2024 Spring semester intern at ISDP's Stockholm Taiwan Center. He is also a senior master's student at the Taipei School of Economics and Political Science, specializing in global political economy.