

# Forward and Seaward: Archipelagic Defence as a Military Strategy for the Philippines

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## Biography

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## Cover

*A Philippine Navy AW159 Wildcat helicopter is seen in flight while the Royal Australian Navy destroyer HMAS Brisbane sails during a maritime cooperative activity between the Philippines, Australia and Canadian navies near Scarborough Shoal in disputed waters of the South China Sea on September 2, 2025. (Photo by Ted Aljibe/AFP via Getty Images)*

# Executive Summary

- Over the past decade, the Philippines' perception of the military threat from China has become increasingly severe, driving the foundational concept of its defence planning towards 'archipelagic defence'. The Marcos Jr administration's 'Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept' (CADC) has laid the groundwork for major changes to Philippine military strategy, which include emphasising basing dispersion, ranged strike capabilities and the use of geography, as opposed to previous conventional, unfocused military build-ups.
- However, elements of archipelagic defence will highly likely lead to sharper military confrontations with China; in particular, the expansion of Philippine military positions along strategic border areas, particularly near Taiwan, and the CADC amounting to a 'counter' anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy to China's current military posture. This process will likely foster security-dilemma dynamics, and thus Manila needs to develop an effective strategic-communications plan on its foreign policy for its more neutral neighbours.
- The emphasis on archipelagic defence could help move capability development beyond resource 'wish lists' and leverage foreign policy, military partners, force posture, doctrine and operational concepts – key elements historically downplayed in Manila's discussions of 'military modernization'. Before Manila can put the CADC in place as a military strategy, it will have to overcome various constraints. These include inter-service rivalries, which currently hamper cooperation, as well as attempts by China to undermine public support for the CADC.
- Manila would benefit from creating baseline defence and security strategies that explicitly integrate foreign military partnerships into its archipelagic defence and espouse clear positions on basing access, weapons deployments and in-theatre assets. The government's international defence and security engagement (IDSE) plans and broader defence and security strategies have largely avoided these subjects, allowing for strategic flexibility but also spawning several policy problems.
- The jury is still out as to whether archipelagic defence is an effective response to China's grey-zone strategies and whether it translates strategic-level deterrence efforts into tactical and theatre-level improvements in Manila's military position. Subsequent iterations of the CADC will need to clarify its theory of victory and emphasise planning to achieve strategic objectives rather than merely acquiring asymmetric military capabilities.

# Introduction

The Philippine government publicly announced its new ‘Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept’ (CADC) in January 2024 after months of heightened tensions with China.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr repeatedly emphasised the importance of the country’s archipelagic nature in the formulation of its defence and foreign policies during his keynote address at the 21st IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2024 – the first by a Philippine president.<sup>2</sup>

The CADC generally seeks to ‘defend[ing] forward’ at maritime chokepoints, in order to emphasise the efforts that the Philippines will undertake to prevent maritime and military encroachments on its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This ‘defend[ing] forward’ consists of dispersed basing patterns, coastal air and missile defences, and well-balanced naval and air power.<sup>3</sup> The CADC also aims to build security by leveraging ground-based missile defences and the elements of the country’s topography and geography, such as the Philippines’ close proximity to contested waters, for military advantage. It also aims to build collective security by granting varying degrees of military access to foreign partners.

The CADC is the Philippines’ first high-level defence plan explicitly built around archipelagic defence as an organising principle, although publicly available details are sparse. To date, the Marcos Jr administration has not released its national defence and military strategies, making the CADC prone to improvisation in the form of ‘unscripted’ strategising.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the Marcos Jr administration, Manila had largely phrased its strategic intent and defence planning in threat-agnostic ways, such as ‘territorial defense’ or ‘credible defense posture’.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, the CADC’s archipelagic-defence foundation refines Philippine military strategy by pivoting away – in theory – from previous attempts at conventional yet unfocused military build-ups and towards a military strategy favouring asymmetry and geospatial advantages. Those previous attempts, for example, include

the general military-capability build-up in response to Beijing’s occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995 or following the Scarborough Shoal stand-off in 2012.

Unlike these previous attempts, however, the CADC’s emphasis on archipelagic defence could help move capability-development efforts beyond resource ‘wish lists’ and leverage foreign policy, military partners, force posture, doctrine and operational concepts – key challenges previously often downplayed in Manila’s discussions of ‘military modernization’. Some of these discussions also fail to address critical questions, such as Beijing’s grey-zone coercion, whether Manila should also engage in reciprocal island reclamation, or how to sufficiently deter China.<sup>6</sup>

In a general sense, a military strategy should offer a notional integration of ends (objectives), ways (courses of action) and means (instruments or capabilities). Naturally, such components must be both well developed and well related. The strategy should elaborate on a theory of victory, particularly as to how military capabilities will achieve a set of strategic or theatre-level objectives. Relatedly, a military strategy should align force development – specifically the military’s posture, design, organisation, doctrine and capability plans – with espoused military tasks and objectives. Seen in this light, Manila will have to overcome various constraints to make the CADC an operational military strategy.

For one thing, to ensure broader institutional support, the concept of archipelagic defence will have to transcend its origins as a service-level strategy when the Philippine Navy (PN) published its Active Archipelagic Defense Strategy (AADS) in 2013. For another, Beijing will view the CADC’s stipulations, such as basing dispersion, forward-deployment and long-range strike capabilities, with alarm. This will exacerbate existing security-dilemma tensions. China’s escalatory tendencies will push the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) into a high operational tempo. Given the AFP’s small and technologically limited littoral-combat force, this will mean a trade-off between

operational readiness and structural readiness. The jury is also still out on whether such archipelagic defence is an effective response to China's grey-zone strategies and whether it translates strategic-level deterrence into tactical and theatre-level improvements in Manila's military position.

For Manila to effectively implement the CADC as a military strategy, it should, firstly, espouse a clearer set of doctrines than current documents and concepts of operations and objectives, instead of resorting to its historical assumption that a conventional military build-up will solve its security problems. Secondly,

the Philippine Department of National Defense (DND) would benefit from establishing a baseline position on how to utilise foreign military partnerships, particularly in terms of basing access, weapons deployments and in-theatre assets. This subject has largely been avoided in the DND's international defence and security engagement (IDSE) plans, which focus mostly on financial assistance and joint training. Finally, Manila should build domestic and international political support for its resource-intensive archipelagic-defence plan, which will inevitably create military tensions with China in the near-to-medium term.

# 1. Strategic History and Archipelagic Defence

The Philippines' strategic history offers little precedent for the development of a strong archipelagic-defence outlook for its military strategy. Indeed, the defence of air and maritime zones beyond its coastline has not traditionally occupied a central role in Philippine military planning. During the height of internal-security conflicts from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the country's military strategy was oriented towards counter-insurgency and rural pacification.<sup>7</sup> Chronic financial problems until the early 2000s further exacerbated the trade-offs between achieving external versus internal security.

This operational history left several path-dependent legacies. Firstly, the military did not require extensive mechanisation and, having largely conventional superiority against local armed groups, mostly utilised the navy and air force for logistics and mobility support.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the counter-insurgency campaigns between the 1970s and the early 2000s prioritised inland forward-basing (e.g., in the hinterlands) and neglected naval and air-force bases in coastal and outer-island perimeter areas. Manila thus historically saw its coastline – one of the longest in the world – and adjacent waters as military buffers rather than a strategic liability. Today, its strategic equation is the opposite; China's maritime expansion in the Western Pacific Ocean has made the Philippines grapple with incursions not only in the South China Sea, but also in the Sulu-Celebes Seas to the south and the Bashi Channel and the Philippine (Benham) Rise to the north and northeast respectively.

