Allies entwined

Australia's strategic convergence with the Philippines

EUAN GRAHAM

NOVEMBER 2025

Special Report

ASPI
AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

About the author

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Executive summary

The Philippines contains vital terrain in maritime Southeast Asia, for the US and its regional allies. It is also worth defending, in normative terms, as a democracy of approximately 115 million people whose sovereignty is under daily challenge from an expansionist authoritarian power, China, which has fixed the Philippines in its strategic crosshairs. The positional importance of the Philippines coupled with its revived treaty alliance with the US makes it pivotal to deterring aggression against Taiwan and other parts of what US strategists call the First Island Chain. Australia has independent reasons to be invested in the security of the Philippines beyond its importance to US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Marcos administration is actively bolstering Manila's other security partnerships. Australia's defence relationship with the Philippines has evolved considerably since 2017 to become Manila's closest security relationship after the US. In fact, Canberra is currently more closely aligned with Manila than it is with Washington. Closer alignment reflects shared threat perceptions as well as a wider inter-alliance, cross-bracing trend that's driven, in part, by shared doubts about the US commitment to its allies' security. Making a military contribution to the defence of the Philippines against external aggression entails additional strategic risk for Canberra, as it's the most likely scenario to embroil the ADF in a US–China conflict. But it's in Australia's independent interest to do so, as part of an international coalition, in defence of the regional order and a democracy under direct threat.

This report first analyses the forcing factors that have brought about strategic convergence between Australia and the Philippines. Second, it explains why a political window has opened for institutionalising defence cooperation with the Philippines. Third, it assesses a recent joint defence exercise (Alon 2025) in light of a planned upgrade to the bilateral defence relationship. Finally, in this context, it offers policy recommendations to both governments for furthering defence ties.

The forcing function

1. Intensifying threats and the Philippines' positional value

The Philippines' cardinal location within maritime Southeast Asia and what US strategists refer to as the First Island Chain marks it apart in terms of its positional value.[1] The fact that some of World War II's most ferocious naval battles and amphibious campaigns raged in the Philippines is testimony to that enduring locational importance. This strategic value, latent since 1945, has been elevated by China's increasingly palpable threat to 'reunify' Taiwan by force and its expansionist designs in the Spratly Islands, the Senkaku Islands and beyond. Rather than constituting separate flashpoints, the First Island Chain is better conceived of as a single theatre where China's aggressive behaviour and modernised maritime capabilities are exerting pressure at different locations and varying intensities, but all serving the same expansionist and revisionist strategic aims.

For counterbalancing, deterring and—if it comes to it—reversing China's maritime expansionism, the Philippines contains vital terrain to defend and to fight from, into the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea. The Philippines' size and archipelagic geography imbue it with advantages as centrally located 'real estate' on the First Island Chain. It offers an abundance of reach, defensive depth and control over several key straits. But while the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) maintains an extensive network of military bases across the country, its defence infrastructure and capacity for hosting and sustaining visiting foreign military forces have atrophied. The former US military bases at Clark (once the largest outside the United States), Subic Bay, Cubi Point and elsewhere were partially or wholly civilianised after American forces left the country, at Manila's behest, in the early 1990s. Little has been done to modernise them since.

While the Philippines has strategic value because of *where* it is, it's also worth defending by the US, Australia, Japan and other 'like-minded' countries for *what* it represents in normative terms: a democracy of approximately 115 million people that's in the crosshairs of an authoritarian power, China, which is intent on expanding its territory at the expense of its neighbours, exporting its anti-democratic governance model, and breaking the US 'hub-and-spokes' alliance system that has underpinned the region's security since 1945.

China's maritime contestation is a part of daily life for the Philippines. Manila's sovereignty and exclusive jurisdiction under international law are under more persistent and aggressive challenge by China's maritime militia, coastguard, navy and air force than any other ASEAN member.[2] Beijing's coercive behaviour, not restricted to the maritime domain, has taken on particular intensity in the portion of the South China Sea that Manila calls the West Philippine Sea. It includes the Philippine-occupied portion of the Spratly Islands, known locally as Kalayaan, and the freestanding feature of Scarborough Shoal (Panatag Shoal / Bajo de Masinloc), located north of the Spratlys and around 230 kilometres west of Luzon, but within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.

While Beijing's maritime encroachment around the Philippines dates from the 1990s, and incidents since then have stayed below the threshold of armed conflict, China's militarisation of artificial islands, its increased resort to deploying military assets and its heightened bellicosity have sharpened threat perceptions and contingency planning under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's administration since Marcos came to power in 2022. The fratricidal collision between a Chinese navy destroyer and a China Coast Guard vessel in close proximity to a Philippine vessel near Scarborough Shoal in August 2025 underlines the fragile nature of what passes for peace in the West Philippine Sea.[3]

Figure 1: The First Island Chain

Source: ASPI

Considering its strategic situation, defence spending in the Philippines remains comparatively low, at around the equivalent of 1.3% of GDP in 2024.[4] The need to strengthen territorial and archipelagic defence, long part of the AFP's modernisation plans, has received overdue attention under the watchful direction of Marcos's Secretary of National Defense, Gilberto Teodoro Jr. Manila has made significant progress in frontline acquisitions, reviving the neglected external defence capabilities of the Philippine navy and air force, for example by purchasing new Tarlac-class amphibious ships from Indonesia and frigates and FA-50PH Fighting Eagle aircraft from South Korea. But capability gaps remain, and there are doubts about the ability of the Philippines' domestic defence industry to support the AFP's modernisation beyond local assembly.[5] The Philippines also needs to spend more on enablers that support military operations, for instance by buying back facilities previously sold off from the defence estate and by optimising dual-use civilian infrastructure. By Philippine officials' own admission, the AFP is not currently 'mission fit' for external defence, and the mindset of many of its officers remains strategically introverted towards internal security.[6]

The Marcos administration has made efforts to align its national legislation with international law through new maritime zones and archipelagic sea lanes laws enacted in 2024[7], and to improve internal coordination through the creation of a new National Maritime Council.[8] The negotiation of a bilateral *modus vivendi* with China regulating Philippine Government efforts to resupply the military garrison at Second Thomas (Ayungin) Shoal, in July 2024, showed that Manila could manage tensions with Beijing on its own terms, despite its relative military weakness.[9] A transparency campaign championed by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) to publicise China's aggressive maritime tactics has helped to mobilise international public opinion behind the Philippines. But internal inconsistencies remain, as seen by the questionable tactics employed by the PCG at Sabina Shoal, resulting in the loss of effective control over the feature.[10] Manila needs to improve its strategic communications to Beijing. For instance, announcing that the AFP would not deploy naval assets to Scarborough Shoal in order to avoid provoking China may appear rational, given the relative weakness of the Philippines.[11] But it also plays into Beijing's hands by taking strategic risk out of the equation. Deterrence doesn't have to be symmetrical to be effective.

