

Hegseth's Visit to the Philippines Meant to Advance US War Agenda in the Indo-Pacific

By [National Democratic Front of the Philippines](#)

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*The upcoming visit of newly appointed US **Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth** to the Philippines on March 28-29 undeniably exposes Marcos Jr. as the preferred puppet of US imperialism in advancing its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Hegseth's visit is not a benign gesture - it is a calculated move in Washington's ongoing campaign to contain and provoke China, setting the stage for an inevitable escalation of conflict that will drag the Philippines into a war that ultimately serves US interests. Notably, the US chose to begin its Indo-Pacific tour in the Philippines - skipping the customary visit to South Korea - which clearly signals the Trump administration's plans to continue the same warmongering policy of his predecessors against China.*

This visit is part of an expansive military agenda that includes the resumption of the Balikatan exercises on April 21 - May 9 this year. The Balikatan exercises 2025 are scheduled to take place in key strategic locations: Northern Luzon, territories nearest to Taiwan, and the West Philippine Sea, where longstanding maritime tensions with China have persisted. Additional exercises are set to take place in Bulacan, Zambales and in Nueva Ecija. By staging these operations in strategic areas, Washington intends to send a provocative signal to Beijing, further escalating tensions.

Just days ahead of the US Defense secretary's visit, the Philippine and US militaries launched joint military exercises with 5,000 troops laying bare the aggressive nature of Hegseth's agenda. This weeks-long operation serves as an opening salvo to the Balikatan exercises. Contrary to US claims, these military drills are not about safeguarding the Philippines' territorial integrity, but about advancing US warfighting capabilities and establishing a permanent military foothold in the Indo-Pacific. Hegseth's itinerary also includes meetings with his counterpart **Gilberto Teodoro** in Manila, and visits to treaty ally Japan.

This year's Balikatan exercises will see the participation of 10,000 US troops alongside 6,000 soldiers from the Philippines, Australia, and Japan, with additional forces from Canada, France, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. While the overall troop count is slightly lower compared to the 17,600 seen in 2023, the focus of the drills this year has shifted towards showcasing greater military firepower. The Philippine Air Force is set to deploy its recently acquired Spyder mobile air defense systems from Israel, while the Philippine Navy is slated to test an array of advanced munitions—including the Rafael Spike NLOS, South Korean C-Star surface-to-surface missiles, and French-made Mistral 3 surface-to-air systems—in a full battle test that features live-fire missile trials and the deliberate sinking of a

decommissioned World War II vessel.

Hegseth's visit also seeks to push for the "modernization" of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. In reality, this is part of a broader strategy to transform the AFP into an auxiliary force of the US military in the event of an all-out war with China. While the maritime dispute with China remains fundamentally a territorial and resource issue, it pales in comparison to the pervasive US control over Philippine economy, culture, politics and military which poses a far more insidious threat. Hegseth's plans to deepen security ties with the Philippine reactionary government not only further entrenches US control over the country's defense but also further implicates the US in Marcos Jr.'s ongoing war crimes, including indiscriminate bombings and military attacks on civilian communities under the guise of "counterinsurgency" operations.

The NDFP stands with the Filipino people in opposing Hegseth's visit and against the continued subjugation of the Philippines to US military interests. Allowing US troops to conduct military operations disguised as training on Philippine soil is unacceptable. Amidst these war exercises, revolutionary forces will continue to defend civilian communities affected by these military operations. We call for the rejection of all US military agreements, the removal of foreign troops and bases, and an end to the use of the country as a pawn in a brewing inter-imperialist war.

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Featured image: Army Vice Commander Maj. Gen. Leodevic B. Guinid discusses activities for SABAK 2025 with 25th ID Deputy Commander USARPAC Brig. Gen. Jonathan A Velishka and U.S. Army counterparts during the joint opening ceremony of SABAK 2025 at Fort Magsaysay, Nueva Ecija on March 24, 2025.

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