Thirdly, facing guerrilla warfare meant that the AFP did not need significant, capital-intensive acquisitions, such as integrated air and missile defence (IAMD), maritime-domain-awareness capabilities and a regionally competitive air force or navy.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the PN and Philippine Air Force (PAF) atrophied in the early 2000s, the latter having no fighter jets from 2005–15 and the former being one of the smallest navies in Southeast Asia, despite having the second-largest EEZ in the region.<sup>10</sup> In other words, prior Philippine military

strategies, component doctrines, force postures and capability developments have generally weakened the AFP's efficacy as a territorial defence force.

## China and the Rise of Archipelagic Defence

The AFP's operational history notwithstanding, it has harboured the intention to shift from prioritising internal to external security since the end of the Cold War. But the 1995 Mischief Reef stand-off against Beijing only spurred a weak effort at military modernisation, partially because it was viewed as a one-off flashpoint rather than a systemic campaign. However, China's militarisation and reclamation of features in the South China Sea since 2014, as well as the tremendous growth of its maritime fleets – including the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the People's Armed Force Maritime Militia (PAFMM) – have prompted Manila to rethink this assessment and heightened its sense of maritime insecurities.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, China's construction of military facilities on Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Johnson South Reef, Gaven Reefs, Fiery Cross Reef, Hughes Reef and Cuarteron Reef in the Spratly Islands – as well as its accordant placement of radar and communication arrays, mobile surface-to-air missiles and anti-ship cruise-missile systems there – stoked Philippine threat perceptions that China is using a 'maritime counter-insurgency' to change the regional status quo.<sup>12</sup> Using purportedly non-military bodies such as the PAFMM and the CCG, China has carried out militarily salient activities such as island reclamation, while preventing Manila from using military vessels under an informal understanding between the two countries that restricts activities to civilian vessels. The Philippine military views these actions as part of China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy. This strategy imposes costs on would-be attackers as a means of securing China's nearby waters, while minimising the likelihood of a direct force-on-force confrontation.<sup>13</sup> While primarily

directed against the United States, Manila tends to perceive this Chinese policy as also weakening its own strategic position.

Meanwhile, the Philippines has historically refrained from building permanent features – a signal of reclamation intent – in the South China Sea, having developed no major bases or facilities in the disputed Spratly Islands apart from the construction of the Thitu (*Pag-asa*) Island’s beaching ramp in 2020 and the ongoing repair of its airstrip.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Vietnam and China have respectively reclaimed an approximate 2,360 and 4,650 acres in the Spratlys.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this, because the Philippine claim to the features primarily depends on patrols and operational tempo, rather than infrastructure or occupation, it views ship swarming and harassment more acutely than other claimants.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, this sensitivity has induced the Philippines to expand its maritime zones and the PN’s area of operations, notably with the exclusive claim to an extended continental shelf in the Philippine Rise in 2012 and a new extended continental-shelf submission to the United Nations in 2024 (see Table 1.1).<sup>17</sup>

More broadly, a key defence-planning assumption across administrations is that China’s military threat is primarily a *maritime* one. Indeed, the DND’s various strategic-assessment reports have framed China’s military threat as that of maritime encroachment on the Philippines’ outer fringes, rather than against interior metropolitan areas. This assumption even held true under president Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22), who had cordial relations with Beijing and emphasised bilateral diplomatic and political negotiations to solve maritime tensions.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Duterte’s personal belligerence towards the US – which included eventually aborted plans to terminate the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement – created pressure to develop what the AFP calls a

‘Unilateral Defense Plan’ to face-off external aggression without any military alliance or external support.<sup>19</sup> Such plans, however, remain largely ideational, and the US–Philippines alliance remains a pivotal – if unstated – centrepiece of Philippine military strategy.

The Philippines’ perception of the scope of China’s maritime encroachment has nevertheless worsened. In recent years, public AFP reports have referred increasingly to Beijing’s growing precision-strike capabilities and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the South China Sea. Manila has shown a related interest in acquiring IAMD capabilities.<sup>20</sup> During Duterte’s tenure, the AFP also expressed concerns regarding suspicious marine scientific research in the Philippine Rise in the northeast and distrust of Chinese naval vessels’ claims to innocent passage in the Sulu-Celebes Seas.

The power imbalance between the Philippines and China has also fed into the former’s inclination to seek international defence partners, be it for defence procurement, operational augmentation or various strategic-political reasons. Since the Scarborough Shoal stand-off in 2012, the Philippines has authorised the rotational presence of Australia in 2012 and Japan in 2024, while granting US basing access under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014 and expanding again in 2023.<sup>21</sup> The Marcos Jr administration has presided over a sustained effort to ‘multilateralise’ Manila’s defence through negotiations of visiting-forces agreements with Canada, France and the United Kingdom. Manila has also viewed China’s public threats against the EDCA with alarm, as well as China’s constant analogies branding the country as Asia’s ‘next Ukraine’, referring to a smaller country provoking pre-emptive military action by a larger power.<sup>22</sup> Counter-productively, such rhetoric likely fed the perception that Beijing is threatening Manila’s defence posture – including through its military activities inside Philippine territory.

This perception represents a conceptual step change, as the Philippines had previously viewed China primarily as a maritime threat rather than an existential and holistic military threat. Due to this historically limited view of the threat that China poses, Philippine defence plans have emphasised anti-ship, anti-air and littoral-warfare capabilities rather than components of a whole-of-society military strategy, such as

Zone	Surface area (in km <sup>2</sup> )
Land Area	298,170
Archipelagic Waters	589,739
Exclusive Economic Zone	2,200,000
Extended Continental Shelf – South China Sea	150,000 (est.)
Extended Continental Shelf – Philippine Rise	135,506
Total	3,373,415

Source: Philippine Department of National Defense

reserve-force development and defence-industrial base development. During the later years of Benigno Aquino's presidency and the early years of Duterte's presidency (2014–17), the asymmetric components of those goals were rarely emphasised.

Apart from improving domain and situational awareness, the DND and AFP were focused on building up conventional capabilities, such as increasing the size of the country's Offshore Combat Force (the naval unit tasked with territorial defence) and the stock assets of air-force units handling fighter operations, defence, surveillance and command and control.<sup>23</sup> There was also far less urgency placed on force-structure development and doctrinal changes, which were modified at the service and joint levels during 2019 to accommodate a reorientation to external defence.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, the Marcos Jr administration reportedly wanted to hone in on war fighting in its upcoming National Defense Strategy refresh to address long-standing blind spots of Philippine defence planning.

Furthermore, the Philippines appears to have anchored its archipelagic-defence strategy on its own version of an A2/AD campaign, rather than seeking to puncture China's own A2/AD network, thus creating somewhat overlapping A2/AD coverages. Manila's plans for strike capabilities are markedly short-range in nature, suggesting a prioritisation of anti-ship and anti-air capabilities over serious long-range counter-strike capabilities aimed at disrupting China's 'kill-chain' system.<sup>25</sup>

However, the Marcos Jr administration's emphasis on IAMD and the expansion of the number of EDCA sites is geared towards the distribution and survivability of military-basing infrastructure. In the event of open conflict, this could degrade China's ability to deter the United States from forcibly entering the theatre using Philippine facilities.