In the event of an armed conflict over Taiwan, northern areas of the Philippines and major straits through the archipelago would be important for the belligerents to control or deny, making it unlikely that Manila could maintain neutrality, even if it wished.[12] While public concern in the Philippines dwells on the fate of more than 150,000 overseas Filippino workers in Taiwan and how to extract them from harm's way, within Manila's defence community there's a sober appreciation that physical proximity (northern Luzon is just 370 kilometres from Taiwan) is likely to pull the Philippines into any conflict over control of the island.[13] President Marcos has publicly acknowledged that risk.[14] A significant Chinese act of aggression across the Taiwan Strait is unlikely to be contained there. Conflict could quickly spread to the South China Sea (where Taipei holds territory in the Spratly Islands) and vice versa.[15]

Given the AFP's improved but still limited internal capacity for counterbalancing China, the Marcos administration is accelerating its diplomatic efforts to bolster the Philippines' external security partnerships. After the US, Australia has the deepest defence relationship with the Philippines, underpinned by a 1995 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperative Defence Activities, a two-way Status of Visiting Forces Agreement dating back to 2007, and a 2021 Mutual Logistic Support Arrangement.[16]

More recently, Japan concluded a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) with the Philippines in mid-2025, which entered into force in September following its ratification by the Japanese Diet and Philippines Senate.[17] As a measure of the heightened strategic value that Japan places on the Philippines, Tokyo has donated air and surface surveillance radars and proposed to transfer six destroyers to the Philippine Navy under its Official Security Assistance program. In December 2022, Japan sent a pair of F-15 fighters on a goodwill visit to Clark Air Base for the first time since World War II. The RAA will enable the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to engage in regular training with the AFP and to conduct more exercise deployments to the Philippines. Japan sent JSDF units to participate in Exercise Balikatan for the first time in March–April 2025.

Canada, France, New Zealand and the UK have all expressed interest in negotiating their own access agreements with the Philippines. Manila is pursuing defence and maritime security cooperation with other partners, including India and South Korea. Seoul has become a major supplier of defence equipment to Manila and also participated in the Balikatan exercises with the US and AFP. The foundation for an international coalition to help defend the Philippines is considerable, and almost certainly broader than is the case for Taiwan.

Figure 2: Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, participate in an amphibious landing and assault near San Vicente, Palawan, during Exercise Alon 2025

Source: Defence Department, online.

2. The Philippines in US military strategy

Under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, the US has an ongoing obligation to defend the territory of the Philippines and official assets, including ships and aircraft, if they come under armed attack in the Pacific area.[18] While Marcos has opted to double down on Manila's strategic dependence on the US, the military alliance relationship remains attenuated in certain respects. The key limitation is that, since the closure of Clark and Subic Bay in 1992, the US hasn't had permanent military bases in the Philippines. A resident foreign military presence is barred under the country's 1987 Constitution.

West of Hawaii, the US military peacetime footprint in the Pacific is overwhelmingly concentrated in Japan, Guam (a US territory) and South Korea. But fixed assets in those locations are vulnerable to missile attack. To the south, Australia is increasingly important as a forward deployment and dispersal location for US forces and would become much busier during wartime. In Southeast Asia, Singapore serves as a support node for the US military, including hosting a US Navy logistics command relocated from the Philippines in the early 1990s. Singapore matters far more in military terms to the US than Thailand, even though the latter is a non-NATO ally. But the city-state's non-ally status raises questions about its dependability during a US–China conflict, when it's likely to be pressured by Beijing to deny the use of bases on its territory. Elsewhere across Southeast Asia, the prevailing US military concern is access for its forces in transit to and from the First Island Chain. This puts the Philippines, as a treaty ally, in pole position as an operating location for US forces, albeit within continuing constraints.

Since an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed with the Benigno Aquino III government, in 2014, the US has had access to a number of AFP bases, initially covering five sites and later expanded to nine.[19] Under the previous administration of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), a bilateral Visiting Forces Agreement was rescued from near-expiry by then-Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana. That agreement enables US forces to enter the Philippines on a rotational basis to conduct exercises and training activities with the AFP. The US military

has additionally obtained access beyond the EDCA arrangement to Clark Air Base, Subic Bay and the nearby storage facilities at Agila.[20]

The positional importance of the Philippines coupled with those revived access arrangements under its treaty alliance have made it pivotal to US military strategy for countering China's expansionist designs on the First Island Chain.[21] The US military focus on the First Island Chain has intensified under the second Trump administration.[22] The importance of the Philippines as a US ally was underscored by Pete Hegseth choosing Manila for his first regional visit as Secretary of Defense in July 2025. The US Indo-Pacific Command is reported to have planned some 500 joint activities with the AFP for 2026—a striking indicator of how ubiquitous defence cooperation with the Philippines has become—highlighting Manila's significance as a forward operating location and defensive bastion where the US military is able to maintain a near-continuous, but rotational, presence.[23]

3. Australia's strategic interests in the Philippines

Australia has an independent interest to be invested in the friendly strategic orientation and territorial integrity of the Philippines; it's not simply another US ally. Equally, Manila values Canberra as an aligned strategic partner in its own right. Even though inter-alliance considerations are a driver of the deepening Australia–Philippines bilateral defence relationship, including through such initiatives as the 'Squad',[24] on a first principles assessment Canberra fundamentally shares Washington's interest in defending the First Island Chain to prevent China's domination of East Asia and the wider region.

