

Philippines, US hold biggest joint military drills seen during Duterte's rule but swear they're not aimed at China

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The exercises were held in mock urban settings to train special forces in battling terrorists in cities following last year's Islamic State-linked siege

US and Philippine forces have begun their largest annual military exercises under President Rodrigo Duterte, who wanted to scale down America's military presence and involvement in combat drills as he sought closer ties with China and Russia.

The Balikatan exercises opened on Monday and were to involve combat drills in mock urban settings to train special forces in battling terrorists in cities following an Islamic State-linked siege on southern Marawi city last year.

After rising to power in 2016, Duterte vowed to scale back the presence of US troops involved in counterterrorism training in the country's south and once threatened to end the annual drills with American forces.

These will be the largest joint drills since Duterte took office, though Philippine officials stress they are not aimed at China.

The Philippines and the United States began a large-scale annual military exercise on Monday that includes a drill on part of Luzon island facing the disputed South China Sea.

More than 8,000 troops will participate in the exercise, dubbed "Balikatan" (shoulder to shoulder), which is expected to run through to May 18, with troops from Japan and Australia also joining as they have in the last two years.

The Philippine military said drills will be held in different parts of the country, including in the central provinces of Zambales and Tarlac. Scarborough Shoal, whose ownership is hotly contested between the Philippines and China, lies off Zambales.

"This year, Balikatan will focus on interoperability training to address traditional and non-traditional security concerns," Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said at the opening ceremony at Camp Aguinaldo, the country's main military camp in Manila.

"Through this exercise, we hope to improve our counterterrorism capabilities in order to build safer communities and work towards the eradication of global terror networks," he added.

Angered by US criticism of his deadly anti-drug campaign, President Rodrigo Duterte said in 2016 that he wanted the annual exercise scrapped. But it ended up being held last year, albeit on a

smaller scale, while maintaining humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities.

At the same ceremony, US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim highlighted the need for cooperation between the Philippines and its decades-long ally to address global terrorism and other threats.

“We need to work together to overcome complex challenges we face in today’s world. That includes international terror networks as well as natural threats,” Kim said, adding that the exercise will continue to strengthen bilateral relations.

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