

EDCA - On US-Philippines New Defense Pact

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A Big Deal? US, Philippines Agree First 'Bases' Under New Defense Pact

A look at the significance of the initial locations agreed for EDCA's implementation.

The United States and the Philippines have finally agreed on the first locations where U.S. forces will have access under a new defense pact signed back almost two years ago, officials confirmed to reporters Friday after a bilateral strategic talks.

While Washington and Manila had inked the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) - a pact that would, among other things, give U.S. troops and equipment wide access to Philippine military bases on a rotational basis - back in April 2014, it had been languishing until the Philippine Supreme Court finally upheld its constitutionality in January this year [1].

With the constitutionality question now behind them, the two sides announced on Friday at their sixth annual Bilateral Security Dialogue (BSD) that they had agreed on the first five locations to begin implementing EDCA. The locations are: Antonio Bautista Air Base; Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay; Lumbia Air Base; and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base.

"This is a really a pretty big deal," U.S. ambassador to the Philippines Phillip Goldberg, who witnessed the signing of EDCA in 2014, told reporters at a roundtable at the State Department following the meeting.

Despite the implementation delay, Goldberg is right to highlight the significance of the agreement. First, at the strategic level, with the upholding of EDCA and its initial implementation, the U.S.-Philippine alliance - which had long been recognized as underperforming - has gotten another significant boost just before the end of the Aquino administration in June and the end of the Obama administration next January. With both administrations committing themselves over the past five years to reinvigorating the relationship to a level not seen since the removal of U.S. forces from Subic Bay and Clark Air Base more than two decades ago, seizing the moment to maximize cooperation now makes sense.

Second and more specific to the defense realm, moving forward with EDCA's implementation will advance the security interests of both sides as well as enhance joint cooperation. For Washington, getting access to these facilities will allow it to station more troops, ships and planes more frequently as it continues its 'rebalance' to the Asia-Pacific. Though it is important to emphasize that the United States already does have significant access to Philippine facilities, EDCA's implementation does afford Washington the opportunity to further enhance its rotational presence there and in the region more generally, which remains a significant concern for U.S. defense planners [2].

For the Philippines, its ally will be able to assist more in capacity-building for Manila's military - which is still one of Asia's weakest. This is critical for the Southeast Asian state to develop what defense planners call 'minimum credible deterrence' in the face of a variety of threats which include, but are not limited to, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea [3]. In this vein, at a press

briefing Friday morning at the strategic dialogue, Amy Searight, the deputy secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia, announced to reporters that the Obama administration would be seeking Congressional authorization for \$50 million for the Maritime Security Initiative, “the lion share” of which would go to the Philippines [4].

For both Washington and Manila, EDCA’s implementation would also allow both sides to expand ongoing efforts in areas like training and interoperability. As Goldberg himself admitted, the closure of U.S. bases in Clark and Subic has limited what the United States and the Philippines can do together under their alliance. And while U.S. and Philippine officials never miss a chance to reiterate that EDCA is about U.S. access to Philippine facilities rather than U.S. bases per se – which the agreement itself also specifically mentions – enhanced access offers more opportunities to increase the tempo of defense collaboration. To cite just one example to illustrate this point, Fort Magsaysay, one of the five agreed first locations, has already been a key site for the annual U.S.-Philippine military exercise known as the Balikatan Exercises which begins next month [5].

Third and lastly, though the five specific initial co-locations have long been discussed and more are expected to be disclosed in the future, several of them are particularly strategic. For instance, Antonio Bautista Air Base is located on Palawan near the South China Sea which is at the center of a lingering dispute between six claimant states including the Philippines and China. The outcome of a case that Manila filed against Beijing is expected in the coming months [6].

Another of the locations, Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base, is located on Mactan Island in Cebu, the center for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts following Typhoon Haiyan, the deadliest Philippine typhoon on record which killed over 6,000 people when it hit back in November 2013. Several countries including the United States had flown in relief supplies through military aircraft. Its inclusion attests to a point both U.S. and Philippine officials have emphasized: that EDCA is meant to address a wide range of threats beyond just China.

As is stipulated in EDCA, access to these five initial locations would enable the Washington and Manila to engage in a range of activities – from the construction of facilities to the prepositioning of defense equipment – that they have long been talking about. Asked when exactly this might occur following the recent agreement, Goldberg refused to specify a timeline but said “a movement of presupplies and of different personnel” could be expected “very soon.”

To be sure, work has just started on EDCA’s implementation and it is too early to judge how it will all turn out. For example, military construction projects will need to be approved by security boards of both sides as well as adequately funded before they can take off, which will take time. More generally, though none of the current presidential candidates likely to succeed Aquino are likely to renege on EDCA itself, there are lingering concerns that the pace of implementation may slow in the post-Aquino era. Perennial anxieties about the sustainability of the U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia after the Obama administration also remain, and Philippine officials did express those publicly at the dialogue.

Nonetheless, by getting the ball rolling on the implementation of EDCA, the United States and the Philippines are at least attempting to generate some momentum that subsequent administrations can hopefully build on. With U.S. defense secretary Ash Carter set to visit Manila in April, we could see yet more developments for U.S.-Philippine defense ties for the rest of 2016.

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P.S.

* The Diplomat. March 19, 2016:

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/a-big-deal-us-philippines-agree-first-bases-under-new-defense-pact/>

Footnotes

[1] See: "Philippine Court Upholds New US Defense Pact":

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/philippine-court-upholds-new-us-defense-pact/>

[2] See: "Interview: The Future of US Military Exercises in the Asia-Pacific":

<http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/interview-the-future-of-us-military-exercises-in-the-asia-pacific/>

[3] See: "The Truth About Philippine Military Modernization and the China Threat. Available on ESSF (article 39003), [Defense Buildup: The Truth About Philippine Military Modernization and the 'China Threat'](#).

[4] See: "US Launches New Maritime Security Initiative at Shangri-La Dialogue 2015":

<http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/us-launches-new-maritime-security-initiative-at-shangri-la-dialogue-2015/>

[5] "US, Philippines to Hold Expanded War Games":

<http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/us-philippines-to-hold-expanded-war-games/>

[6] See: "Does the Philippines' Case Against China Really Matter?":

<http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/does-the-philippines-south-china-sea-case-against-china-really-matter/>