

## Re-Establishing a Permanent Military Base at Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines



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## **Re-establishing a Military Base in Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines**

In the ever-increasing complexity of the South China Sea operating environment, the Commander, United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) seeks to “enhance stability...by promoting security cooperation, encouraging peaceful development, responding to contingencies, deterring aggression, and, when necessary, fighting to win.<sup>1</sup>” In order to achieve these objectives, USINDOPACOM should advocate to re-establish a US military base in Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines. A permanent US military presence in the Philippines will support USINDOPACOM efforts to curb the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) influence in the Philippines, better posture US and allied forces in peacetime, and enable military operations in the event of armed conflict in the South China Sea. This paper will begin with a brief historical review of US activities in Subic Bay since the Spanish-American War, as well as the background of the modern US-Philippine alliance. The paper will then discuss USINDOPACOM’s imperative to deepen the US military relationship with the Philippines, as directed in US strategic guidance and set against the context of China’s rise in power. Next, the paper will argue that Subic Bay provides USINDOPACOM with distinct operational advantages in peace and war. Finally, the paper will review and dispute a likely counter-argument against a permanent base in Philippines: that a base would be overly escalatory and drive the US and China closer to war.

### **Subic Bay: Background of US Military Activity**

US gained colonial control of the Philippines at the end of the 1898 Spanish-American War, and retained control until the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation of the

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<sup>1</sup> US PACIFIC COMMAND. <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>

Philippines during World War II. After the war, the Philippines gained independence in 1946, and in 1947, signed a base agreement with the US, granting the American military access and complete control over the naval base in Subic Bay<sup>2</sup>. Four years later, in 1951, the two governments signed a Mutual Defense Treaty, which has remained the foundational and enduring document of US-Philippine relations over the last 70 years<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US military base at Subic Bay developed into a significant geostrategic position, providing repair, logistics, and staging facilities during the Korean War, Vietnam War, and in the Cold War against the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> Once the largest overseas US naval base, Subic Bay hosted 215 US ships per month in 1967, while the supply depot handled over 4 billion barrels of fuel per month<sup>5</sup>. In the late 1980s, nearly 17,000 US servicemembers were deployed to the Philippines, and Subic Bay also served as the US logistics hub during the Iran-Iraq Tanker Wars.<sup>6</sup> The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, however, diminished the geostrategic significance of the American base in Subic Bay.

By 1990 a long-term permanent US military base in the Philippines became increasingly unlikely. Negotiations regarding basing agreements between the two countries were ongoing during the massive Mount Pinatubo volcanic eruption in 1991, a disaster that forced the thousands of US servicemembers and their families to evacuate Subic Bay and other

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Rimmer. "US Western Pacific Geostrategy: Subic Bay before and after Withdrawal," *Marine Policy* 21, 21 (4) (1997). Pergamon: 325–44. doi:10.1016/S0308-597X(97)00012-2.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Smith. *US-Southeast Asia: Philippines - an Exemplar of US Rebalance*: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1820757903%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>4</sup> Rimmer.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Cohen and James Hardy. "Philippines, US Confirm US Navy's Return to Subic Bay." *Jane's Defence Weekly* 49, no. 44 (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Rimmer.

installations.<sup>7</sup> The environmental disaster, combined with longstanding Filipino concerns regarding nationalism and sovereignty, as well as disagreements regarding the presence of nuclear weapons in the Philippines, influenced the Philippine Senate's vote to end the base agreement.<sup>8</sup> From the US perspective, with the decline of US-Soviet great power competition and the lack of a near-peer competitor in Asia, Subic Bay's strategic significance was insufficient for the US to challenge the decision. The 1992 base closure, however, did not mark the end of US-Philippine military relations.

