

Philippines Joins Washington's Containment Policy of China

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The Philippines announced on April 3 that the locations of four new military bases that the US will gain access to have been identified. These bases, an expanded part of the defence agreement between the two countries, will allow the US to approach Taiwan from the south in the event of war and acts as another part of its China containment strategy.

The US-Philippines joint military exercise Balikatan-2023 will be held across the South East Asian country from April 11 to 28, the US embassy in Manila announced on April 4. This will be the largest exercise in the history of the Philippines. About 9,000 service members took part in last year's exercise. However, this year, more than 5,000 Philippine troops and more than 12,000 US troops will participate.

It is noteworthy that the US Embassy announced the drills only a day after Manila revealed the locations of the four new military bases that will allow rotating US troops - three on the main island of Luzon, close to Taiwan, and one in Palawan province in the South China Sea.

The licensing of these four sites was probably decided during the trips of US officials to the Philippines in recent months, first **Vice President Kamala Harris**, and then **Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin**. A US presence at new military facilities in the Philippines, as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, will increase the potential for Washington to influence the situation in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

One of the strategic intentions of the US is to build a base on Balabac Island as it could provide future support and logistics in any future military operation in the region. Three of the new bases could be used primarily by the US military to respond to any situation in the Taiwan Strait from the south. This would work alongside their bases to the north of Taiwan, specifically those in Okinawa in southern Japan. In this way, the new bases in the Philippines will fill the gap in the south, which is very important for the implementation of the US

containment strategy.

Although the Philippines has a dispute with China over maritime sovereignty space, from Beijing's perspective, Manila has brought a foreign power to the region. For the Americans, the Philippines is an important springboard for operations against China in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and because of this, China will certainly take retaliatory measures, which could include a force build-up. This in turn will see tensions rise in the sea area adjacent to the Philippines, which can lead to a serious deterioration in Beijing-Manila relations.

"China has sent a signal to the Philippines to not allow third parties to sabotage the friendly relations between the two countries," Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson **Wang Yi** said at a meeting in Beijing with former Philippine President, Senior Vice Speaker of the Philippine House of Representatives **Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo**.

At the same time though, Manila announced on April 4 that talks with China on joint oil and gas exploration in the disputed South China Sea will resume the following month. Resumptions of talks was first indicated when Chinese **President Xi Jinping** hosted his Philippines counterpart **Ferdinand Marcos Jr.** in Beijing during the latter's first state trip outside of the Southeast Asian region.

"China will work with the Philippines to continue to properly handle maritime issues through friendly consultation, resume negotiations on oil and gas exploration, promote cooperation on oil and gas exploration in non-disputed areas, and conduct green energy cooperation on photovoltaics, wind power, and new energy vehicles," Xi said at the time.

A statement released by the Philippines' presidency also said Marcos mentioned the "continuing negotiation for the joint exploration between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea, which he said is very important to the Philippines."

However, it is recalled that the Philippines Supreme Court had declared only days after Marcos' trip to Beijing that the country's tripartite agreement with China and Vietnam for energy exploration in the disputed South China Sea was void and unconstitutional.

Even so, the fact that Manila will allow four new US bases to open just weeks before discussions with Beijing will resume suggests that Philippine leaders will continue deepening their country's military relations with the US whether improvements are made with China or not. China's artificial islands in the South China Sea is a move that has angered its neighbours, but they will also prove to be a first line of defence for the Asian country as the US continues to strengthen its military presence in the region, as seen with its new access to four Philippine bases.

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