During World War II, the last general conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia played an active role in recapturing the Philippines from Japanese occupation. In strategy, however, where one stands depends on where one sits. From Australia's perspective, its own first island chain runs predominantly along a horizontal axis, from the Andaman and Nicobar islands through Indonesia, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and other parts of Melanesia before terminating in New Zealand. For most of the postwar era, with Vietnam as the obvious outlier, Australia concentrated on Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and Borneo within its own defence perimeter in Southeast Asia.

Although Manila is only marginally further from Sydney than Jakarta, the Philippines hasn't automatically been considered as falling within Australia's area of direct defence interest. This is despite the fact that Canberra and Manila are both signatories to the 1954 Manila Pact, which was the legal foundation for the ill-fated Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Because there was no serious external threat to the Philippines during the Cold War, SEATO focused on continental Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and South Vietnam, until its demise in 1977.[25] The Manila Pact remains in force, however. Moreover, Australia has maintained a continuous strategic interest and presence in the South China Sea and its surrounding approaches for nearly a century, as well as providing more recent counterterrorism support for the Philippines.[26] That abiding interest in keeping the South China Sea open has risen to the fore, as China has physically contested military navigation and overflight (including unsafely intercepting Australian aircraft near the Paracel Islands) and bullied Southeast Asian rival claimants there. That interest naturally extends Australia's defence focus to the Philippines, as suggested by the fact that Australian P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft now operate regularly from there, and Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles publicly refers to the 'West Philippine Sea'.[27] The 2024 National Defence Strategy identifies 'maritime Southeast Asia' within Australia's 'primary area of military interest' and the AFP as a 'key partner defence force'.[28]

Starting from the deployment of an ADF counterterrorism training assistance mission to Marawi in 2017, initially under Operation Augury, Australia's Enhanced Defence Cooperation Program with the Philippines has since grown to become the largest within Southeast Asia. Australia's military training relationship with the AFP is substantial.[29] But it isn't all one-way. The AFP possesses niche skills that the ADF can learn from, such as jungle warfare and explosive ordnance disposal. Joint exercises have expanded rapidly. Exercise Alon was the ADF's largest overseas military drill in 2025. AFP units participated in Exercise Talisman Sabre for the first time in 2025, and the Philippines sent combat aircraft to the multinational air exercise Pitch Black, also for the first time, in 2024.[30] Defence is increasingly the bedrock and driver of the bilateral relationship, which was elevated to a strategic partnership in September 2023.[31]

Figure 3: Minister for Defence Richard Marles and Secretary of National Defense Gilberto C Teodoro Jr observe a combined joint force entry operation in San Vicente, Palawan

Source: Defence Department, online.

In terms of foreign policy and statecraft, the Philippines' principled, international law-based approach to upholding its sovereignty and jurisdictional claims in the South China Sea has closely aligned it with Australia since Manila won a significant legal victory over China through the International Court of Arbitration in 2016—a judgement that still resonates with wider implications for the regional order.[32] Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy articulates a wide-ranging interest in maintaining a region where sovereignty is protected and international law is followed 'free from coercion'.[33] The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs notably expressed public solidarity with Australia and support for freedom of navigation and overflight following an unsafe intercept of an Australian P-8A by a Chinese fighter over the South China Sea in February 2025.[34] Australia's alignment with the Philippines now runs arguably deeper than with any other ASEAN country—a contrast sharpened by ASEAN's collective reluctance to publicly support Manila in its ongoing struggle to resist China's maritime encroachment. In some respects, Canberra could even be currently considered more closely aligned with Manila than it is with Washington.

Australia has an independent strategic interest in helping to defend the Philippines against aggression by China. Equally, Philippine officials believe that bilateral defence cooperation should develop a niche that's complementary to but separate from their respective alliance relationships with the US.[35] Arguably, Canberra has already signalled its commitment to making a *de facto* military contribution to the Philippines' defence through an intensifying pattern of military exercises and their clear war-fighting focus. That said, even if Australia decided to elevate its bilateral defence relations with the Philippines to treaty level, it's highly unlikely that Canberra would extend a freestanding security commitment to Manila of the type recently offered to PNG, for example. A deepening partnership between the ADF and AFP would necessarily remain nested within a broader inter-alliance arrangement, in which the US still acts as an overall security guarantor, exercising theatre command of multinational military operations during any regional armed conflict. Australia's independent interests and desire to develop the bilateral defence relationship with the Philippines shouldn't obscure that fundamental reality.

Simply by its proximity to Taiwan, Australian force deployments to the Philippines have overlapping utility for planning in case of a cross-strait crisis or conflict. If Australia opted to make a military contribution to the defence of Taiwan, as part of a US-led coalition, one possibility would be to focus on joint operations in and from the Philippines, including the defence of Palawan Island and its adjacent straits (Mindoro and Balabac) and preventing hostile intrusions into the surrounding sea areas. Under a geographical division of labour, the ADF could concentrate on a supporting in-theatre role to help defend Taiwan's southern flank and prevent its encirclement from the south. That would free up US forces in the Philippines to concentrate on operations in northern Luzon and the Luzon Strait, creating a military dilemma for China. The alternative of operating from Japan makes less sense for the ADF, given the greater distances, congestion and operational risks involved—though submarines and combat aircraft can be deployed with greater flexibility. That overlap with Taiwan scenarios increases the value of such exercises as Alon and strengthens the case for maintaining an Australian rotational commitment to the Philippines. By defending the Philippines, Australia can contribute to defending Taiwan.