Although the permanent military base closed in 1992, the US and Philippine relationship remained strong. The two countries signed a 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), and 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), allowing the US Department of Defense to rotate military personnel and assets, on a non-permanent basis, to conduct training, logistics support, and maintenance activities throughout designated areas within the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> With an initial ten-year term, the EDCA will automatically continue in 2024 unless specifically revoked. Although the EDCA provides USINDOPACOM with significant operational opportunities, the explicit lack of US military permanence has drawbacks and limits USINDOPACOM's operational capabilities. This lack of permanence is a major weakness when viewed in the context of China's powerful rise.

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<sup>7</sup> Gaillard, Jean-Christophe, Ilan Kelman, and Ma. Florina Orillos. "US-Philippines Military Relations After the Mt Pinatubo Eruption in 1991: A Disaster Diplomacy Perspective." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2009): 301-30. Accessed October 13, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23615255>.

<sup>8</sup> Harkins, Gina and Fellman, Sam. "Return to Subic Bay". Defense News. July 29, 2013 Monday. <https://advance-lexis-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:593Y-7C01-DYJJ-P551-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>9</sup> De Castro, Renato, and Renato Cruz De Castro. 12AD. "The 21st Century Philippine-U.S. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA): The Philippines' Policy in Facilitating the Obama Administration's Strategic Pivot to Asia," *The Korean journal of defense analysis* 26, 26 (4). Korea Institute for Defense Analyses: 427-46.

Since the US withdrew from Subic Bay in 1992, the Southeast Asian balance of power has changed significantly. The rise in Chinese power replaced the Soviet decline, marking a return to great power competition between the US and China. China's aggressive expansionism in the South China Sea, including China's seizure of the contested Scarborough Shoal, has threatened Philippine interests. A 2016 United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration regarding Chinese excursions in the South China Sea ruled in the Philippine's favor, stating that China's claims in the South China Sea were illegal. China has largely dismissed this ruling.<sup>10</sup> However, recognizing the Philippines' strategic value, Beijing has sought to improve relations with Manila. Since his election in 2016, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte has responded warmly to Chinese political and economic courtship, while at the same time cooling diplomatic relations with the United States.<sup>11</sup> China's attempts to expand Beijing's sphere of influence in the Philippines threaten US regional strategic and USINDOPACOM's operational interests. In order to deter further Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, and to prepare for the possibility of armed conflict, USINDOPACOM should seek to strengthen the US alliance with the Philippines by re-establishing the US naval base at Subic Bay.

### **USINDOPACOM and the Philippines: Strategic Imperative and Operational Advantage**

Chinese overtures to the Philippines threaten the longstanding US-Philippines alliance, an alliance USINDOPACOM cannot afford to lose. US strategic guidance to USINDOPACOM is clear. The 2017 National Security Strategy specifically identified the importance of maintaining

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<sup>10</sup> Hoogeland, Martijn. "CASE NOTE: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE AND THE ROLE OF UNCLOS IN THE SETTLEMENT OF THE DISPUTE." *Revue Québécoise De Droit International* (12, 2019): 93-116. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2335664134%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>11</sup> Vanderklippe, Nathan. "Philippines' Duterte Warms Up to China: Southeast Asian Country has Become a Coveted Spot on the Chessboard between Washington and Beijing - and the U.S. may be Losing." *The Globe and Mail*, Oct 19, 2016. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1830013667%3Faccountid%3D322>.

“...a forward military presence [in the INDOPACIFIC] capable of deterring, and if necessary, defeating any adversary<sup>12</sup>” while explicitly highlighting the importance of the US-Philippine alliance in maintaining stability throughout the INDOPACIFIC region. The 2018 National Defense Strategy and National Military Strategy similarly stated the importance of improving military relationships with allies, such as the Philippines, to further US strategic objectives.<sup>13,14</sup> USINDOPACOM must identify Subic Bay as critical to the combatant commander’s operational objectives, nested under strategic direction, in the South China Sea.