Taken together, the CADC's development suggests that counter-anti-access thinking has increasingly influenced the Philippines' military strategy. This thinking seeks to blunt China's anti-access networks in the South China Sea, in addition to developing Manila's own anti-access capabilities. Evidently, while the AFP's capability-development plans have largely remained intact, the Philippine president's views make a substantial difference when it comes to the tenor of the Philippines' A2/AD thinking. Marcos Jr's military strategy, which relies upon American support during a conflict contingency, appears to be incentivising Manila to begin thinking about supporting the United States' resilience against China's A2/AD capabilities. However, what Manila is *not* doing is developing the independent strike capabilities needed to degrade China's A2/AD capabilities or installations in the South China Sea. Notably, it relies on the United States' temporary deployment of capabilities such as the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System and *Typhon* mid-range capability system, which ultimately depend on Washington's political will and Manila's acceptance.

## 2. Building Blocks of Archipelagic Defence

As a military strategy, the concept of archipelagic defence is less a singular coherent framework and more of a series of key building blocks. These include various policy and strategy documents, force posture and doctrinal developments, as well as technological platforms.

### Policy and Strategy Documents

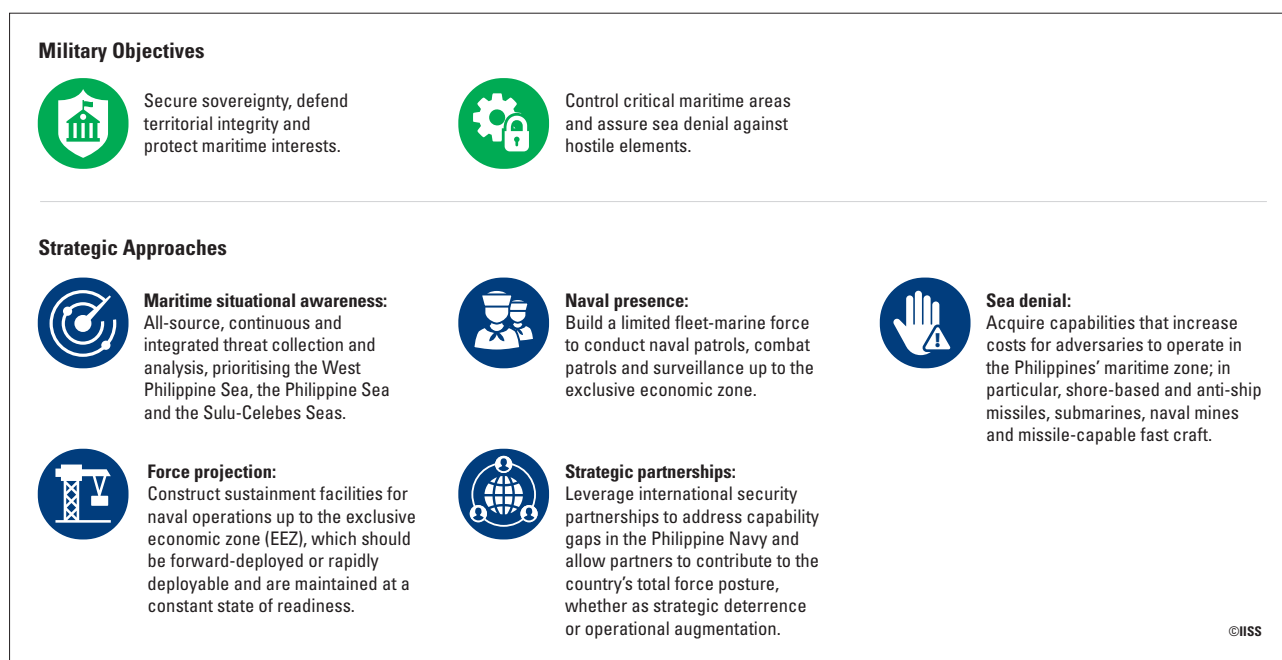
In its incipient form, archipelagic defence was the PN's initial service-level strategy when it published the AADS in 2013.<sup>26</sup> The document was significant (see Figure 2.1); firstly, its emphasis on centring capability development on the military objective of 'sea denial' rather than 'sea control' represented a specific understanding of naval deterrence that did not intend to match China ship-for-ship. Secondly, its explicit prioritisation of three geographical theatres, namely the Philippines-claimed West Philippine Sea, the Philippine Sea and Sulu-Celebes Seas, reflected a broader understanding of the country's maritime interests beyond the preoccupation with the South

China Sea at the time. Thirdly, its elucidation of how naval forces would be utilised for strategic and tactical naval deterrence has become a mainstay of how the Philippines intends to project its forces, given its limited resources and capabilities.

However, the AADS's need to address multiple mission areas – such as disaster response and internal-security operations – diluted its military purpose, leaving critical issues unaddressed, such as China's grey-zone tactics and island reclamation in the South China Sea. Consequently, the 2013 and 2017 iterations of the AADS and its accompanying 2020 Sail Plan did not sufficiently flesh out the organisational and doctrinal changes necessary for a broader military strategy.<sup>27</sup>

During the Aquino administration (2010–16), the Philippine government placed much less emphasis on what exactly made the Philippines' military strategy an archipelagic one at the joint-force level.<sup>28</sup> That said, since 2012, the DND has rarely diverted from the objectives and approaches outlined in its 2012 defence White Paper

Figure 2.1: Overview of the Philippines Navy's 2017 Archipelagic Defense Strategy



Source: Philippine Navy

– which also set the contours of the 2012 Revised AFP Modernization Program (RAFPMP) – and the strategic approaches of the PN’s AADS.<sup>29</sup> These objectives are:

1. Create a strategic response force with forward-deployed or rapidly deployable forces and develop significant air- and missile-defence capabilities.
2. Enhance Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities to support joint-defence operations and increase air- and maritime-domain awareness.
3. Develop military infrastructure in Philippine-occupied features in the West Philippine Sea.
4. Enhance allied and partner forces’ inter-operability and force augmentation.
5. Pivot to guerrilla-warfare strategies in the event of foreign invasion of interior territories.

But early iterations of the DND’s plans for territorial defence were notionally geared towards general military modernisation. Vital documents, such as the 2003 US–Philippines Joint Defense Assessment and the 2012 Defence White Paper, focused on evaluating force structures and modernisation packages for naval and air-force capability build-up.<sup>30</sup> While the threat from China was cited as a rationale, there was little discussion of the downstream military consequences of Beijing’s specific capabilities and tactics, such as its precision-fire capabilities, nuclear arsenal, island reclamation and nascent A2/AD activities in the South China Sea via coast guard and militia vessels. Over time, the Philippines’ territorial-defence planning gradually shifted from focusing on the West Philippine Sea (as in the 2012 defence White Paper) to all strategic border areas in response to China’s increasingly multi-directional maritime encroachment.