Australia's growing defence cooperation with the Philippines, while still developing, is already one of its most important relationships in Southeast Asia, and the one that currently enjoys most policy momentum. But the depth of alignment between Canberra and Manila and its strategic consequences are insufficiently appreciated in Canberra. It therefore merits deeper understanding and greater scrutiny within government, in parliament and among the general public. It matters further because the risk of an armed clash occurring in the vicinity of the Philippines, including Taiwan by extension, is currently the most likely scenario to involve the ADF in a regional war. There are solid reasons for Australia to take on additional strategic risk in this regard, in defence of the regional order. Given the stakes, however, the government should articulate the case more clearly.

The political window

1. Marcos's alliance pivot

Under President Marcos, the Philippines has strongly pivoted back to the US alliance, after the Duterte presidency adopted a non-confrontational approach towards disputes in the South China Sea while attempting (with little success) to pursue economic gains with China. Marcos's pro-alliance tilt, under sustained pressure from China, has created a window of opportunity for Washington and US allies and partners to institutionalise security cooperation with the Philippines before his single term in office ends in June 2028.

The pattern of politics in the Philippines has tended to manifest in pendulum swings between administrations that alternately cleave closer to the US or China. Under a successor government, however, the Philippines is unlikely to revert to an overtly pro-China posture because Beijing's sustained pressure tactics have sharply alienated public opinion. Domestic politics in the Philippines is unpredictable, yet the severe strategic environment makes it unlikely that Marcos's successor would adopt radically different defence and security policies. History suggests there will be a political and diplomatic adjustment that could slow the pace of external security cooperation from 2028, but the window is likely to remain open.

Given the power disparity between the Philippines and China, a continuation of the alliance with the US represents the best overall solution to meet the Philippines' external defence needs. Granting access to the US military is ultimately a sovereign political decision for the government of the day in Manila, but it can't be assured in case of a regional conflict erupting in which the Philippines isn't under direct attack, and any assertion of neutrality would carry significant defence and security costs for Manila, with no guarantee that China would respect it. Duterte's administration piloted that experiment and failed. In fact, the revival of the US–Philippines alliance began during Duterte's final years in office.

While Marcos has declared that US forces in the Philippines should not engage in 'offensive action', Manila hasn't objected to the extended deployment of US military capabilities including long-range fires such as the US Army's

Typhon / Mid-Range Capability system,[36] as long as those capabilities are demonstrably linked to the defence of the Philippines.[37] Nuclear weapons are prohibited in the Philippines under its Constitution, but that isn't a current point of tension within the alliance. In practice, as long as US forces continue to highlight joint training with the AFP and to deliver infrastructural improvements in the Philippines, then a near-constant US military presence in the country and the ability to pre-position equipment and stores are unlikely to encounter a domestic backlash.

Support from local politicians and communities is also important for maintaining access to military bases in the Philippines for foreign forces, whether from the US, Australia or other countries. China's influence among elites remains strong, as it is across Southeast Asia. The Chinese Communist Party's penetration of the Philippines at many levels, aggravated by lax migration controls under Duterte, is a multi-headed problem.[38] It presents some risks and obstacles to security cooperation, especially intelligence sharing with international partners.

Figure 4: A Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) F/A-18F Super Hornet takes off from Clark Air Force Base

Source: Defence Department, online.

2. Anxious allies

Cross-bracing America's Pacific alliances was a clear policy imperative of the Biden administration, reflecting the absence of a collective defence framework in the region that's comparable to Europe.[39] While that impetus, or indeed any coherent regional policy focus, is less evident under the second Trump administration, pressure from Washington on its allies to scale up their defence efforts could be one political factor influencing the growth of inter-alliance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. More obviously, regional allies' mounting uncertainty about Washington's willingness to honour its treaty-based security guarantees under President Donald Trump is impelling Australia, Japan, the Philippines and others to support each other more. Manila and Canberra see reinforcing their 'spoke-to-spoke' relations as a way to offset political uncertainty about US commitment levels, especially under a US administration that appears to be less invested in deterring China than during Trump's first term in office, and more comfortable dealing with allies on a bilateral basis than under Biden.

As a former US colony, the Philippines has a complicated relationship with its one-time ruler. While the populace remains positively inclined towards the US and its role in protecting the Philippines against external aggression, there's lingering resentment and suspicion about Washington's past interference in the Philippines' domestic affairs. Filipinos are sensitive to perceptions of overbearing behaviour, including in the security relationship with the US. Equally, through US eyes, the Philippines can appear to 'flip-flop' between mendicant and obstructive behaviour, in ways that can only be properly understood in a postcolonial context.

With a much lighter historical and military footprint, Australia's political baggage in the Philippines is of the 'carry-on' variety. Australians contrast themselves favourably to Americans in terms of: 'We ask; we don't tell.'[40] While it's a sentiment that Australia would find difficult to replicate within its immediate region, it's one that Filipinos largely endorse.

Political factors have become more salient in response to a perceived dissonance between the thickening US military engagement with the Philippines, on the ground, and the White House's unfiltered ambivalence towards treaty alliances and overseas military commitments. Manila is seeking to supplement the US guarantor role by strengthening its relations with other receptive partners, especially Australia and Japan, which are Washington's anchoring alliances at the head and foot of the First Island Chain. Reinforced regional security partnerships offer the Philippines not just alternative sources of material aid but hedges against US abandonment. For all that, for reasons of scale alone, the US is likely to remain the Philippines' primary security partner and its leading contributor to external defence. When it comes to deterring China, Manila can't compensate for the strategic heft that the US brings through any alternative combination of like-minded partners. Nor can Canberra.

