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Bilateral and Regional Implications of the U.S.- Philippine Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

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Renato De Castro, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “A rotational U.S. military presence will strengthen the Philippines’ resolve to uphold its territorial claims in the South China Sea and test American credibility in honoring its defense commitment to the country.”

On April 28, 2014, then Philippine Secretary of National Defense Voltaire Gazmin and U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Philip Goldberg signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) a few hours before President Barack Obama’s arrival in the Philippines. The signing of the EDCA sent a strong diplomatic signal to Beijing that it would have to take account of an American military presence in the Philippines if it chose to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea. More significantly, a rotational U.S. military presence was expected to strengthen the Philippines’ determination to uphold its territorial claims vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea dispute backed by American resolve and credibility to honor its defense commitment to the Philippines.

The 21st Century Philippine-U.S. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

The EDCA is not a new security treaty; it is merely an updated version of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. This executive agreement serves as a framework by which the Philippines and the U.S. can develop their individual and collective defense capabilities. This goal is accomplished through the rotational deployment of American forces in Philippine bases. Although the EDCA allows American forces to utilize facilities owned and controlled by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the Philippine base commander has unrestricted access to these locations. Likewise, American-built or American-improved infrastructure inside these installations can be used by the AFP. Furthermore, any construction and other activities within the Philippine bases require the consent of the host country through the Mutual Defense Board (MDB) and Security Engagement Board (SEB). More importantly, the EDCA is designed to minimize domestic opposition to U.S. military presence in the country by explicitly affirming Philippine sovereignty and providing a legal framework for increased American rotational presence rather than the re-establishment of permanent bases, which remains a sensitive issue among Filipinos.

The EDCA also proved advantageous to the AFP. With its small and obsolete naval force and an almost non-existent air force, the Philippine military benefits from the regular and short-term visits of U.S. forces that conduct military training as well as humanitarian and disaster response operations. Logistically, the U.S. construction of vital military facilities, infrastructure upgrades (such as hangers, air defense surveillance radar systems, ground based air defense systems, and naval operating bases), and the storage and prepositioning of defense equipment in agreed locations can lower the cost of the force and training modernization programs since the buildings and equipment can be shared and utilized jointly by American and Philippine armed forces.

The implementation of EDCA augurs well for the Philippine military. Philippines Air Force (PAF) fighter pilots can train with their American counter-parts at the five airbases that are part of the agreement. The PAF can also use facilities that American forces will improve or build inside its facilities. In addition, the Obama Administration has requested US\$50 million from the U.S. Congress to fund the Maritime Security Initiative in Southeast Asia. The lion’s share of the funds in the first year

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will go to the AFP's capability building program. It is expected that there will be allocations for the purchase of equipment to monitor activities and movements in the South China Sea.

Regional Security Implications

During the Sixth Annual Bilateral Security Dialogue (BSD) between the U.S. and the Philippines in Washington D.C. on March 18, 2016, it was announced that American forces will be allowed access to the following AFP bases: Antonio Bautista Air Base in Palawan; Basa Air Base and Fort Magsaysay in Luzon; Lumbia Air Base in northern Mindanao; and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base in Cebu.

With EDCA's implementation, the United States enhances the rotational presence of its forward-deployed forces, improves existing facilities, and pre-positions supplies and equipment in five agreed-upon locations. In the long-term, the effects of EDCA will go beyond the modernization of the Philippines' military and increased inter-operability between the armed forces of the two allies. The EDCA will have two far-reaching strategic/diplomatic implications. First, a rotational U.S. military presence will strengthen the Philippines' resolve to uphold its territorial claims in the South China Sea and test American credibility in honoring its defense commitment to the country. Second, the use of air and naval infrastructure in the Philippines will facilitate a rapid and massive deployment of American forces in case armed clashes erupt in potential flashpoints such as the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and in the Taiwan Strait.

Since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the USAF has sought arrangements for the rotational deployments of its aircraft and personnel in the Philippines. This arrangement entails infrastructural improvements to keep facilities "warm," enabling the rapid start of operations in the event of a crisis. American access to the aforementioned five operationally flexible Philippine bases addresses this need. It also thwarts China's plan of preventing U.S. forces from operating in the disputed South China Sea.

Conclusion

Currently, there is small unit of USAF aircraft and personnel deployed in the Philippines. Only time will tell whether this small USAF formation will become an effective forward-deployed force that can deter China's expansion in the South China Sea. This will depend largely on how President Rodrigo Duterte would tolerate China's expansion into the Philippines' maritime domain, and the importance of his country's long-standing alliance with the U.S. Recently, however, President Duterte has expressed critical comments toward the alliance. He announced that he wants the withdrawal of 107 American troops from Mindanao, saying that he was only maintaining them against possible attacks by Muslim militants. He declared that the Philippines would stop patrolling the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea with the U.S. Navy to avoid provoking China. In early October, he also announced that the U.S.-Philippine Philbex joint amphibious exercise would be the last during his four-year term.

On November 7, 2016, despite his earlier rhetoric against the U.S. and the alliance, President Duterte suddenly gave his consent for the conduct of a joint U.S.-Philippine military exercise and for the implementation of the EDCA. His decision to continue joint U.S.-Philippine military exercises and to implement the EDCA will be conveyed to the MDB later this month. However, it is still too early to guess President Duterte's future executive decisions toward the implementation of the EDCA in particular, and the alliance in general. The AFP's recommendations to conduct joint exercises between U.S. and Philippine forces and the implementation of EDCA will not only affect Philippine national security interests but also the regional balance of power.

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