Meanwhile, the Philippine Marine Corps (PMC) adopted the Archipelagic Coastal Defence Concept (ACDC) in 2021 as a new operating doctrine.<sup>31</sup> The ACDC emphasised mobile and shore-based anti-air and anti-ship missile platforms. This document had the knock-on effect of securing the Philippine Army’s (PA) pivot to archipelagic defence.<sup>32</sup> The ACDC also required the placement of marine detachments along maritime chokepoints, such as the Batanes group of islands in Northern Luzon and in the Sulu–Celebes Seas. These placements represented a geospatial shift for the

PMC, which had typically been deployed for counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

The ACDC was largely developed with the support of the US military, particularly amid the PMC’s re-focus towards littoral operations and what they mean in a modern A2/AD environment.<sup>33</sup> Under the coastal-defence system, mobile ranged fires, such as *BrahMos* cruise missiles, would take advantage of the natural concealment provided by dense jungles to increase their survivability. Additionally, the Philippines aims to make use of being the closer major landmass to disputed areas and essentially operating on a near-shore basis, unlike China.<sup>34</sup> In short, Duterte was generally unable to remove the structurally rooted threat perceptions in the Philippine military about the military and maritime threat posed by China.

The Marcos Jr administration doubled down on the military’s pivot to external defence with its CADC in 2024, which elevated core concepts of the PN’s AADS into a joint-operating concept.<sup>35</sup> As his administration coincided with the third and final term of the AFP’s modernisation programme (segmented into phases known as *Horizons*), there has also been greater emphasis on air and missile technologies, such as mid-range strike capabilities (unlike *Horizon 1* and *2*’s focus on the fleet-marine force and combat-fighter capabilities). Marcos Jr also appears to be explicitly taking advantage of the mutual defence treaty with the US, such as by expanding the number of EDCA sites.<sup>36</sup>

## Posture

Following the 2012 defence White Paper and the 2013 AADS, Manila has aspired to create forward-deployed or rapidly deployable forces in areas of maritime interests to generate in-depth defence. The choice of a ‘defend forward’ force posture (in terms of basing, troop placement and asset deployment) was also due to the limited patrol range of the AFP’s surface and aerial assets. As indicated in the map below (see Map 2.2), since 2016, strategic basing and ‘West Philippine Sea development projects’ have focused heavily on the Northern Luzon Command (NOLCOM) and in areas close to Taiwan rather than just the Western Command (WESCOM), which handles the South China Sea disputes. While the Philippines has largely viewed these deployments as

Map 2.2: Major Philippine basing-development projects (2016–24)



Note: Any depiction of disputed boundaries used in graphics or mapping does not imply legal recognition or evaluation nor does it indicate support for the position taken by any government or administration.

Source: Philippine Department of National Defense

westward facing, the country has clearly widened the latitude of its strategic basing and the deployment of troops and assets.

Prior to the Marcos Jr administration, the development of the NOLCOM was largely in line with Phase 1 of the Air Surveillance Radar Acquisition Project that focused on three locations along the Philippines' western seaboard facing the South China Sea.<sup>37</sup> However, the Philippines' deployments in Northern Luzon changed under Duterte when the PN reactively deployed military basing and marine detachments at Fuga Island and Mavulis Island along the Bashi Channel facing Taiwan between 2019 and 2022, in response to public alarm over Chinese businesses' planned development projects in the area and Chinese-flagged vessels' presence in the Philippine Rise in the Philippine Sea to the east.<sup>38</sup> As of 2023, the AFP maintained 20 Border Detachments that prioritise theatres facing the South China Sea: nine are deployed in the Spratly Islands, four are in the Batanes group of islands south of Taiwan and seven are in the outer Tawi-Tawi islands in southwestern Mindanao.<sup>39</sup>

The AFP's interest in developing bases in the extremis of Northern Luzon is a recent development. When the Philippines negotiated with the US its 2013 Increased Rotational Presence agreement and the EDCA initially in 2014 (time for Manila's filing of an arbitral case against China), it did not authorise access to bases closer to Manila. In contrast, three of the four additional EDCA sites granted under Marcos Jr in 2023 were in north and eastward-facing provinces of Northern Luzon.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, the Philippines' placement of long-range strike capabilities could be as game-changing as the touted nature of the technology itself – which the Philippines did not historically possess. Even after India's delivery of the first batch of *BrahMos* missiles in 2024, the AFP has kept silent on their deployment and repeatedly emphasised the mobile nature of the batteries.<sup>41</sup> Satellite images indicate that the first base for the *BrahMos* batteries is at Naval Station Leovigildo Gantioqui in Zambales off Western Luzon, which faces the South China Sea. The PMC's coastal-defence regiments – which will operate the *BrahMos* – are also considering new basing in Lubang near Manila Bay and Calayan Island near Northern Luzon's Babuyan Islands, a maritime chokepoint south of Taiwan.<sup>42</sup>

The Philippines' historical aversion to significant military basing close to the Spratly Islands is also changing. In the August 2024 congressional budget hearings, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr announced that Manila will build several small forward-operating bases, likely focusing on island habitability to maintain small garrisons and basic naval facilities.<sup>43</sup> Manila's risk appetite seems to have grown as it has realised the operational problems caused by only having a few dual-use facilities in the Spratly Islands. However, this has led to a concern over the attritional damage as a consequence of the high tempo of operations of its naval-reconnaissance aircraft and patrol ships, which are used constantly to resupply claimed features.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, Manila's previous hesitance to build facilities in the South China Sea, as well as Beijing's lack of articulation of its interests in other geographies outside the theatre (e.g., the Bashi Channel), have inadvertently made the Philippines eager to reinforce its position elsewhere, including Northern Luzon (south of Taiwan). Amid escalating rhetoric about conflict in Taiwan and Marcos Jr's warming ties with the US, Beijing now views the kickstarting of marine deployments in the area as provocative.

So far, the Philippines has been deliberately ambiguous about the implications of its archipelagic-defence posture for China. Marcos Jr has clarified that he will not allow EDCA sites to be utilised for any offensive military operations – alluding to a potential Taiwan contingency – while also stating 'it's very hard to imagine a scenario where the Philippines will not somehow get involved' in a Taiwan contingency.<sup>45</sup> Teodoro Jr has called the developments in Northern Luzon a 'geographical accident', specifically in reference to the necessity of reinforcing heretofore non-existent perimeter defences in the area.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, China has been closely monitoring the deployment of both Philippine and US capabilities in the area. Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi notably protested against the non-permanent deployment of the United States' *Typhon* missile launcher, which is capable of firing intermediate-range missiles (a capability not possessed by the Philippines as Manila's *BrahMos* missiles are capped at a 290-kilometre range), as part of *Exercise Salaknib 2024*.<sup>47</sup>

## Doctrine

In terms of its doctrine, the Philippine military continues to be divided by planning around markedly different combat requirements for internal and external security. The AFP's Joint Operating Concept (JOC) had significant difficulties getting rolled out because of gaps in material capability for C4ISR as late as 2019. When the JOC was finalised in 2020, the AFP had to emphasise multi-mission capability development and asset fungibility rather than military competition against China, since the Philippines still faced a confluence of internal and external security threats.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, the AFP has struggled to develop doctrines that specifically address its force employment against hostile foreign forces at a tactical level.