3. ASEAN's 'cold shoulder'

As tensions with Beijing have worsened under President Marcos, the Philippines has received remarkably little succour from ASEAN, even as it faces a clear and present external threat to its sovereignty and security.[41] This, despite Manila being a founder member that diplomatically backed other ASEAN members in their time of need, for example during the 1980s when Thailand was concerned about Vietnam's military occupation of Cambodia. Indeed, ASEAN's *raison d'être* as a regional organisation was to provide some measure of unity and collective response to shared security threats affecting Southeast Asia.[42] Yet there's scant empathy across most ASEAN capitals for the Philippines' stand against China's coercion and aggression. Manila is frequently urged to be less confrontational, less reliant on the US, and more accommodating towards Beijing. Although the Philippines will hold ASEAN's rotating chair in 2026, there's little faith left in Manila for ASEAN 'centrality' or the code of conduct negotiations with China on the South China Sea.[43]

ASEAN's 'cold shoulder' towards the Philippines has instead encouraged Marcos to court alternative, more tangible sources of support within the region, including Australia—although Manila could be more confident and forceful in building its links with like-minded partners. The extent of ASEAN's marginalisation of the Philippines has escaped some Australian observers, who remain in denial about the extent of the grouping's organisational drift, as well as the strategic ambivalence of Canberra's more traditional partners in Southeast Asia.

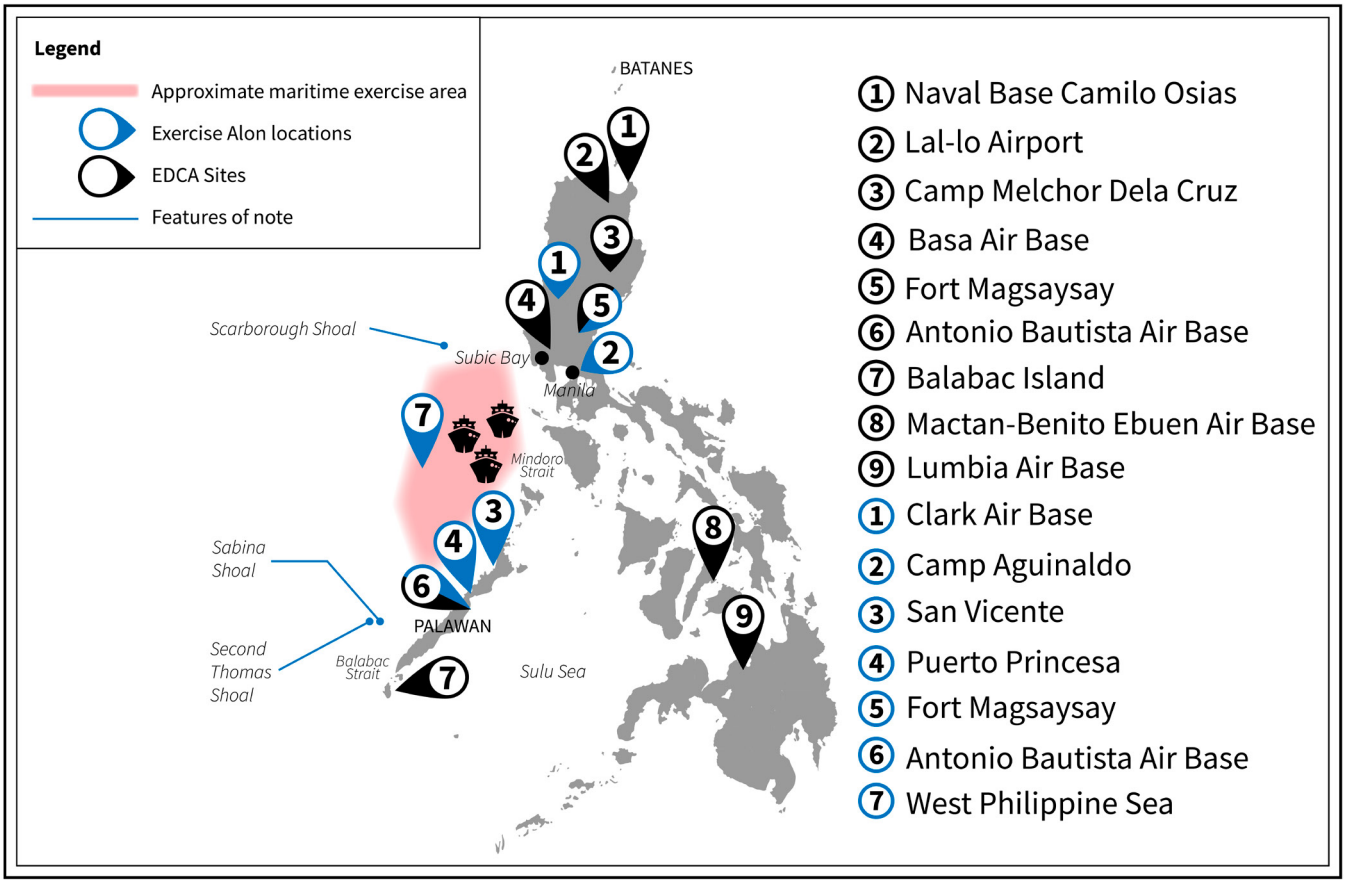
Opportunities for expansion

1. Exercise Alon

There's obviously more to Australia–Philippines defence relations than a single exercise. The ADF regularly conducts maritime cooperative activities (MCAs) with the AFP and other partner nations in the vicinity of the Philippines, as well as participating in the annual Balikatan exercise, with Philippine and US forces.[44] MCAs, supporting freedom of navigation and overflight under international law, are a focal point of defence cooperation in their own right.[45] But the 2025 iteration of Exercise Alon (which the author of this report partially observed), conducted during late August across

several locations in the Philippines, offered wider insights on the direction of travel of the bilateral defence relationship and the ADF's progress along its expeditionary learning curve (Figure 5).[46]

Figure 5: Major activity locations in the Philippines for Exercise Alon 2025 and EDCA sites



Source: ASPI

Alon began only in 2023 as an amphibious exercise between the ADF and Philippine Marines. Like its closest analogue, the Keris Woomera drills with Indonesia, with which it alternates in odd-number years, Alon originated out of Indo-Pacific Endeavour, the ADF's umbrella regional engagement activity. Alon was the ADF's largest overseas drill in 2025; it involved around 3,600 military participants in total, including roughly 1,600 Australian personnel, 1,525 AFP members, 350 US Marines and around 180 Canadian service personnel.

