

# **An Unlikely Threat: Balikatan During a Global Health Crisis**

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Over the years, the United States and the Philippines have nurtured security relations that ensured stability not only in the Philippine archipelago, but in the Asia-Pacific region as well. To formalize the alliance, then-President Elpidio Quirino signed the Military Assistance Act of 1946, allowing the U.S. to assist the development of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). It aimed to protect the Philippines' territorial integrity, promote the mutual defense of both countries against all forms of threats, and maintain peace in the region. The move was also prompted by the "red menace" brought about by communist nations China and Russia, and the rising tide of local communist insurgency that challenged the viability of the Philippine government at that time.

It was only in August 1951 when the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) was inked, an overall framework for the mutual defense of the U.S. and the Philippines. The pact became vital for the U.S., specifically for its defense strategy in the Western Pacific region. To effectively implement the framework, the two countries agreed to develop and maintain their collective capacities to fend off adversaries. And by 1953, the AFP, with the help of its American counterparts, has successfully reduced the communists into rambling bands, without the capacity to pose threats to the Philippine government. However, decades later, [the Philippine Senate moved to deny Washington of operating bases on Philippine soil](#), prompting the withdrawal of American troops from the archipelago. Despite this, the two (2) countries decided to keep their partnership intact through the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) signed in February 1998. Generally speaking, the VFA is an instrument that aims to establish clear rules that will apply whenever U.S. troops visit the Philippines for joint training, exercises, exchanges, and the like.

Among the efforts that sprouted due to the long-standing relationship between Manila and Washington is the creation of Exercise Balikatan. A Filipino word meaning

shoulder-to-shoulder, “Balikatan” aims to renew the two countries’ ties and allow troops to train collaboratively in the field. It has a two-fold objective: first, to enhance interoperability between American and Philippine forces through the exchange of training, skills, and techniques; and second, to improve combat readiness in joint and combined operations. It is also the largest combined training drill between the two countries after U.S. military installations in the Philippines were shuttered.

Balikatan, which was first conducted in 1981, began as a Navy-to-Navy drill called “Palah.” It was then changed to a single-service field training exercise, while its succeeding years were limited to command post exercises. However, following the terrorist events that struck New York City and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, Balikatan activities were expanded to include counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, intelligence training, logistics, and equipment maintenance training. The AFP was also allowed to access the U.S. military’s excess defense articles from 2002 to 2004. Through the articles, transport aircraft, utility helicopters, naval ships, landing crafts, and assault rifles were provided by the U.S. federal government.

At present, the joint drill is being managed as a combined activity through a parallel organization where both nations are symmetrically represented. The organizational structure that Balikatan has, per the AFP Joint and Combined Training Center (JCTC), is called the Exercise Directorate Headquarters (EDH), with designated co-exercise directors (ED), assistant EDs, and exercise agents (EA) each from the Philippines and the U.S. EDH is then further organized into three divisions: Exercise Control Group, Headquarters Support Group, and Exercise Operation Center with personal, special, technical, legal, medical, and joint coordinating staff providing support, supervision, and technical advice.

With its goals of bolstering military capabilities and interoperability, Balikatan has significant implications to the major defense policy thrusts of the Department of National Defense (DND), particularly in the areas dealing with international terrorism, drug and

arms trafficking, maritime piracy, money laundering, and illegal migration as indicated in the Philippine Defense White Paper of 1998.

### **Fearing the Unseen Enemy**

Come 2020, the entire world faced an unlikely threat—the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which is currently causing millions of infections and deaths in over 186 countries. With hundreds of thousands of cases recorded across the world each day, the global health crisis has led to the cancellation of Balikatan 2020 to curb infections among Filipino and American service members. The U.S. became the hardest-hit nation, with more than 33 million cases recorded as of writing since the airborne disease spread out from the Chinese city of Wuhan in Hubei province in December 2019. Aside from Balikatan, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) also had no choice but to call off or downsize other [joint military exercises](#) with other countries, including Exercise Foal Eagle with South Korea, Cobra Gold with Thailand, and Cold Response with its allies from the Arctic Region.

The Philippines was not spared from the health crisis. The country confirmed its first local transmission on 30 January 2020—and in just a single year, the number of COVID-19 cases skyrocketed to over a million, with more than 21,000 Filipinos succumbing to the deadly respiratory disease as of writing. The pandemic also forced the Philippine government to implement a series of lockdowns across the country to contain the spread of COVID-19. During the first surge of cases, the [strict quarantine measures](#) affected around 57 million residents in the island of Luzon alone, resulting in the mobilization of local government units, law enforcement, and military personnel.

Rear Admiral Adeluis Bordado — co-director of Balikatan 2020 and acting chief of the AFP Education, Training, and Doctrine Command (AFPETDC) that time — admitted that pushing through with the joint drill at the height of health crisis could endanger many lives as [it would involve thousands of service members in large movements](#). U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) echoed RAdm Bordado's sentiments, noting that canceling the exercise is in the best interest of both Manila and Washington. More than

10,000 troops from the two countries were supposed to take part in the annual exercise that was scheduled from 4 May to 15 May 2020.