### **Maintaining Alliances: Force Advantage**

Although a small country with respect to its economy and military power<sup>15</sup>, a tilting of Filipino interests in Chinese favor would negatively impact the US position in the region. Neighboring countries, particularly those with competing territorial claims in the South China Sea such as Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, may perceive this diplomatic shift as an indication of decreasing American power.<sup>16</sup> If other countries view the US as either unwilling or unable to maintain Washington’s longstanding relationship with Manila due to Chinese

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<sup>12</sup> United States. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington: President of the U.S., December 2017. [https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/National-Security-Strategy\\_POTUS\\_Final-12-18-2017.pdf](https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/National-Security-Strategy_POTUS_Final-12-18-2017.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> US Office of the Secretary Of Defense. Summary of 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge. Washington D.C.: OSD, 2018. [https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/National-Defense-Strategy-Summary\\_SECDEF\\_2018.pdf](https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/National-Defense-Strategy-Summary_SECDEF_2018.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> US Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Description of the National Military Strategy 2018. Washington D.C.: CJCS, 2018. [https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/National\\_Military\\_Strategy\\_Description%20UNCLASSIFIED\\_CJCS\\_2018.pdf](https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/National_Military_Strategy_Description%20UNCLASSIFIED_CJCS_2018.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> US State Department. World Factbook. Accessed 17 Oct 2020. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rp.html>

<sup>16</sup> Meng, Lai Yew. "Sea of Cooperation" Or "Sea of Conflict"? The South China Sea in the Context of China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation." *International Journal of China Studies* 8, no. 3 (2017): 321-345. <https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/2002968280?pq-origsite=summon>

outreach, pro-US relationships in the region may become a tougher sell.<sup>17</sup> This symbolic, yet strategic, loss is even more powerful today in light of the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling against China. A strong Chinese-Filipino relationship, despite the international ruling, weakens US legitimacy and authority. With China's emergence as a great power, and the subsequent tendency for smaller, less powerful countries to "pick sides" between great power competitors<sup>18</sup>, USINDOPACOM risks a diminished relationship with the Philippines, to China's advantage. As described in the 2018 Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs noted that whether in armed conflict or in conflict below the threshold of war, the US will need committed allies to compete with great power competitors<sup>19</sup>. USINDOPACOM should establishing a permanent US military presence in Subic Bay to secure and enhance the alliance with the Philippines, and simultaneously encourage other countries to pursue strong relationships with the US.

### **Countering China's Pursuit of Operational Advantage**

In addition to the Philippines' strategic importance with respect to coalition-building, an increase in the Chinese sphere of influence within the Philippine archipelago presents USINDOPACOM with significant operational challenges. The Philippines is valuable due to its large coastline along the South China Sea, proximity to the Spratley Islands, and due to the

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<sup>17</sup> Yoon, Sukjoon. "IMPLICATIONS OF XI JINPING'S "TRUE MARITIME POWER": Its Context, Significance, and Impact on the Region." *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 3 (Summer, 2015): 40-63.  
<https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1678581351%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>18</sup> Wang, Hsin-Hsien, Shinn-Shyr Wang, and Wei-Feng Tzeng. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: How Lesser Powers Respond to Competing Great Powers in the Asia-Pacific Region." *Issues and Studies* 56, no. 2 (06, 2020): 1-24. doi:http://dx.doi.org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1142/S101325112040007X.  
<https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2437906766%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>19</sup> US Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning. Washington, DC: 16 March 2018.  
[https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/JCS\\_joint\\_concept\\_integrated\\_campaign\\_16MARCH2018.pdf](https://navalwarcollege.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/courses/T.RES.JMO.SLC.UPDATES.2012/SLC%20Readings/JCS_joint_concept_integrated_campaign_16MARCH2018.pdf)

country's position within the broader INDO-PACIFIC theater. A large archipelagic landmass separating the South China Sea from the Central Pacific Ocean, Philippine waters offer access between the South China Sea and the Central Pacific Ocean, including through the Luzon, Mindoro, and Balabac Straits.<sup>20</sup> A strong Chinese-Filipino relationship could challenge US access to Philippine archipelagic waters, either through military or diplomatic means, and serve as a positive step to expanding Beijing's sphere of influence towards the second island chain.<sup>21</sup> USINDOPACOM must take active steps, such as re-establishing a permanent US military presence in Subic Bay, to strengthen US relations with Philippines in order to degrade and deter Chinese efforts to gain influence.