Doctrine development in the PN and PAF has largely been in line with – and reciprocally developed alongside – the Philippines' archipelagic-defence strategy. Both services have largely emphasised the asymmetric nature of the Philippine response to China's threat. The PAF's current 'Agile Combat Employment' concept, for example, has echoed the archipelagic-defence strategy, since it aims to pivot the PAF's basing so that it is forward-deployed, smaller and dispersed, while the PN's 2013 and 2017 iterations of the AADS were the backbones of current Philippine military thinking on external defence.<sup>49</sup>

The PMC's above-noted adoption of the ACDC in 2021 also placed a premium on land-based forces in the Philippines' understanding of its counter-A2/AD strategy against China.<sup>50</sup> The ACDC provided a role for the PA in the operation of shore-based and mobile anti-air and anti-ship missile platforms. This was due to the Army Artillery Regiment's Shore-Based Missile System programme and its interest in developing an IAMD capability with the PAF and PMC.<sup>51</sup>

The PA's integration into archipelagic defence, however, is at its nascent stages. In the 2021 Army Operating Concept, the PA shifted its doctrine to that of 'land-power manoeuvre', which prioritises asymmetric warfare using ranged fires and dispersed ground forces that avoid force-on-force confrontation. PA units have historically had limited roles for armour and artillery, as well as more but smaller, more numerous brigades of between 1,500 and 2,500 personnel.

Over the past six years, the PA has sought to reorganise its units into brigade combat teams (BCTs) outfitted with combined arms, such as artillery and air defence.<sup>52</sup> However, until 2023, there had only been one BCT in the country, primarily due to limitations in the combined arms capabilities required for the activation of further units. The 1st BCT was not deployed in either the WESCOM or the NOLCOM, which are priority theatres under the AFP's current JOC.<sup>53</sup>

The Marcos Jr administration shifted these priorities, with the military fast-tracking the creation of BCTs – referred to as 'quick response' territorial forces, which were envisioned in the DND's 2012 defence White Paper – for each of the main island groups in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.<sup>54</sup> However, this integration appears to be limited, as the creation of only a handful of BCTs means that PA battalions still largely operate on a status quo basis.

Further to this, the new naval, air-force and army doctrines and operating concepts do not appear to have introduced a sea change in the military's response options to China's grey-zone coercion. Both intelligence from the Philippine military and commercial-satellite imagery suggest that China typically increases its number of ships in the area – not to mention an increase in tactics such as vessel-ramming – in response to tensions. Amid tensions in Sabina Shoal, which peaked from July to early September 2024, China boosted its ship presence in the Philippines-claimed West Philippine Sea by almost a quarter (from 163 to 203 ships).<sup>55</sup> Beijing likely views the key components of an archipelagic-defence strategy, such as the development of missile capabilities and distributed basing along strategic border areas, with concern.

Manila has appeared largely reactive to Beijing's escalations. For instance, in 2024, military chiefs made an ad-hoc decision to equip personnel with knives and short swords after the CCG boarded PN vessels to prevent a resupply mission to BRP *Sierra Madre*.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, in 2023 the AFP resurfaced plans it had first drafted in 2020 to create a Philippine maritime-militia force composed of both navy reservists and fishermen, but there has been no further clarity from the government on the matter.<sup>57</sup>

At the theatre level, the Philippines' posture also does not appear to be a significant naval deterrent. CCG and maritime-militia vessels have surged at the Second Thomas Shoal since the second half of 2023, and the frequency of physical contact between the Philippine Coast Guard and the CCG (such as ship collisions, use of water cannons and hull scratching) has also increased.<sup>58</sup> The AFP's ability to convert its territorial-defence doctrines and total force posture towards desired results has thus been questionable.

China's geostrategic position in the South China Sea has generally improved over time, as seen by its consolidating of military outposts and in changing commercial activity in the area. According to a Philippine government study, there has also been a decrease in Philippine fishing activity in the West Philippine Sea, and the spatial trend is for foreign-flagged vessels to be moving into Philippine-claimed areas.<sup>59</sup>

## Technology

The PN and PAF have benefitted immensely from the external-defence orientation of the RAFPMP. The PAF's stock of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft has increased since 2014, while Manila has notably procured air-defence equipment, discussed below (see Table 2.3).

The monetary value of military modernisation from *Horizon 1* to 3 has been an exponential leap from USD 1.7 billion to USD 31bn (see Table 2.5). Though Manila is unlikely to secure funding for the notional amount under the final 2023–36 *Re-Horizon* Phase 3, the four-fold budget increase from *Horizons 1* to 2 shows that Manila is serious about its intentions. Procurements in recent years prioritised C4ISR, helicopters, air-defence and anti-ship missiles, frigates and offshore-patrol vessels. *Re-Horizon* Phase 3 will reportedly prioritise combat aircraft, frigates, air and coastal-defence systems, uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) and submarines.

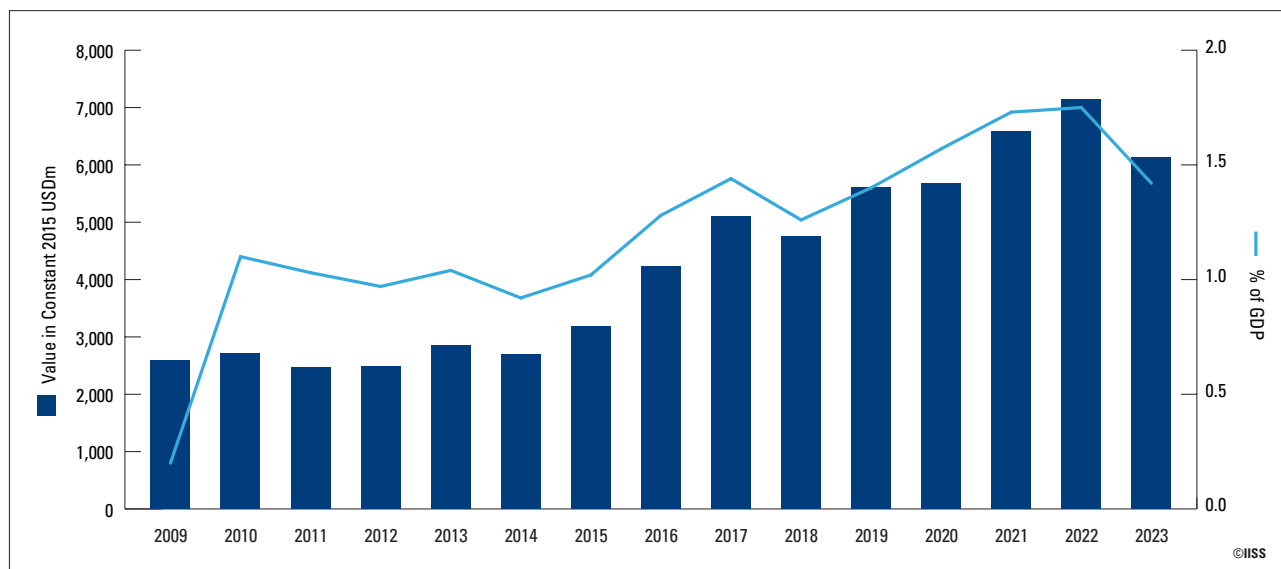
However, the slow pace of modernisation raises the question of whether the Philippines' capabilities will be rendered obsolete or arrive too late and be insufficient.<sup>60</sup> For example, fewer than a third of the projects planned under *Horizon 2*, which focused on establishing basic territorial-defence capabilities, were completed (see Table 2.5). China's naval modernisation, meanwhile, continues at breakneck pace, and the PLAN is expected to grow from 395 ships in 2025 to 435 in 2030, eclipsing the US Navy as both the largest navy and as a battle force.<sup>61</sup> The gap in capabilities between Manila