### **Balikatan During the “New Normal”**

While the pandemic is not yet over, its end may now be in sight as countries around the world scramble to vaccinate their citizens to achieve “herd immunity,” a vital step in entering into the “new normal.” After going through a year of stay-at-home orders, lockdowns, and cancelations, the U.S. and the Philippines decided to push through with the 36<sup>th</sup> iteration of Balikatan, which was held from 26 March to 23 April 2021. Despite the development, INDOPACOM noted that the magnitude of the joint exercise was scaled down both in the number of events and participants in order to adhere to stringent health and safety protocols.

Held in areas under the AFP’s Northern and Southern Luzon Commands, such as Colonel Ernesto Rabina Air Base in Tarlac, the latest Balikatan was a combination of virtual and kinetic events—a first for the joint exercise. According to Major Jose Y Reyes Jr (INF) PA, head of the Training and Exercise Department of JCTC, this year’s set-up brought significant changes to the planning phase of the drill. Traditionally, the U.S. participates physically throughout all parts of Balikatan, including the preparation and planning stages. However, due to the travel ban imposed by the Philippine government, the U.S. was not able to take part in some activities, particularly during site surveys. Maj Reyes explained that site surveys are activities that determine the feasibility of a certain training area. Preparing for Balikatan is usually divided into several stages: preliminary planning meeting, concept development conference, initial site survey, initial planning conference, middle planning conference, final site survey, and the final planning conference. Even with the absence of American troops during the pre-exercise events, Maj Reyes emphasized that the decisions remained bilateral between the U.S. and the Philippines.

As mentioned by INDOPACOM, scaling down the joint drill was necessary to curb the further spread of COVID-19. This year, all Joint Interoperability Events (JIOE) were canceled, which include amphibious, combined counterterrorism, and maritime security operations. Meanwhile, for Combined Interoperability Events (CIOE), tactical airlift, airdrop, and mass casualty evacuation, and subject matter expert exchanges were conducted through virtual means such as the All-Partner Access Network (APAN), a platform vetted by the U.S. Other CIOEs that pushed through include a bilateral battle staff academic seminar, close air support, combat air controller operations, and a live-fire exercise. Humanitarian and Civic Assistance (HCA) events were also carried out during the latest Balikatan, where Filipino and American service members constructed education and health care facilities in the province of Quezon.

Moreover, to get the bigger picture of the ongoing pandemic, the Philippine Air Force (PAF) and U.S. Pacific Air Forces Command (PACAF) held a three-day [virtual global health engagement](#). U.S. Air Force (USAF) Lieutenant Colonel Cherielynn Gabriel, an international health specialist from PACAF, said the main objective of the exchange is to provide an overview of the current health crisis from surveillance, on-scene response, testing, and monitoring to patient treatment and modifications to patient movement. The specialist further explained that the engagement sought to share best practices, enhance knowledge of participants, and maintain relations until the two countries can practice medical interoperability in-person when the global health landscape improves.

While physical events were conducted amid the surge of new COVID-19 cases in the Philippines, the AFP assured that stringent health protocols were followed throughout the joint exercise. Physical distancing was enforced among service members, as well as the wearing of masks. Filipino and American troops were also required to undergo a two-week quarantine and present a negative COVID-19 test before participating. Aside from health protocols, activities under Balikatan have to follow the established systems and processes called the Joint Exercise Life Cycle. According to Major Jimmy P Guinanoy, assistant chief of staff for plans of Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), the

processes provide a challenge for both the Philippines and the U.S. on how they respond and cooperate during the joint exercise.

In terms of numbers, approximately 225 troops from the U.S. military and 415 personnel from the AFP participated in the recently concluded Balikatan, [a dramatic decrease](#) from the usual numbers of the previous iterations of the joint exercise—around 3,500 service members from each country. The Australian Defense Force (ADF), which usually takes part in Balikatan in the past, was also not able to participate this year due to the health hazard posed by the highly contagious disease.

### **What's Next for Balikatan?**

Maj Reyes admitted that there was a big difference between the latest joint exercise and the previous iterations of Balikatan. Coordination between the AFP and the U.S. military became challenging as holding virtual events was a new concept for both institutions. Nevertheless, the new platform provided an avenue for the AFP to conduct weekly synchronization meetings with its U.S. counterparts as compared before when e-mail is the usual means for them to connect after the final planning conference of the joint drill.

Even with the presence of an unlikely threat—the COVID-19 pandemic—Balikatan has still proven its importance to the AFP. For both Maj Reyes and Maj Guinano, the joint effort with the U.S. provides valuable information and assistance in many ways, particularly in the areas of interoperability and capability improvement. It generally serves as a rehearsal for actual missions that Filipino service members will carry out in the future. And with the pandemic's end now in sight for both the Philippines and the U.S., Maj Reyes believes that the 37<sup>th</sup> iteration of Balikatan would be better in all aspects. The AFP, according to him, is now more prepared to adapt to the virtual environment that could still be relevant for a few more years.

If the global health crisis indeed spans longer than expected, Maj Guinano noted that the AFP should bolster its pandemic mitigation efforts in order to attain all the benefits that Balikatan provides to Filipino service members. Underscoring the importance of the joint exercise, the official said COVID-19 should not jeopardize the Philippine military's training programs.

In conclusion, Balikatan remained unfazed in fortifying the AFP's ability to perform combined and joint planning operations, projecting a posture of readiness, and displaying the strong relations between Manila and Washington amid fears brought about by the pandemic. Holding the 36<sup>th</sup> iteration of Balikatan, according to the AFP and INDOPACOM, is an accomplishment itself for the two allies.

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