#### **Advantage US: Peacetime Protection, Presence, and Deterrence**

Securing strategic overseas basing should be a key element of USINDOPACOM's efforts to shape the theater.<sup>22</sup> In peace and in operations other than war, the combatant commander would gain significant operational advantage through the establishment of a permanent military base in Subic Bay. Re-establishing a base in the Philippines would allow USINDOPACOM to strengthen a key regional partner, better posture US forces to deter Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, and deter armed conflict. With respect to the base's desired effects, USINDOPACOM should focus on improving Filipino core competencies in areas of shared US-Philippine interests, including coastal defense, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian assistance

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<sup>20</sup> Scobell, Andrew. 2018. "The South China Sea and U.S.-China Rivalry," *Political science quarterly* 133, 133 (2). Academy of Political Science: 199–224. doi:10.1002/polq.12772. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1002/polq.12772>

<sup>21</sup> Tangredi, Sam J. "Anti-Access Strategies in the Pacific: The United States and China." *Parameters* 49, no. 1 (Spring, 2019): 5-20. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2273145943%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>22</sup> Vego, Milan. *Joint Operational Warfare, Theory and Practice*. Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, reprint, 2009. Pg IV-55.

and disaster relief (HADR)<sup>23</sup>, while at the same time improving the US regional logistics network. The base must be limited in scale to mitigate over-escalation with China, which may perceive a permanent US presence in Subic Bay as a threat.

### **Starting Small**

The first capability USINDOPACOM should consider is basing three United States Coast Guard (USCG) assets at Subic Bay, similar to the USCG presence in Manama, Bahrain. The Marine Protector class patrol boat and Sentinel-class cutter are well-suited for the theater, with sufficient range and endurance to conduct patrols and freedom of navigation operations in the region<sup>24 25</sup>. Scarborough Shoal, for example, is less than 130 nautical miles from Subic Bay. In addition to conducting freedom of navigation operations and a display of American maritime presence, the USCG vessels would serve as a training asset to improve Philippine coastal defense forces. Importantly, USCG assets are typically considered less provocative than US naval vessels.

### **Supporting Philippine Policy Aims: Counter terrorism**

USINDOPACOM should also consider placing a Special Operations Forces (SOF) element at Subic Bay for the purpose of continuing coalition counter-terrorism operations. This basing would support the ongoing Operation Pacific Eagle, an INDOPACOM effort to combat

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<sup>23</sup> Avila, Ava Patricia C. and Justin Goldman. "Philippine-US Relations: The Relevance of an Evolving Alliance." *Bandung : Journal of the Global South* 2, no. 1 (09, 2015): 1-18.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1186/s40728-015-0021-y>.  
<https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1987935000%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>24</sup> Janes Defence. [https://customer-janes-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs\\_3693-jfs\\_](https://customer-janes-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs_3693-jfs_)

<sup>25</sup> Janes Defence. [https://customer-janes-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs\\_b209-jfs\\_](https://customer-janes-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs_b209-jfs_)

Islamic extremists in the Philippines. Despite years of counter-terror effort, extremist groups within the Philippines remain a persistent threat. US efforts have been limited to technical and financial support, but have not produced the desired results<sup>26</sup>. Matching US counter-terror support to Philippine desires would strengthen counter-terrorism operations while demonstrating US commitment and resolve throughout the region.