**Table 2.3: Selected capability indicators for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)**

AFP selected inventory				Selected defence acquisitions by the Philippine Air Force and the Philippine Navy since 2014				
Domain	Equipment	2014	2024		Equipment Classification	Equipment	Quantity	Manufacturer
Air	Air Defence	–	6	<b>Air Force</b>	Fighter Ground-attack Aircraft	FA-50PH <i>Fighting Eagle</i>	12	South Korea
Air	Fixed-Wing	71	100		Training Aircraft	EMB-314 <i>Super Tucano (A-29B)</i>	6	Brazil
Air	Rotary-Wing	88	104		Attack Helicopter	TAI T129B <i>ATAK</i>	6	Turkey
Air	Uninhabited Aerial Vehicle	2	15		Medium Transport Helicopter	S-70i <i>Black Hawk</i>	48	Poland (with units pending delivery)
Maritime	Amphibious Vessels	12	22		Medium-range Surface-to-air Missile System	<i>Spyder-MR</i>	3 batteries	Israel
Maritime	Auxiliaries	14	7	<b>Navy</b>	Frigates	<i>Jose Rizal (ROK HDF-3000)</i>	2	South Korea
Maritime	Patrol and Coastal Combatants	125	103			<i>Miguel Malvar (ROK FF-06)</i>	2	South Korea (pending delivery)
Maritime	Principal Surface Combatants	1	2		Fast Patrol Boat	<i>Nestor Acero (ISR Shaldag V mod)</i>	6	Israel
Land	Armoured Fighting Vehicle	443	578		Principal Amphibious Ship	<i>Tarlac (IDN Makassar)</i>	2	Indonesia
Land	Artillery	285	309		Anti-submarine Warfare Helicopter	<i>AW159 Wildcat</i>	2	UK
					Anti-ship Missile	<i>BrahMos</i>	3 batteries	India (with units pending delivery)

Sources: Military Balance+, milbalplus.iiss.org, Philippine Department of National Defense

Figure 2.4: **Philippine defence budgets 2009–23**



Sources: Military Balance+, milbalplus.iiss.org

	Horizon 1 (2013–17)			Horizon 2 (2018–22)			Re-Horizon 3 (2023–36)
	Approved	Completed	Completion Rate	Approved	Completed	Completion Rate	Approved
Projects	53	36	68%	98	22	22%	37
Cost*	96.7	71.2	73%	451.4	50.3	11%	1,893.7

\*in billions PHP

Source: Philippine Department of National Defense

and Beijing will only grow larger, regardless of intrinsic improvements in Philippine assets. For this reason, Manila’s international defence partnerships amount to ‘force augmentation’ and a force multiplier, but are not conceptually discussed in defence-planning documents.

In fact, since 2014, the number of Philippine naval and coastguard patrol and coastal combatants has decreased from 125 to 103, though Manila was able to procure two principal surface combatants, the BRP *Jose Rizal* (FF-150) and BRP *Antonio Luna* (FF-151). Towards the tail end of the Duterte administration, the PN had to decommission Second World War-era ships to decrease its fleet size, following studies that concluded their continued use was uneconomical.<sup>62</sup> The PN’s acquisitions, however, have not kept up and only achieved a fraction of its 2012 acquisition targets (see Table 2.6). In 2024, the PN was strained by a high operational tempo against China and left unable to send ships to the RIMPAC naval exercise in the US, noting that it could not ‘afford to send our capital assets

outside the country’, in reference to the country’s two guided-missile frigates and the landing dock used for logistical transports.<sup>63</sup>

One bright spot for Manila is the modernisation of its air-domain capabilities, which saw an increase in fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft, particularly combat utility helicopters (Bell 412s and S-70i *Black Hawks*), two anti-submarine helicopters (AW159s), and six close air-support aircraft. The Philippines also intends to procure multi-role fighters (MRFs), though there have been delays due to debates on whether to acquire F-16s or JAS 39 *Gripens*.<sup>64</sup>

	2012 Plan	2024 Actual Assets
Frigates	6	2
Corvettes	12	3
Offshore-patrol Vessels	18	6
Missile Boats	42	9
Attack Submarines	3	0

Source: Philippine Department of National Defense

The Philippines, however, continues to have a limited air-defence system, which relies on a small fleet of FA-50s and a limited set of air- and missile-defence batteries. The delivery of the ground-based *Spyder* air-defence system in 2022 was a critical acquisition as it operationalised the PAF's 960th Air and Missile Defense Group.<sup>65</sup> However, there remain gaps in air-defence coverage due to the limited number of ground-based air-defence systems. The PAF will reportedly prioritise defending air bases and the *BrahMos* anti-ship missile batteries rather than population centres.

Delays in the MRF procurement underscore Manila's near-term vulnerability, since the MRFs were intended as the response force in areas that air defences do not cover. Additionally, many of the projects under *Horizon 2* were moved to *Horizon 3* in a 2024 executive decision (known as *Re-Horizon 3*). These include the short-range air-defence system and the land-based missile system.<sup>66</sup> Still, the overall capability plan of the AFP has held relatively firm across administrations. Due to delays in implementing the RAFPMP, the DND and the AFP have prioritised anti-ship missiles, air defences, MRFs and submarine acquisition.

# 3. Resourcing Archipelagic Defence

The key challenge ahead for Manila is to enact its archipelagic-defence policy with these specified resources. Military strategy, after all, requires not just articulation but also implementation.

## Budget and Personnel

Since 2014, the AFP has had a mixed record of transitioning from internal to external security. As indicated in Figure 3.1, since 2014 the PA’s share of active-duty personnel relative to the entire AFP has notably remained at around 70%, while PN personnel – the forefront of an active archipelagic-defence strategy – has grown the least, at 6%. Nevertheless, Manila has made significant investments in its naval and air-forces programmes, which have incrementally increased from 30% of the military budget in 2021 to 40% in 2025, a figure that now exceeds both services’ proportional share of the force size (see Table 3.2).

The overall contour of force development has not been immune to shifts in presidential priorities. As seen in Figure 3.1, Duterte notably presided over a

significant increase in PA personnel due to his emphasis on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism from 2016–22.<sup>67</sup> Across the board, the AFP grew slightly. As indicated in Figure 3.1, both the PA and PN have increased their number of active tactical battalions and naval units respectively from 2019–23. The increased pressure from China has also forced the DND to revise its intended authorised troop strength, going from ruling out enlargement in 2023 to a planned 40% increase as of September 2025.<sup>68</sup>

