

## Opinion – The 2025 Philippine General Election and US Strategy in Asia

Written by Rizal Buendia

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RIZAL BUENDIA, NOV 19 2024

As a former colony of the US, tied to a subsequent neocolonial relationship and the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), the Philippines plays a key role in US foreign policy at a time when the US is focused on the growing influence of China and the escalating territorial disputes in the region. Military cooperation with the Philippines today is also paramount to the US when considering the termination of the 1947 US-Philippine Military Bases Agreement (MBA) in 1992 and the need for a new strategic approach that incorporates China's economic and strategic rise. The 2025 election will determine who will occupy over 18,000 positions, including the configuration of the Philippine Congress – which influences the country's foreign policy and sanctions defense programs. It will also pave the way for the next presidential election in 2028 when current president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will leave office.

The US “pivot to Asia,” or “rebalance,” became a buzzword after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first announced it at the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010, in Hanoi, and subsequently in “America's Pacific Century,” in *Foreign Policy* (2013). The US Pivot to Asia is a shift in the focus of foreign policy from the Middle East to try to balance the growing influence of China and the threat of North Korea. While essentially diplomatic and economic in nature (Graham 2013), the catalyst for the pivot was not only of reduced American regional power but the more assertive Chinese approach and actions, especially in the South China Sea. This has reignited US involvement in the region and reinforcing the voice of some US regional allies that perceive China as a peril more than a partner. China's growing geopolitical importance has prompted US to strengthen its position, via balancing and engaging with China.

In the period of the pivot to Asia, and post-bases era, US-Philippine security relations has broadened and extended to Philippine politics. US geopolitical strategic interests makes it vital that the 2025 election produces politicians and leaders who continually endorse and commit themselves to key standing military cooperation agreements forged between the two states especially the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Implemented in 1999, the VFA paved the way to a series of uninterrupted annual conduct of *Balikatan* (“shoulder-to-shoulder”) military exercises, notable in 2001, 2016, 2022, 2023, and 2024, between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the US military.

Training exercises and war games have become an important fixture of US-Philippine military-civil security relations. *Balikatan* has been designed to strengthen bilateral interoperability, capabilities, test air and missile defense systems, increase awareness of maritime security, trust and cooperation. The near cancellation of the VFA in 2020 by then President Duterte as Philippine foreign policy, and during President Trump's first term, shifted towards China and away from the US is a testament that political leadership has direct impact on the complexion of the country's foreign policy.

Apart from the VFA, the Philippines adopted the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) as a supplemental agreement to two previous accords – the 1951 MDT and 1998 VFA. The ten-year EDCA deal allows the US to have a strengthened presence in the Philippines. This Agreement was however challenged by civil society organizations and legal experts before the Philippine Supreme Court (PSC) as it tolerates US to rotate its troops in the Philippines for an extended stay and consents it to build and operate facilities on Philippine bases for both US and Philippine armed forces. While opposition groups and parties argue that EDCA contravenes the Philippine

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constitutional provision on the establishment of a permanent foreign military base, the PSC ruled otherwise and with finality that EDCA is constitutional in its 2016 decision.

The slow implementation of EDCA during then-President Duterte's term (June 2016–June 2022) was willful due to Duterte's influence. Notwithstanding, the US and the Philippines agreed to have five EDCA sites or military bases for American troops in 2016, namely: Antonio Bautista Air Base (Palawan); Basa Air Base (Pampanga); Benito Ebuen Air Base (Cebu); Fort Magsaysay (Pampanga); and Lumbia Airport (Cagayan de Oro). With the post-Duterte shift of foreign policy, President Marcos Jr., expanded the EDCA sites, covering four more new bases in 2023, a year after he assumed the presidency. Additional sites are situated in north Luzon facing Taiwan (Republic of China), three, and one in Palawan facing the SCS. These are: Camp Melchora Dela Cruz (Gamu, Isabela); Lal-lo Airport (Lal-lo, Cagayan); Naval Base Camilo Osias (Santa Ana, Cagayan); and Balabac Island (Palawan).

The unilateral selection and identification of EDCA bases without the participation of people on the ground has been adversely received by local government officials. The governors of the provinces of Isabela and Cagayan were collectively offended by the national government's choice of their provinces as EDCA armed bases as they become potential magnets of attack by Chinese missiles and nuclear attacks, and may be caught in the crossfire of US and China armed rivalry. Civil society organizations and groups also raised the alarm of violation of human rights and confiscation of lands from indigenous peoples as a consequence of hosting EDCA military activities and training. Understandably, the non-participation of local government and community leaders in the political process of charting their future in a large-scale project like the EDCA military and civil scheme will not only isolate the program from the people but also produce adversarial relations between national and international actors on the one hand, and local government and community on the other hand.

US geopolitical interest in the region cannot be disassociated with economic goals, particularly as China has become the main trading partner for most Asian nations replacing the historic primacy of Asian linkages with the US and the West and thereby helping Beijing establish strong ties with a range of states. The Lowy Institute's 2023 report (Patton and Sato 2023) concludes that China has been more influential than the US across four categories: economic relationships, defense networks, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence. Of the ten Association Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the US is the most influential power in only two: the Philippines and Singapore.

Given China's growing economic presence in the region, the US is keen on offering a counterbalance. By increasing trade, investment, and development assistance, the US aims to offer the Philippines an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments. In May 2022, the Philippines and the US joined 12 other partners to launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) to strengthen economic partnership on: trade; supply chains; clean energy, decarbonization, and infrastructure; and tax and anti-corruption. And more through the Global Infrastructure and Investment (GIP) in support of IPEF economies, human capital, and sustainability goals.

In terms of trade and investment, US-Philippine relations are relatively strong – \$22.6 billion in total goods trade in 2023 and an estimated \$10.6 billion in trade in services in 2022. The US is also the country's largest export market and is one of the country's largest foreign investors. In 2024, the US Commerce Secretary brought 22 US companies to the Philippines to explore commercial opportunities, resulting in US\$1 billion in investment pledges. Any shift in the current environment – whether from the Philippine political system or otherwise – would be deeply concerning and troubling to US investors as this may affect their business and commercial future in the country.

Marcos Jr.s' declaration in his 2023 State of the Nation Address that “our independent foreign policy – a friend to all and enemy of none – has proven effective” is obviously out of touch with the reality as his foreign policy is biased to US interests. Those elected in 2025 may give us early signs of whether the path ahead will be one of continued alignment with the US, or one that moves the Philippines towards China's sphere of influence. The US may therefore view these elections as a way to support candidates and policies that align with its longer term vision for a “free and open Indo-Pacific”.

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