### **Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief**

A US base at Subic Bay would also support USINDOPACOM's Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. By basing an Expeditionary Sea Base vessel, such as the USS Lewis B. Puller, and pre-positioning HADR supplies in Subic Bay, USINDOPACOM would be better prepared to quickly respond to natural disasters. The HADR mission is critical in Southeast Asia, which suffers from a disproportionately high number of climate and geologic-related destructive events<sup>27</sup>. Typhoons, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions threaten countries throughout the region, and USINDOPACOM's response to these disasters sends a strong message of US commitment.<sup>28</sup> The HADR capability would also mitigate concerns regarding a base's net effect on regional tensions.

### **Routine Maritime Logistics**

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<sup>26</sup> Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress. April 1, 2020 to June 30, 2020. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/11/2002474708/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20PACIFIC%20EAGLE-PHILIPPINES%20APRIL%201,%202020%20-%20JUNE%2030,%202020.PDF>

<sup>27</sup> Summary of the Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019. United Nations Economic and Social Council. 2 July 2019. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Summary%20of%20the%20Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019\\_English.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Summary%20of%20the%20Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019_English.pdf) - page 4

<sup>28</sup> Kwok, Kristine. "The Diplomacy of Disaster Fast and Generous US Aid Effort is Restoring its Prestige in Asia, while China's Sluggish, Modest Response is being seen as a Missed Opportunity." *South China Morning Post*, Nov 15, 2013. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1458441327%3Faccountid%3D322>.

Finally, a military base in Subic Bay would enhance USINDOPACOM's logistics capabilities in Southeast Asia. Combined with capabilities in Guam, Singapore, Japan, and Republic of Korea, the ability to stockpile material, food, and fuel in the Philippines would add flexibility to USINDOPACOM's theater-wide logistics network. This capability would also mitigate over-escalation concerns, as logistics are just a natural requirement to support other US efforts, such as coastal defense, counter-terror, and HADR. Additionally, a Philippines-based logistics hub could support USCENTCOM if US bases in Bahrain and Qatar are severed in the event of armed conflict with Iran.<sup>29</sup>

### **Ensuring Victory in War**

Although USINDOPACOM seeks to maintain stability in the South China Sea, the combatant commander cannot ignore the potential for armed conflict between the US and China. There are several political, economic, military, and other indicators that suggest a war between the countries is possible,<sup>30</sup> and that the South China Sea is a likely flash point if war occurs.<sup>31</sup> In the event of armed conflict within the South China Sea, USINDOPACOM would face a significant challenge due to the growth of Chinese Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) technology and capability within the region. Through an impressive system of sensors, platforms, and long-range precision strike technology, China has already significantly reduced US ability to establish

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<sup>29</sup> Rimmer, Peter. 1997. "US Western Pacific Geostrategy: Subic Bay before and after Withdrawal," *Marine Policy* 21, 21 (4). Pergamon: 325–44. doi:10.1016/S0308-597X(97)00012-2.

<sup>30</sup> Oriana, Skylar Mastro. "In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap: International Relations Theory and the Prospects for Peace in U.S.-China Relations." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 24, no. 1 (03, 2019): 25-45. doi:http://dx.doi.org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s11366-018-9581-4. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2136320052%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>31</sup> Scobell, Andrew. 2018. "The South China Sea and U.S.-China Rivalry," *Political science quarterly* 133, 133 (2). Academy of Political Science: 199–224. doi:10.1002/polq.12772. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1002/polq.12772>

even limited air and sea control within the nine dash line<sup>32</sup>. In the event of war, USINDOPACOM will need the geographic advantage inherent in a permanent base in Subic Bay while employing the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC).