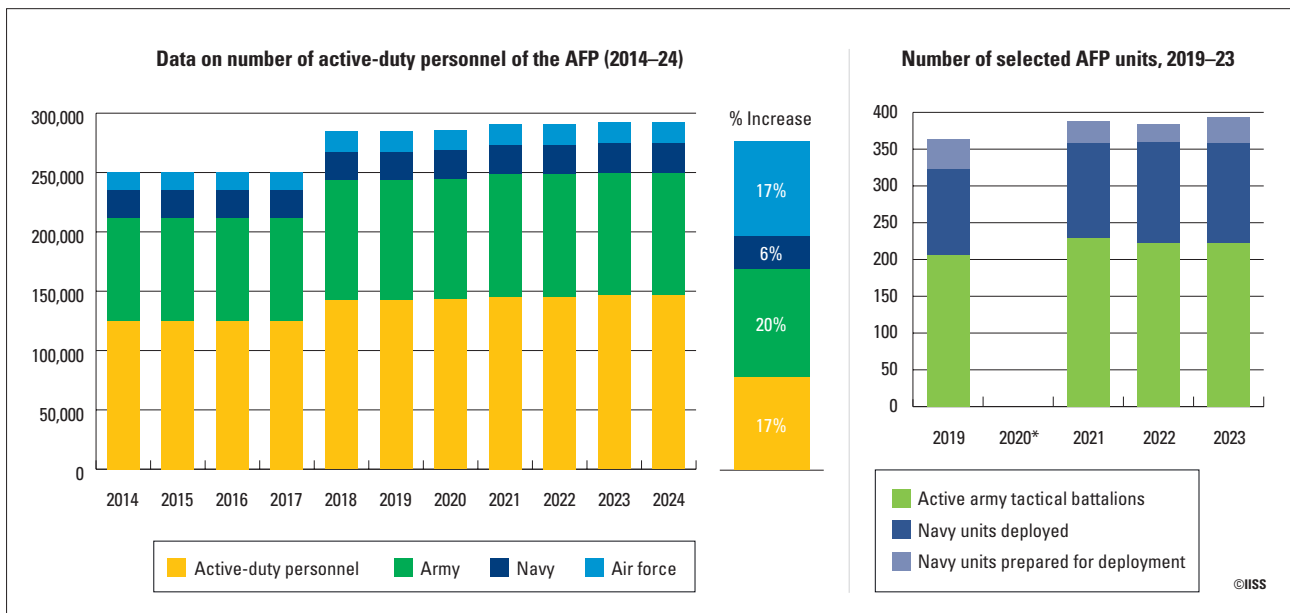
Meanwhile, the Philippines’ defence budget, stripped of personnel expenses, has significantly grown in constant 2015 US dollar value from USD2.58bn in 2009 to

**Table 3.2: Composition of the Philippine defence budget 2021–25**

% Share of Total Defence Programme					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025*
Land Forces	47.9	47	56.2	52.5	50.3
Air Forces	15.3	16.9	18.3	19.9	20.7
Naval Forces	15.1	14.7	16.7	17.6	19.7
Joint-force Operations	2.4	2.1	2.3	4.4	3.4
Joint-force Capability	16.2	16	3.1	1.9	2.1

\*Proposed  
Source: Philippines Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department

Figure 3.1: **Philippine defence budget data**



\*No data  
Sources: Military Balance+, milbalplus.iiss.org, Philippine Department of National Defense

**Table 3.3: New ministerial-level defence partnerships of the Philippines, 2016–21**

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>ASEAN</b>	■ Indonesia and Malaysia (Trilateral)	■ Cambodia			■ Indonesia	
<b>NON-ASEAN</b>	■ Japan ■ France	■ Russia ■ UK ■ New Zealand ■ Czech Republic ■ Turkiye ■ India ■ China	■ Jordan ■ Turkiye ■ South Korea	■ Sri Lanka ■ Belarus ■ Croatia ■ France ■ Japan ■ Israel ■ South Korea ■ Russia	■ Japan ■ US	■ Poland ■ Czech Republic ■ Spain

Source: Philippine Department of National Defense

USD6.14bn in 2023. However, total defence expenditure as a proportion of gross domestic product has only marginally changed, from around 1% of GDP in 2009 to about 1.5% since 2016 (see Figure 2.4).

## Partnerships

Since 2016, the Philippines has largely developed new ministerial-level bilateral defence partnerships outside of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), instead favouring European Union member states, Japan and South Korea. Most of these defence agreements focus upon military logistics and procurement of territorial-defence capabilities (see Table 3.3).

Within ASEAN, the Philippines is trying to cooperate more with Vietnam – a key South China Sea claimant state. In 2024, Manila and Hanoi agreed to bolster their cooperative maritime activities in the South China Sea and are expected to sign a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation.<sup>69</sup> This level of cooperation is notably weaker than Manila’s military ties with Malaysia and Indonesia, but indicates Manila’s attempts to engage ASEAN member states.<sup>70</sup>

Historically, the Philippines has leveraged military cooperation for defence acquisition, including securing concessional loans or asset donations. The Philippines is the 22nd-largest arms importer globally as of 2023 and its imports grew by 105% from 2014–18 to 2019–23.<sup>71</sup> This is primarily because of a combination of the Philippines’ lack of a domestic defence-industrial base beyond small arms and the advanced systems required by the territorial-defence components of *Horizons 2* and *3* of the RAFPMP, which only countries with a better-developed defence-industrial base can supply.<sup>72</sup>

Curiously, developing a domestic defence-industrial base has only figured marginally in early discussions of the CADC, with the recently signed 2024 Self-Reliant Defence Posture (SRDP) law being extremely unlikely to be of significance to ongoing *Horizon 2* and *3* procurements. Manila faces a stark choice between acquiring capabilities in the near-term and developing industrial self-reliance.

One sea change from the Cold War is the decline of the United States’ role as the Philippines’ principal supplier of defence equipment – a role since taken up by South Korea and Israel. South Korea, Israel and the US collectively made up nearly 80% of Manila’s arms imports since 2019 (see Table 3.4). Budget constraints and restrictive procurement laws partly drive this supply-chain dependence. These have incentivised Manila to be a repeat-customer and to consolidate rather than diversify its supply chains.

South Korea’s importance to the AFP is largely due to its role in supplying the bulk of the PN’s offshore-patrol vessels, corvettes and frigates. Hyundai Heavy Industries secured contracts in 2021–22 that made it the singular supplier for the PN’s Offshore Combat Force, which includes the delivery of two corvettes and six offshore-patrol vehicles.<sup>73</sup> Israel, in contrast, has been the partner of choice for C4ISR, missile technology and air-defence equipment. Tel Aviv notably

**Table 3.4: Top sources of Philippines arms imports**

Country	Share of the Philippines total arms imports (2019–23)
South Korea	37%
Israel	28%
US	14%

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database

supplied Manila with UAVs and various radar technologies, though it also secured a contract for fast-attack interdiction craft-missile ships.<sup>74</sup>

For its coastal defences, the Philippines relies on the US and India, with both Washington and New Delhi having opened lines of credit to Manila in 2023. Both the PN's Coastal Defense Regiment and the PA's Artillery Regiment will be primarily equipped with variants of India's *BrahMos* missiles, while the PA is expecting the delivery of the HIMARS multiple rocket launcher systems alongside Israel's *Lynx* and South Korea's *K239 Chunmoo*.<sup>75</sup> As these capabilities are new to the AFP, India and the US have also assisted the Philippines in training the PMC's Coastal Defense Regiment over the last two years.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond defence acquisitions, the US remains the chief defence partner of the Philippines. Although Australia and Japan have emerged as vital partners since 2012 and 2024 respectively, their contributions to operational augmentation are largely limited to security assistance and maritime and air training.<sup>77</sup> Under Marcos Jr, the CADC, as the latest iteration of archipelagic defence, invites foreign forces to participate in combined force-projection activities as a means of both underscoring and bolstering strategic deterrence. These activities include joint-sails or maritime exercises within the Philippine EEZ (dubbed 'Maritime Cooperative Activities'). Apart from Australia and Japan, Canada, France, India and the UK have also joined the Philippines in port visits and other naval-projection activities that serve as signalling activities to China.<sup>78</sup> The Marcos Jr administration, thus, is presiding over an unprecedented growth in visiting-forces agreements with foreign militaries – a strategy that is not without its domestic detractors due to perceptions of potentially losing national autonomy amid the quest to counterbalance China.<sup>79</sup>

