



Australia-Philippines Security Cooperation: The Maritime Dimension

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Since the start of Battle for Marawi in late May 2017, attention has tended to focus on the development of a stronger partnership between Australia and the Philippines in the areas of counter-terrorism and enhanced training for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).¹ But in parallel, there have been significant developments in bilateral cooperation on maritime security, as the Philippines Navy (PN) acquires new assets and seeks to develop new capabilities. This paper explores the evolution of that element of the evolving defense and security partnership between Australia and the Philippines and the drivers of closer ties. It observes that not only is there a growing intensity in bilateral maritime security cooperation, but also that there has been a shift from non-traditional to more traditional, harder-edged, activities.

Background

The framework in which this maritime security cooperation takes place is made up of three key agreements: the 1995 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperative Defense Activities; the Philippines-Australia Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA), signed in 2007, which was ratified and came into force in 2012; and the 2015 Comprehensive Partnership agreement. A fourth – a logistics support agreement – was promised in the Comprehensive Partnership declaration but has not yet been agreed.² The 1995 MoU created a Joint Defense Cooperation Committee to coordinate activities, while the 2012 SOVFA brought into being a set of legal arrangements to facilitate those activities. The 2015 Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership, for its part, observed past and

¹ It should also be observed, as Secretary of National Defence, Delfin N. Lorenzana noted in March 2017, that even prior to Marawi, that the Philippines had “a bigger military to military engagement with Australia than any of our ASEAN neighbours.” See Nicole Forrest Green, *Interview with Secretary Lorenzana*, Australia Philippines Business Council, 22 March 2017, <https://www.apbc.org.au/blog/315>.

² Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Joint Declaration on Australia – The Philippines Comprehensive Partnership* (2015), <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/joint-declaration-on-australia-the-philippines-comprehensive-partnership.pdf>.

ongoing cooperation, including high-level dialogue, but was vague about the specifics of future plans, other than floating the idea of the logistics agreement.

Within this framework, a number of maritime security initiatives have developed, alongside Australian Defense Force (ADF) and AFP involvement in army, air force, and joint exercises.³ The most of important of these is the annual Maritime Training Activity LUMBAS, involving the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Philippine Navy (PN), which began in the early 2000s. In the past, LUMBAS has focused on a range of activities, including ship-to-ship communication, humanitarian and disaster relief, anti-piracy, anti-narcotics, and managing a number of other contingencies.⁴

Intensifying Cooperation

Since the declaration of a Comprehensive Partnership, bilateral security cooperation has both broadened and deepened. In 2015, the same year that the Partnership was announced, Australia gifted two landing craft (ex-HMAS Tarakan and ex-HMAS Brunei) to the PN and concluded a deal to supply three more at an affordable rate, which were delivered in 2016. In March 2017, a couple of months before the takeover of Marawi by Islamist militants, the first Navy-to-Navy Strategy Dialogue was held, led by the Deputy Chief of the Royal Australian Navy and the Vice Commander Philippine Navy.⁵

Six months later, in October 2017, there was a marked step up in that year's Exercise LUMBAS from past practice. A year earlier, the sea phase of the Exercise had involved two Armadale-class patrol boats, HMAS Glenelg and HMAS Larrakia, and the focus had been on combatting narcotics smuggling.⁶ This was in line with earlier iterations of this Exercise, which had historically concentrated more on maritime safety and managing non-traditional security challenges than on higher-end activities. For LUMBAS 2017, by contrast, the RAN sent the Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) HMAS Adelaide and the frigate HMAS Darwin, two significantly larger and more capable ships, which had earlier been deployed to the region as part of Indo-Pacific Endeavour.⁷ This commitment by the RAN reflected the agreement reached in the first Navy-to-Navy strategic dialogue that LUMBAS should be re-designated as a "Naval Warfare Exercise" and focus on developing the PN's "warfighting capabilities."⁸ Although a RAN LHD was not involved in the 2018, another ANZAC-class

³ These include ADF involvement in Ex Balikatan from 2014 onwards, the Philippines-Australia Army to Army Exercise (PAAAE), the Carabarroo urban warfare exercise, and air defence exercise Pitch Black.

