

MILITARY

Pacific Missile Crisis: US points Typhon at China from Philippines

China says missile deployment will destabilize the region as Manila doubles down dangerously on US extended deterrence strategy

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US personnel unload a trailer-based launcher associated with the Typhon weapon system from a C-17A transport plane in the Philippines on April 7, 2024. Photo: US Army

The US Typhon missile system's indefinite deployment in the Philippines signals a bold move to counter China in the Pacific, heightening regional tensions to a new level while stoking political divisions in the Philippines.

This month, [multiple media sources](#) reported that the US will retain its mid-range Typhon missile system in the northern Philippines indefinitely, despite Chinese concerns and the risks of retaliatory escalation, according to Philippine and US officials.

The system, which can launch Tomahawk and Standard Missile-6 weapons and potentially hit targets in mainland China, was initially brought in for joint exercises staged in April.

The combat drills tested the system's deployability aboard Air Force aircraft. Philippine officials are considering keeping the missile system in the northern Philippines up to April next year, when US and Philippine forces will hold their annual Balikatan large-scale combat exercises, AP [reported](#).

The Typhon's continued presence signals the US and Philippines' intent to bolster regional deterrence amid rising South China Sea and Taiwan Strait tensions. Chinese officials, including the foreign ministry, have expressed alarm, warning that the deployment could destabilize the region and lead to an arms race.

However, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro rejected these claims, accusing China of interference in the Philippines' internal affairs and using "reverse psychology" to deter the improvement of his country's defense capabilities.

He further criticized China for its military buildup in the South China Sea, where it has fortified islands with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, and called on Beijing to "destroy their nuclear arsenal, remove all their ballistic missile capabilities, get out of the West Philippines Sea and get out of Mischief Reef."

Philippine military leaders, including General Romeo Brawner Jr, have called for the Typhon system to remain permanently, citing national defense needs. This deployment is part of broader US efforts to strengthen its military posture in the Indo-Pacific, where China has rapidly expanded its missile capabilities.

The US Typhon missile system's indefinite deployment in the Philippines may mark an evolution of the US' longstanding extended deterrence posture in the Pacific.

Coupled with its basing strategy emphasizing scalability and strategic ambiguity, the missile system deployment allows for force dispersion to boost unpredictability to potential adversaries while enhancing survivability and lethality.

In a December 2021 [article](#) in the peer-reviewed Security Studies journal, Do Young Lee says that America's extended deterrence strategy in the Philippines evolved from forward conventional deployments during the Cold War to short-term rotational deployments after the closure of US bases in 1992.

Since then, Lee notes that the US has focused on reinforcing its security commitments with the Philippines through formal agreements and rotational deployments rather than maintaining a permanent presence, as seen in Germany, Japan and South Korea, whose downsizing or removal would entail enormous political and strategic costs.

US extended deterrence in the Philippines enables a subsequent "lily pad" strategy, operationalized by the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows the [US access to nine military sites](#) in the Philippines.

Depending on the security situation, these lily pads may be described as forward operating bases hosting a US presence that can be flexibly upscaled or downscaled as needed. The indefinite deployment of the Typhon marks a significant upgrade in US capabilities in the Philippines.

In claiming that the Typhon missile would be stationed in the Philippines for training purposes, the US may have borrowed from Russia and China's strategy of disguising military movements as training exercises.

Such an approach is similar to how Russia claimed its [February 2022 troop buildup in Belarus](#) was part of military exercises, not a Ukraine invasion force. Similarly, [China's periodical and intensifying naval drills around Taiwan](#) could one day turn quickly into a blockade of the self-governing island.

US strategic ambiguity around the Typhon deployment may simultaneously enable and restrain the Philippines.

On the one hand, the indefinite deployment of the missiles may deter China from further escalation without fully committing the US to the Philippines' defense, as required under their mutual defense treaty.

On the other hand, the lack of US explicit permanent deployment guarantees of the missile system may restrain the Philippines from unilaterally asserting its South China Sea territorial claims, which can draw the US into a larger confrontation with China.

Despite the ambiguity behind the US deployment of Typhoon missiles, the Philippines' archipelagic configuration suits the [US Distributed Maritime Operations \(DMO\) operating concept](#).

This concept entails dispersing US Navy units over a larger operational area to make detection and targeting more difficult for adversaries while enabling mutual support and concentrated fire on targets.

The US can spread Typhon sensors and weapons across multiple EDCA sites, employ longer-range and unmanned systems, and use resilient communication links to maintain coordination and adaptability in a contested environment.

However, the deployment may face operational constraints due to the Philippines' distinct lack of air and missile defense assets. This could force the US to deploy its assets rather than rely on the Philippines to defend its missile systems based there.

Moreover, [China's aircraft carrier deployments in the Philippine Sea](#) may convey that a Ukraine-style resupply operation is not an option for the US Typhon launchers in the Philippines, demonstrating that it can cut off any attempts at resupply and reinforcement from Guam.

More than any military vulnerability, though, fickle, venal Filipino political elites may be the US Typhon deployment's Achilles' heel.

In an [article](#) for Channel News Asia (CNA), Lianne Chia mentions that as the incumbent Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration has strengthened ties with the US, it has weakened ties with politicians associated with the former Rodrigo Duterte administration, which favored engagement with China and antagonism with the West.

That rift, China says, culminated in Vice President Sara Duterte's resignation from the Cabinet and former president Duterte criticizing Marcos Jr as a US puppet.

Chia notes that this bubbling feud could impact the Philippines' foreign policy, with future US defense initiatives in the Philippines, including the Typhon deployment, hanging in the balance with crucial mid-term elections due next year.

However, feuding Philippine political dynasties backed by competing external powers, i.e., the US and China, sacrifice national interests for the sake of a few retaining power, wealth and prestige.



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