The expansion of US basing access in the Philippines under the 2023 revitalisation of the EDCA is also a significant step to extracting credible commitments from the US. However, there are indications that US–Philippine defence relations are undergoing a fine-tuning. Manila and Washington have given teeth to the EDCA largely by expanding basing access and US military financing assistance, rather than by increasing the US troop presence. Outside of periodic military exercises, fewer than 1,000 US military personnel have been deployed on an annual basis in the Philippines since the early 2000s and have primarily been in advisory roles. Still, the centrepiece US–Philippine *Balikatan* exercise has grown to its largest iteration in 2024, with key missions in the past two years largely adhering to archipelagic defence, particularly joint training on air and missile defence, missile strikes, island takeovers and maritime security.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the uptick in cooperation, Manila has no long-term military plan detailing how it wants to specifically leverage its military alliance with the US against China. Manila's implicit assumption is that the US will 'defend' Philippine interests in the South China Sea, without expounding on what these 'requests' to Washington might be, such as US escort ships during resupply missions or a guaranteed force presence in the Philippines. The EDCA's signing in 2014 and its rejuvenation in 2023 were significant advancements to US–Philippine relations, but the types of forces and capabilities that the Philippines is requesting from the US – to be deployed in EDCA bases – need to be fleshed out. For instance, Manila's policy on US missile platforms is unclear, with the US *Typhon* platform's deployment since 2024 prompting Philippine Senate inquiries.<sup>81</sup>

# Conclusions and Implications

Firstly, clarifying its theory of victory in the South China Sea, particularly in the context of the broader regional-security environment, would improve the Philippines' archipelagic-defence strategy. Manila's notional plans of archipelagic defence presently remain focused on the purported deterrent effects of military modernisation without addressing theatre-specific campaign objectives, such as how to resist being pushed out of its EEZ or preventing access-denial in critical waterways surrounding Philippine-claimed features, such as the Second Thomas Shoal. The Marcos Jr administration has made much-needed corrections to previous gaps, such as an explicit commitment to forward-basing and building infrastructure in claimed areas. Yet these developments currently appear to be a patchwork of policy pronouncements rather than a cohesive strategy articulated in an official document.

Secondly, the development of concepts of operations and doctrines should be prioritised, particularly on the utilisation of the threat of force or its actual use to achieve desired strategic outcomes. Archipelagic defence is already clear on its requisite military hardware and technologies, such as modest strike capabilities and area-intervention assets. In contrast, Manila has had no clear response to China's grey-zone coercion, even as it acknowledges the problem. Since 2012, the Philippines has largely acquiesced to matching China's policy of primarily using its coastguard as the frontline response to territorial incursions, leaving the PN out of the action. In essence, China has prevented the PN from becoming the Philippines' force of choice through creative misdirection – a development not adequately addressed by the Philippine defence establishment, and a problem requiring higher-level civilian policy direction.

Thirdly, the Philippines has made significant progress in enlisting foreign defence partners for various requirements of archipelagic defence, ranging from military procurement to joint military activities in the Philippine EEZ. These are meant to signal an international repudiation of China's nine-dash line. Yet the

bigger question is how exactly Manila seeks to leverage its defence partnerships for both tactical and strategic goals, beyond merely modernising the AFP. The United States' role as an 'offshore balancer' against China has always been unstated in Philippine military strategy, leading Manila to be unclear on the defence commitments it is requesting from the US, apart from much-needed yet ultimately mutual defence guarantees.

Archipelagic defence anchored on unilateral defence planning is markedly different from one rooted in integrated deterrence with like-minded countries, and it is high time for Manila to address which way it intends to lean in the coming years. Manila's foreign-policy pivots in the last three administrations, such as threatening to scrap the Visiting Forces Agreement under Duterte and then leaning heavily into US assistance under Marcos Jr, are all contributing to credibility issues for the Philippines. The CADC needs to establish a policy baseline on foreign partnerships, rather than stay quiet on foreign forces' presence in the Philippines. Moreover, providing Beijing with strategic reassurance on the floor and ceiling of Manila's cooperation with foreign powers would also be of benefit to Manila.

Fourthly, the Philippines will have to work out its A2/AD thinking in relation to archipelagic defence. As a consequence of archipelagic-defence strategies being significantly altered in accordance with the foreign-policy priorities of presidents, the AFP has not been clear about the end goal for its own A2/AD. Is Manila's primary goal to induce naval deterrence through A2/AD technologies placed within the range of contested waters, or is the end goal to neutralise China's own A2/AD networks that pose a threat to the Philippines? These different goals have different capability requirements, which in turn are important considerations in any discussion about the range of Manila's planned strike capabilities, combat fighters, shore-based ranged fires and so forth.

Fifthly, Manila will also have to be prepared for China's likely escalatory actions in the near term

in response to South China Sea tensions and the Philippines' growing A2/AD potential. Archipelagic defence, particularly the Philippines' renewed emphasis on forward-basing in the South China Sea, will inevitably be viewed by China through the prism of superpower rivalry.<sup>82</sup> Another part of the equation is how Manila and Washington will navigate their political relationship to sustain archipelagic-defence planning, particularly amid rising concerns over the second Trump administration's transactional approach towards allies and stunning magnanimity towards adversaries like China and Russia.

The Trump administration has, thus far, largely treated Manila well, given exceptions to foreign-aid moratoriums and increased foreign military assistance. However, Manila may hesitate to enmesh with the US further and develop EDCA sites due to fears that the US will later request greater burden-sharing. Escalation dynamics can already be observed in the roll-out of the CADC, and the United States' failure to support Manila definitively might deter Philippine policymakers from investing heavily in archipelagic defence, as opposed to hedging and primarily diplomatic resolution. Archipelagic defence as a military strategy is costly, both from a resource and political standpoint, and the Trump administration's treatment of the Philippines may determine political support for the CADC in the Philippines.

Finally, Manila will have to develop its diplomatic relations with its neighbours and better communicate its rationale for such policies. This is a key strategic objective for Manila, as any sustainable archipelagic-defence strategy that essentially internationalises and diversifies the force presence in the region should seek to gain acceptance, if not agreement. China's A2/AD strategy is as much about fostering political conditions that weaken support for the US presence in the region as it is about networks of military technologies that threaten military forces. Manila would therefore benefit from an effective strategic-communications plan on its foreign policy for its more neutral neighbours.

The Philippines' archipelagic-defence strategy appears to be the broad direction in which the country's defence posture, capability development and military doctrines have moved towards since 2012. Despite significantly different foreign policies between Aquino and Duterte in 2016 and Duterte and Marcos Jr in 2022, elements of archipelagic defence will become mainstays of Philippine defence planning and its risk environment in the coming years. The running joke in the Philippines used to be that 'the country is all coast but no defence and all air but no force'. The same is no longer true today, although significant capability gaps remain. In the near term, Manila will have to think beyond technologies and materiel capability and explore fundamental questions of how and when to use military power and for what purpose.

## Notes

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