

# Philippines gets 'unprecedented' aid — and reassurances — during talks with U.S.

Manila will receive \$500 million in security assistance, months before the U.S. votes in a contentious presidential election.

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By Gabriel Dominguez, Jesse Johnson

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The United States unlocked an “unprecedented” \$500 million in security assistance for the Philippines during high-level talks in Manila on Tuesday amid heightened tensions in the disputed South China Sea, just months before the U.S. votes in a November presidential election that will have broad ramifications for Asia.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Philippine defense chief Gilberto Teodoro and Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo for the countries' first-ever “two-plus-two” talks in Manila since the format began in 2012 as the officials agreed on key steps to bolster the Philippine military and continue modernizing the alliance.

"Our relationship ... is the strongest that it's ever been, and today's talks built on that unprecedented momentum in a number of very concrete ways," Blinken told a joint news conference after the talks, adding that the U.S. commitment to defending its ally would “endure” no matter who wins the election.

Teodoro thanked the U.S. for its continued assistance, saying that the new aid tranche will help his country establish a “credible deterrent to unlawful aggression” while ensuring that Manila becomes an “effective upholder” of international law.

A large portion of the latest U.S. military assistance, described as a “once-in-a-generation investment,” would go into

modernizing the Philippine military and coast guard to help Manila shore up its defenses in response to a recent series of violent clashes between Chinese and Philippine vessels in and near disputed waters, particularly around a Philippine outpost on Second Thomas Shoal.

Over \$128 million would be used to upgrade facilities within nine Philippine military sites U.S. forces have access to under the allies' 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Funding was also made available to support Manila's cybersecurity capabilities.

“This level of funding is unprecedented and sends a clear message of support for the Philippines from the Biden-Harris administration, the U.S. Congress and American people,” Austin said.

The funds — part of a recent national security supplemental budget passed by the U.S. Congress in the spring — are an important element of the allies' “security sector assistance roadmap,” which lays out the delivery of “priority defense platforms” for the Philippines over the next five to 10 years.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (center) speaks with Blinken (left) and Austin after their meeting at the Malacanang Presidential Palace in Manila on Tuesday. | Pool / via REUTERS

The roadmap is expected to see Manila continue to receive equipment such as radars, military transport aircraft and drones, as well as coastal- and air-defense systems.

Since the roadmap seeks to build up Manila's capacity to "resist coercion," the two countries also recommitted to [further integrating bilateral ties into multilateral networks, including with Japan](#) and Australia, to strengthen collective deterrence against China. This will include the continued regularization of joint maritime activities such as drills and patrols between their navies in the East and South China Seas.

The two sides also said negotiations on a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) were progressing and would be finalized within the year. The pact would formalize the sharing of critical security information in a timely way, while also crafting guidelines for

safeguarding top-secret information or technology transfers.

The officials also again emphasized that the 1951 U.S.-Philippine mutual defense treaty applies to armed attacks on either nation's armed forces or public vessels “anywhere in the Pacific and in the South China Sea.”

Nate Fischler, Asia-Pacific analyst at U.S.-based intelligence firm RANE, said the primary purpose of the meetings, which follow a July 18 visit to Manila by the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was to intensify war contingency planning and coordinate on urgent defense needs.

Coming only days after [a similar two-plus-two gathering Sunday between U.S. and Japanese officials](#), these meetings are indicative of “a broader U.S.-led regional defense strategy that aims to restrict China’s maritime reach within the so-called first island chain, of which the Philippines is on the front lines,” he said. This strategy features multilateral coalition-building and relies on critical contributions from several countries,

including Japan, the Philippines and Australia.

“This means Washington will encourage Manila to come to more mutually reinforcing bilateral and multilateral agreements with these countries, such as the recent Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement,” he added.

China claims large parts of the South China Sea, including the Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines maintains a small military garrison atop a rusty naval ship, the Sierra Madre, that it deliberately grounded in 1999 to reinforce its claims in those waters.

Repeated clashes in the waters around the shoal in recent months — mainly over attempts by the Philippines to resupply the garrison — have triggered concerns over the potential for escalation, including U.S. intervention.

But the two sides recently reached an “provisional arrangement” over how to conduct the resupply missions, a move welcomed — with a caveat — by the U.S.

“It's very important that (the arrangement) be the standard, not the exception,” Blinken said Tuesday.

A China Coast Guard vessel blocks a Philippine vessel on its way to a resupply mission at the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea on March 5. |

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The Philippine officials did not offer any new details about the agreement, however, and both sides have continued to trade accusations about what exactly the deal entails.

The two sides agreed to allow Philippine resupply missions for purely humanitarian purposes, meaning allowing Manila to provide its contingent on Second Thomas Shoal with food and medical supplies but not military equipment or construction materials.

However, Beijing and Manila have contradicting versions of what the agreement details, with Fischler saying that, by China's reckoning, the Philippines agreed to both notify Beijing before the missions and allow inspections of relevant Philippine

vessels, something Manila denies, as this would imply accepting Chinese sovereignty over the area.

As a result, it remains unclear whether the mutual accusations are the result of true disagreements, with Gregory Poling, director of the Southeast Asia Program at the U.S.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, saying that if the next resupply missions go smoothly, this would suggest that the different public accounts “are just about each side messaging to save face.”

The Philippines’ proximity to both Taiwan and key sea lanes in the South China Sea makes it an attractive staging point for the U.S. and its allies that could boost their ability to respond to regional crises. Efforts to strengthen Washington’s position in the country were highlighted in the EDCA pact that saw Manila grant U.S. forces access to four additional military locations last year — in addition to five previous ones.

Three of the new EDCA sites face north toward self-ruled Taiwan, which Beijing claims as a renegade province, while the other is near the South China Sea.



The EDCA enables Washington to rotate troops into the Philippines for extended stays, build facilities and pre-position both equipment and supplies at the designated Philippine sites. The pact, however, does not allow for permanent basing.

Blinken and Austin's visit was also intended to reassure allies and partners as the November U.S. presidential election casts a shadow of uncertainty over Washington's future foreign policy direction.

A number of these countries have been attempting to shore up ties with the camp of Republican nominee and former leader Donald Trump, who as president repeatedly expressed a disdainful view of the U.S. alliance system. Trump is facing off against Vice President Kamala Harris, after President Joe Biden withdrew from the race.

While Manila's alliance with Washington "affords it an insurance policy" in the South China Sea, "there's a measure of unpredictability" over the next few months, said Elina Noor, an Asia security expert at the Carnegie Endowment for

International Peace, adding that the return of Trump “may unravel expectations, all over again.”

Asked about a potential shift in the U.S. regional posture after the upcoming election, Austin sought to reassure Manila, saying he “cannot imagine” a day when the United States of America and the Philippines are not the best of friends and allies, while adding that the current momentum in bilateral ties “enjoys bipartisan (congressional) support.”