Apart from its augmented scale and multinational composition compared with 2023, the major differences in Exercise Alon 2025, from an Australian perspective, were the depth of participation from across the ADF in the Joint Task Force and the breadth of training activities spanning maritime, land, air and other domains. One notable logistical achievement from the outset was the airlift from Australia to the Philippines of an Army battlegroup made up of 375 people, around 20 vehicles, two howitzers, plus stores and ammunition. That required 13 fully loaded C-17A direct inward flights to Clark Air Base, with KC-30 tanker support and additional C-130J movements.[47] To put that in perspective, Australia hadn't attempted a 'mass airlift' on this scale within the Indo-Pacific since the security crisis in Timor-Leste in 2006. While airlift is an expensive means to transport an entire battlegroup and its sustainment train to an exercise, as a rehearsal for projecting a battle-ready force over a significant distance into a key location in the First Island Chain, this was a consequential muscle movement for the ADF.

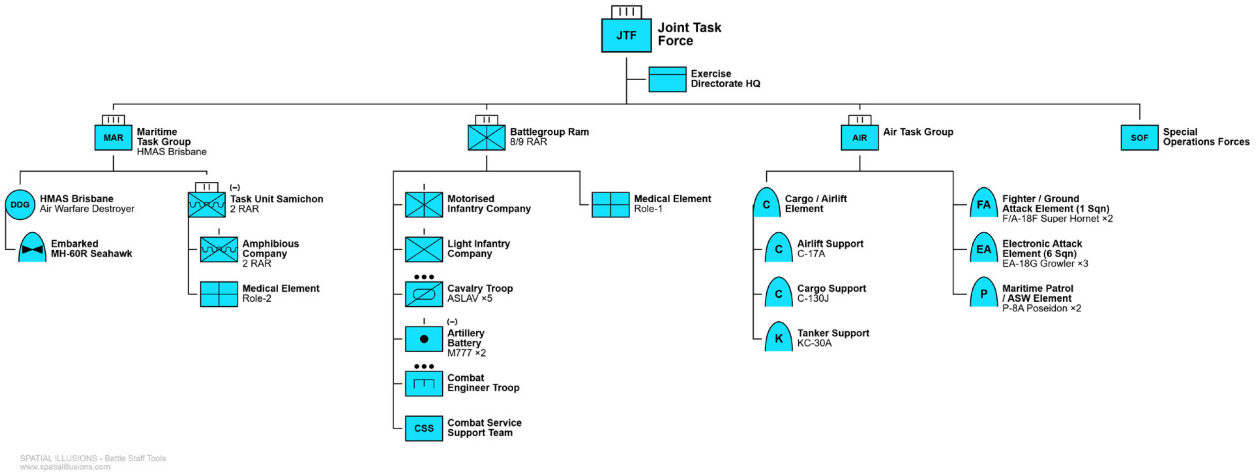
The land component was formed around Army Battlegroup Ram, from 8/9 Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment. That included a battalion headquarters, two infantry companies (one motorised with Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles), a cavalry troop with five ASLAV light armoured vehicles, an artillery battery with two M777 155-mm howitzers, combat engineers, plus medical and combat-service support teams. Special operations forces from Australia and the Philippines were additionally committed.

Figure 6: A RAAF C-17A Globemaster III aircraft delivers cargo in support of Joint Task Force 661 at Antonio Bautista Air Base, Palawan

Source: Defence Department, online.

An air task group composed of two F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter-attack aircraft and three EA-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft (from RAAF 1 and 6 squadrons, respectively) was brought in from Australia for the exercise, marking the first deployment to the Philippines of those combat aircraft types. Two RAAF P-8A Poseidon antisubmarine warfare / maritime patrol aircraft, already on deployment to the Philippines, were involved in the maritime phase of the exercise. Those various aircraft, including transports and tankers, all operated through Clark Air Base, as the 'theatre gateway' for the exercise, which was spread over several locations, from Fort Magsaysay to Palawan and the West Philippine Sea (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Deployed ADF Units and Assets for Exercise Alon 2025



Source: Spatial Illustions, online.

HMAS *Brisbane*, a Hobart-class air warfare destroyer, anchored the maritime task group, along with a frigate, BRP *Jose Rizal*, from the Philippine Navy, and HMCS *Ville de Québec*, a Canadian frigate that, like the Australian ship, had detached from the UK Carrier Strike Group during its deployment through the region. Providing the amphibious element on the Australian side was a company from 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, for the combined joint force entry operation in San Vicente, Palawan.

Aside from such a significant assemblage of expeditionary force by ADF standards, another noteworthy feature of the exercise was the undisguised war-fighting nature of the various activities, including amphibious landings, maritime strike, close air support, antisubmarine warfare, vessel boarding and seizure, airfield seizure, counter-landing, search and rescue and urban warfare. Australian Super Hornets dropped live ordnance in the South China Sea.

In the eyes of senior Philippine defence officials, Alon functioned as an effective rehearsal for joint response in case of a serious act of aggression by China.[48] Senior ADF and US participants stressed the value of the exercise as a deterrent signal to potential adversaries.[49] The main amphibious and maritime exercise areas, although located away from features directly disputed by China, were close enough to Scarborough Shoal and other 'hotspots' in the West Philippine Sea to be relevant for real contingencies—and presumably for China's military to be able to observe *in situ*.