### **Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons**

A permanent military base at Subic Bay would allow USINDOPACOM to more capably employ the joint force in the event of armed conflict with China. In recognition of the challenges posed by developments in A2AD, the joint staff began developing the JAM-GC concept in 2016 as an evolution of the Air-Sea Battle concept. Founded on the idea of a distributable and resilient force of sufficient scale and ample duration<sup>33</sup>, JAM-GC is particularly relevant in the South China Sea. By maintaining basing options in the Philippines, in addition to Singapore, Guam, South Korea, and Japan, US forces would be well-distributed throughout the theater, “maintaining the ability to disperse, reposition, and use a variety of bases and operating locations...”<sup>34</sup> A US base in Subic Bay would help secure allies and provide a force advantage, or as described in the JAM-GC, expand “the number of partners conducting operations together<sup>35</sup>.” And finally, a US base in the Philippines would expand USINDOPACOM’s logistics network, providing “Ample duration...[through] redundancy and timely access to

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<sup>32</sup> Kelly, Terrence, David C. Gompert, and Duncan Long. *Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Volume I: Exploiting U.S. Advantages to Prevent Aggression*: RAND Corporation, 2016.  
<https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1846441325%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>33</sup> Hutchens, Michael E., William D. Dries, Jason C. Perdue, Vincent D. Bryant, and Kerry E. Moores. "Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons: A New Joint Operational Concept." *Joint Force Quarterly* : JFQ no. 84 (First, 2017): 134-139.  
<https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1867155922%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>34</sup> Hutchens, Michael E., et al., Pg. 137.

<sup>35</sup> Hutchens, Michael E., et al., Pg. 137.

resources to withstand interruption, corruption, and attrition.<sup>36</sup> Subic Bay will be critical to USINDOPACOM's execution of the JAM-GC concept in the event of armed conflict with China.

### **Operational Advantages in Space**

In any armed conflict with China taking place within the South China Sea, the USINDOPACOM would operate from an exterior position, and a foothold at Subic Bay would provide geographic advantage. The vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean requires intermediate basing and logistics hubs in order to place and sustain forces and combat potential into contested areas. In a South China Sea conflict, Guam could provide intermediate basing<sup>37</sup>, and the Philippines could serve as a likely natural westward progression from Guam. In addition to securing a linear and simple line of operation across the Pacific, a permanent US military presence at Subic Bay would provide USINDOPACOM with operational advantages in-theater.

Maritime access to the South China Sea is limited, and in armed conflict USINDOPACOM would need to possess, or at least maintain the ability to pressure, key maritime chokepoints.<sup>38</sup> The eastern (Indian Ocean) and southern (Java Sea) approaches to the South China Sea require freedom of maneuver through the Malacca and Karimata Straits.<sup>39</sup> The US already maintains significant positions of influence in these vital waterways through basing in Singapore, including Combined Task Force SEVEN THREE (CTF 73) and Destroyer

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<sup>36</sup> Hutchens, Michael E., et al., Pg. 137.

<sup>37</sup> Rivera, Jerry M., and (U. S. ) Army War College. 2002. "Guam USA: America's Forward Fortress in Asia Pacific." Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a404522.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Noer, J. H. (1996). *Southeast asian chokepoints*. ().Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University. Retrieved from Policy File Index Retrieved from <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1820678118%3Faccountid%3D322>

<sup>39</sup> Noer, J. H.

Squadron SEVEN (CDS 7). The US also maintains positions of influence in the northern approaches to the South China Sea through well-established military basing in South Korea and Japan. By maintaining a military presence in Subic Bay, USINDOPACOM would possess immediate combat power in a country with a South China Sea coastline.

Additionally, US military basing in the Philippines would increase USINDOPACOM's ability to exert influence and contest control over the Luzon, Mindoro, and Balabac straits, naturally the same waterways China stands to gain by strengthening its own relationship with the Philippines. By maintaining the ability to exert influence and combat power in all maritime access routes into the South China Sea, the US would force China to employ sufficient A2AD resources in all areas. And although China's interior position provides an inherent defensive advantage, the South China Sea is an expansive operating area, totaling approximately 2.7 million square miles.<sup>40</sup> Adding a US base in the Philippines to the already-existing network in Singapore, Japan, and South Korea would force China to divide its forces within the South China Sea, and complicate China's efforts to simultaneously target USINDOPACOM assets.