⁴ Renato Cruz de Castro, "Fostering Military Diplomacy with America's Bilateral Allies: The Philippine Policy of Linking Spokes Together," in Alan Chong (ed.), *International Security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN Towards Transitional Polycentrism* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2017), 240-241.

⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Philippines Country Brief*, <https://dfat.gov.au/geo/philippines/Pages/philippines-country-brief.aspx>.

⁶ Norman V. Mendoza, "Australian Navy visits Cebu for naval exercise," *Cebu Daily News*, 14 October 2016, <https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/108491/australian-navy-visits-cebu-for-naval-exercise>.

⁷ Helen Ward and Peter Thompson, "Exercise Enhances Maritime Security," *Navy Daily*, 22 October 2017, <http://news.navy.gov.au/en/Oct2017/Fleet/4158/Exercise-enhances-maritime-security.htm#.XTk-By1L1TY>.

⁸ "Philippine Navy, Royal Australian Navy Hold Joint Maritime Training," *Defense Journal PH*, 31 May 2018, <https://defensejournal.ph/2018/05/31/exercise-lumbas-2018/>.

frigate, HMAS Anzac, was sent, and it exercised alongside the PN's frigate BRP Ramon Alcaraz.⁹

Drivers of Change

While the Marawi episode clearly helped catalyze an intensification of bilateral security cooperation during and after 2017, it is also clear that other factors have driven defense engagement in the past few years, especially in the maritime domain. The most important, clearly, are the People's Republic of China's modernization and rapid expansion of its navy, coast guard, and so-called maritime militia, as well as its militarization of features in the South China Sea. As the last Australian Defense White Paper makes clear, Canberra is very concerned about these developments, the potential for disruption to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through the Indian Ocean, South and East China Seas that could follow, and a range of other maritime security challenges. These include illegal fishing, including activities aided and abetted by coastguards and so-called maritime militias, transnational crime, and possible humanitarian contingencies arising from natural disasters in those areas, as well as terrorism.¹⁰

The Philippines, for its part, has more proximate concerns, given its territorial dispute with China, growing pressure on its fisheries and its fishing industry from foreign and illegal operations, and the challenges inherent in managing larger and better-equipped navy, coastguard, and militia. Manila needs to – and is seeking to – build and modernize the AFP, including the PN, into an institution capable of territorial defense as well as counter-insurgency, which has been its primary function for some time.¹¹ It is presently in the process of inducting or acquiring a series of new assets, notably two Strategic Sealift Vessels, three former US Coast Guard cutters reconfigured as frigates, and two new frigates to be supplied by South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries. It has discussed – so far without decision – acquiring submarines, either from Russia or even Japan.¹² The acquisition of these new assets will demand the enhancement of existing capabilities and the addition of new ones – in anti-submarine warfare, for example – that will require not just the procurement of new assets, but also the development of the skills and experience to operate them. In turn, this will necessitate further engagement with partners like Australia capable of helping develop those capacities.

*** NOTE ** This commentary is based on the discussions in the recent Philippine-Australia Dialogue, jointly organized by the Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress and the Griffith Asia Institute, and with the support of the Australian Embassy in Manila.*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, <http://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>, 30, 42-43.

¹¹ For a helpful account of the background up to the election of the current President, Rodrigo R. Duterte, see Renato Cruz de Castro, "The Philippines Discovers Its Maritime Domain: The Aquino Administration's Shift in Strategic Focus from Internal to Maritime Security," *Asian Security* 12, 2 (2016): 111-131.

¹² Ridzwan Rahmet, "Shifting fortunes: the Philippine Navy's latest spate of modernisation efforts hangs in the balance," *Janes* (2017), https://www.janes.com/images/assets/035/69035/Shifting_fortunes_the_Philippine_Navys_latest_spate_of_modernisation_efforts_hangs_in_the_balance.pdf.