One of the practical advantages of Alon occurring on the heels of Talisman Sabre, in late July, was the ability to leverage force elements from it, including the Canadian warship and the US Marine Rotational Force—Darwin (MRF-D). For the MRF-D contingent, which airlifted itself in MV-22 Ospreys directly from Darwin to the Philippines, this was a particularly dynamic deployment. In between the two exercises, they were deployed to carry out a separate humanitarian response mission in Batanes, the Philippines' northernmost province in the Luzon Strait.[50] Batanes is a particularly strategic location in a Taiwan context.[51] The US Marines remained in the Philippines to conduct additional training after Alon, adding to the impression that recent MRF-D rotations have become more expeditionary in nature. For the Australia-based US Marine participants, Alon had a distinct value from the major US–Philippines drill (Exercise Balikatan, in which the ADF also participates) in that it stress-tested the core multilateral Australia–Philippines–US military partnership, plus Canada, in different configurations and different settings, maximising its operational and signalling value.[52] Japan's new RAA with the Philippines opens up the possibility of extending an additional leg to this partnership. Ministerial coordination already takes place among Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US, sometimes informally referred to as the 'Squad', with a focus on 'aligning their efforts, including infrastructure investments, to support Philippine defence priorities'.[53]

The command-and-control arrangements were notably complex for an expeditionary exercise of this nature. It incorporated three separate national command chains among the Australian, Philippines and US participants, as well as the Canadians, who were also involved in planning. The ADF set up its exercise directorate headquarters inside Camp Aguinaldo, the AFP's central headquarters in Manila. The air task group and MRF-D stood up their headquarters at Clark Air Base, northwest of Manila, while HMAS *Brisbane* served as a floating headquarters for the maritime task group. The ADF deployed Joint Task Force 661 to Antonio Bautista Air Base in Puerto Princesa, Palawan, and established a combined fusion centre at the AFP's nearby Western Command (WESCOM) headquarters, which has operational command within the West Philippine Sea. Australian and US participants highlighted the necessity of closely integrating AFP WESCOM at a planning and command-and-control level on Palawan, despite the limitations of what was essentially a side-by-side sharing arrangement. If the ADF is called upon to operate in the West Philippine Sea during a real-world contingency, close cooperation with WESCOM will be essential. It's their home ground, after all. The trust and interpersonal familiarity built up over the course of such an exercise is an indispensable if unquantifiable component of a combined collective capability (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Sailors from BRP *Jose Rizal* conduct a cross-deck activity on board HMAS *Brisbane*

Source: Defence Department, online.

At a practical level, Exercise Alon 2025 exposed a number of stress points and gaps in the implementation of Australia's Status of Visiting Forces Agreement and Mutual Logistic Support Arrangement with the Philippines, and the ADF's broader ability to undertake expeditionary operations, at scale, in less familiar terrain. Importantly, Alon underlined the logistical challenges of operating within parts of the First Island Chain where the infrastructure is basic and the ADF isn't necessarily first in line to receive support.

2. Upgrading Australia–Philippines defence cooperation

In Manila, during August, Richard Marles and Gilberto Teodoro jointly announced their intention to upgrade the bilateral defence relationship over the next year and signed a Statement of Intent on Enhanced Defence Cooperation.[54] It remains to be seen what form that upgrade will take, but the two ministers committed to sustaining the current momentum of two-way exercises, training and military educational exchanges. They described defence as a 'vital pillar' of the Australia–Philippines strategic partnership.

Cooperation on defence infrastructure development in the Philippines has been identified as a new priority, aimed at enhancing the AFP's territorial defence capabilities and boosting interoperability. Australia has committed to leading the 'construction, use, upgrade, and maintenance' of eight different infrastructure projects across five different locations. Those sites will remain under Philippine sovereignty and ownership. As well as contributing to the AFP's capacity for external defence, pre-positioning a basic quantum of defence equipment and stores in the Philippines in between exercises would help to put future ADF rotational deployments to the Philippines on a more sustainable, less *ad hoc*, footing. In addition to lowering transportation costs, Australia's investment in defence infrastructure should help the ADF to mitigate the risk of competing for scarce landing slots and storage space during a genuine contingency. Further consideration should be given to maximising dual-use commercial facilities.

It remains unclear how closely those projects overlap with EDCA facilities employed by the US military, but Manila appears to see EDCA as a specific arrangement under the Mutual Defense Treaty with the US and would prefer to pursue bespoke arrangements with Australia.[55] It would make sense to focus on locations that reduce Australia's reliance on choke-point transportation hubs and fit the ADF's likely geographical focus on such areas as Palawan.

As part of the planned upgrade to defence relations, bilateral defence and military dialogue will also be strengthened, and a framework will be developed for enhancing the exchange of information between the two countries' defence organisations. The recent 'hands-on' experience of joint planning and command and control between the ADF and AFP at Exercise Alon should be useful in that regard. Search-and-rescue procedures and maritime domain awareness have been identified as further focal activities. Adding military medicine and health to those activities is likely to be well received by the government in Manila, as a current policy priority and a neglected aspect of the Philippines' defence resilience.

Figure 9: Australian Army soldiers from Battlegroup Ram fire a M777A2 howitzer

Source: Defence Department, online.

As the two sides mull over how to upgrade their defence relationship, the question of whether to raise it to treaty level has already surfaced.[56] One possibility would be to bundle the various existing activity streams into a defence cooperation agreement, similar to that signed with Indonesia in August 2024, for ratification by both countries' parliaments.[57] Elevating the defence relationship to treaty level seems pertinent to the Australia–Philippines case, given the depth of strategic alignment between the two countries. Indeed, Australia appears to be signalling its willingness to contribute to the defence of the Philippines against external aggression. The gravity of such a commitment justifies a formal endorsement by the Australian Government at the political level, although not necessarily in the form of a new treaty. An executive agreement endorsed by the two heads of government would also carry significant weight and should be the minimum standard for upgrading defence relations.

In scoping the various possibilities, the Australian Government could find value in dusting off the long dormant 1954 Manila Pact, since it remains in force as a ready-made treaty. As noted by the esteemed Australian defence analyst TB Millar 60 years ago, the '*Treaty's obligation is individual as well as collective.*'[58] While SEATO will never be reconstituted, its underlying treaty remains relevant as a legal foundation to the burgeoning bilateral defence partnership between Australia and the Philippines, and reinforces the US's role as a mutual security guarantor. A reaffirmation of the Manila Pact in a contemporary context could be an elegantly simple 'retro' solution to today's strategic problem, obviating the need to negotiate a new treaty. As the drawn-out progress of the Australia–PNG Mutual Defence Treaty demonstrates, although the outcome was ultimately successful, finalising new defence treaties in the modern era is not straightforward.[59]

Recommendations

Australia and the Philippines should:

- Institutionalise bilateral defence cooperation as far as possible before President Marcos leaves office in June 2028. The next step would be to upgrade the existing bilateral MoU to an executive-level agreement, concluded and signed by the two heads of government, in 2026.
- Jointly scope the potential for the JSDF to participate with the ADF, AFP and US forces in more military exercises in the Philippines, including Alon 2027. All four 'Squad' countries should intensify efforts to harmonise their interlinking acquisition and cross-servicing, visiting forces and logistical support agreements to identify synergies and minimise unnecessary duplication.