### **Case for the Status Quo: Avoiding Escalation**

Re-establishing a US military base in Subic Bay would provide USINDOPACOM with significant advantages throughout the spectrum of war. Despite these significant advantages, and considering USINDOPACOM's interest in maintaining regional stability<sup>41</sup>, the combatant commander must consider the degree to which a permanent US military presence may escalate tension in an already-pressurized region. China may perceive an overt increase in US combat potential in the Philippines as a direct military threat to PRC forces. This perceived threat,

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<sup>40</sup> Rahman, Chris and Martin Tsamenyi. "A Strategic Perspective on Security and Naval Issues in the South China Sea." *Ocean Development and International Law* 41, no. 4 (2010): 315-333. <https://www-tandfonline-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/00908320.2010.499277?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>

combined with a clear shift in Philippine foreign policy in favor of the US, could bring China and the US closer to armed conflict.<sup>42</sup> In addition to increasing tensions with Beijing, USINDOPACOM must consider the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) reaction and response to a permanent US base in the Philippines. ASEAN has grown increasingly outspoken of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, but is also committed to reaching a peaceful solution to regional disagreements, potentially without interference from non-claimant countries, such as the US.<sup>43</sup> ASEAN may view a US base in Subic Bay as a threat to regional stability, thus undermining USINDOPACOM's credibility with an important multinational partner.

However, USINDOPACOM cannot challenge China's sustained aggression in the South China Sea by maintaining the status quo or through de-escalation. De-escalation threatens "US credibility, undercuts assurance of allies, and precipitates adversarial action..."<sup>44</sup> Some level of tension is acceptable, even required, in great power competition. USINDOPACOM's challenge is to identify the appropriate level of tension, and to ensure US actions do not exceed this level. A permanent US base in Subic Bay would be an acceptable increase, if combined with a cohesive narrative. When advocating for the base, USINDOPACOM must highlight the nature of the proposed US forces based in Subic Bay: USCG, Counter-Terror, and HADR assets, as opposed to surface combatants. Additionally, USINDOPACOM would need to highlight that the US had a base in the Philippines at a time when no one viewed China as a great power

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<sup>42</sup> Mastro, Oriana. 2020. "Military Confrontation in the South China Sea." Council on Foreign Relations. May 21. <https://www.cfr.org/report/military-confrontation-south-china-sea>.

<sup>43</sup> Darmawan, Aristyo. 2020. "ASEAN Outlook to Solve South China Sea Dispute?" The ASEAN Post. January 1. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/asean-outlook-solve-south-china-sea-dispute>.

<sup>44</sup> Guillot, W Michael, ed. 2019. "Why De-Escalation Is Bad Policy: SSQ," Strategic Studies Quarterly 13, 13 (3). Maxwell Air Force Base, United States Maxwell Air Force Base, Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2310623710%3Faccountid%3D322>.

competitor. A return to Subic Bay is just a natural continuation of the long-standing US-Philippine alliance, firmly in place since the Mutual Defense Treaty was signed in 1951.

### **Conclusion**

In order to deter hostilities with China while preparing to win in the event of war, USINDOPACOM cannot afford to maintain the status quo. Chinese aggression in the South China Sea has continued despite US efforts, and USINDOPACOM must seek new ways to challenge China, strengthen partners, and improve stability. By re-establishing a permanent US naval base in Subic Bay, USINDOPACOM would strengthen and support the US-Philippine alliance, improve Philippine security capabilities, reassure allies of US commitment in the region, and improve regional stability through deterrence. And in the worse case scenario, should the US enter into armed conflict with China, an additional US base in-theater provides USINDOPACOM with significant operational advantages. By maintaining a key foothold in the Philippine archipelago, USINDOPACOM will be better postured to employ the joint force as described in the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons.

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