Australia should:

- Do more to steer the strategic partnership on the foreign policy side, including encouraging individual ASEAN members to show greater diplomatic and practical support for Manila whenever it faces intimidation and coercion from Beijing.
- Explore options for pre-positioning defence equipment and stores in the Philippines to reduce the cost of future exercise deployments from Australia and to facilitate a short-notice contingency response.
- Propose military medicine and defence health as an additional focus area for bilateral defence cooperation (and multilaterally through the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus process and other regional networks), with a view to boosting the resilience of the Philippines in that area.

The Philippines should:

- Adopt greater consistency and discipline in its strategic communications towards China and demonstrate its willingness to deploy military assets near disputed features for deterrence purposes.
- Expand its own defence infrastructure, buying back facilities previously sold off to the civilian sector. Improving the country's capacity to support the AFP and to host foreign forces should be considered a funding priority for territorial defence.

For Exercise Alon 2027, Australia should:

- Make contested logistics a cross-domain exercise theme, including scenarios for the denial of Clark and Subic as major transportation hubs.
- Consider earmarking a Canberra-class landing helicopter dock, a replenishment vessel and a submarine as priority naval assets. The Australian Army could consider deploying a HIMARS battery for a live-fire demonstration. Additionally, the ADF's intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance footprint in the Philippines should be expanded. Asset selection should be closely aligned with a potential Australian expeditionary contribution to a South China Sea or Taiwan crisis.
- Propose that Japan and New Zealand are jointly invited by Australia and the Philippines to participate.
- Open up more exercise locations in the Philippines, and potentially involve nearby countries (for example, Brunei in defence health activities).
- Consider embedding AFP exercise planners within Australia's Joint Operations Command headquarters.

Conclusions

The ADF and AFP are on separate but congruent 'journeys'. As Australia masters high-tempo expeditionary operations within its surrounding region, the Philippines is reorienting its strategic centre of gravity from internal security to external defence. That military compatibility is driven by a deeper strategic alignment that's likely to prove enduring, given shared threat perceptions towards China, overlapping alliance management challenges with the US and a highly symmetrical interest in cross-bracing efforts with common allies and partners, including Japan. While Philippine politics is unpredictable, and it's prudent to institutionalise the defence relationship with Australia as far as possible while the political window is wide open under Marcos, his successor is unlikely to abandon Manila's current defence policy settings.

The strategic implications of a closer alignment between Australia and the Philippines, though consequential, haven't filtered down to Australia's wider strategic policy community. The joint ministerial statement released in Manila, in August, was a good start, but the Australian Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in particular could do more to raise the profile of the bilateral strategic partnership within political circles and among the general public. Making a military contribution to the defence of the Philippines against external aggression does mean bearing additional strategic risk for Australia, as it's the most likely scenario to involve the ADF in a US–China conflict. However, there are sound reasons for Canberra to do so, in defence of the regional order and a democracy under direct threat.

Despite this being only its second iteration, Alon 2025 was an ambitious exercise for Australia to co-lead with the Philippines, highlighting the importance of defence cooperation in a complex and contested environment, while identifying points of stress and failure. All things considered, including competing demands on the ADF and AFP, the exercise was a commendable success. But exercises can always be improved.

That success should signal in parallel a quantum of assurance to the Philippines and deterrence to China. In terms of the message to Washington, although the US was itself a military participant, Exercise Alon should be a signal to the Trump administration from two key regional allies that they're pressing ahead to develop collective responses to shared threats, close to where China's contestation is playing out in the First Island Chain. It wasn't lost on some of the participants that if deterrence fails then their next deployment to the Philippines might not be an exercise.

Notes

1 The term 'First Island Chain' has been used by US strategists since John Foster Dulles coined it in 1951. But there's no universally agreed definition of its geographical extent, in particular its southern terminus, which some have situated in Australia. For the purposes of this report, it includes Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and the island of Borneo, which is shared among Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia. As such, it encloses the seas of Okhotsk and Japan, the East China Sea, South China Sea and the waterways connecting them to the Pacific Ocean.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASLAV	Australian Light Armoured Vehicle
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
GDP	gross domestic product
HIMARS	M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
JSDF	Japan Self-Defense Forces
MCA	maritime cooperative activity
MoU	memorandum of understanding
MRF-D	US Marine Rotational Force—Darwin
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PCG	Philippine Coast Guard
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RAA	reciprocal access agreement
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
WESCOM	Western Command

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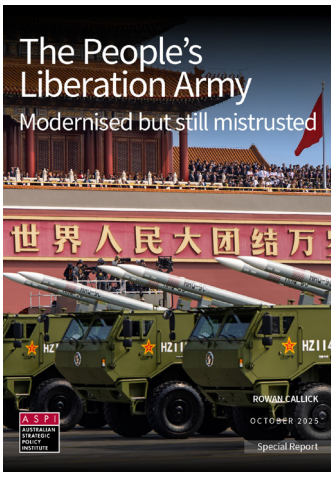

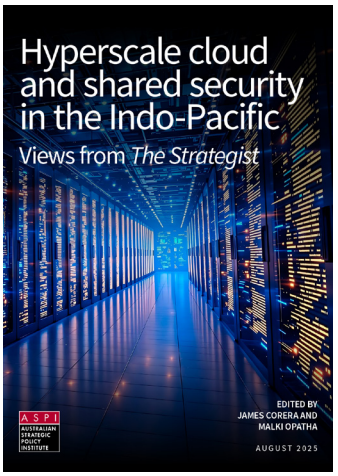

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