

# Security through Intelligence Sharing

## The US–Philippines GSOMIA

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The defence relations between the United States and the Philippines dates to 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), and has evolved over the years into a modern, mature, comprehensive security partnership. Against the backdrop of growing tensions in the South China Sea, and China’s continuous force posture in region, Washington and Manila agreed to sign the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in November 2024.<sup>1</sup> This is a landmark negotiation as it provides the essential legal framework needed for the transfer of classified intelligence and data on advanced weapon systems, thereby materialising the vision of real-time data-sharing, crisis response and deterrence operations. GSOMIA further complements existing bilateral agreements including the Visiting Forces Agreement 1998, and the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement 2014, thus strengthens interoperability, and completely inducts the Philippines into the US-led regional security architecture.

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## EVOLUTION OF THE US–PHILIPPINES STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

Military alliances have consistently proven to be a crucial aspect of international relations between governments throughout history. The partnership between the United States and the Philippines has origins dating back to the late 1800s.<sup>2</sup> The archipelago came under the US control following the Spanish–American War and remained a US colony until 1946, when Washington acknowledged its independence, even though the Philippines had declared its independence from Spain on 12 June 1898.

The Philippines is the US' oldest Asian treaty ally. The 1951 MDT, which mandates that both countries assist one another in defending against an external armed attack, is still in effect. It highlights the need for consultation when the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of the Philippines or the United States is in danger in the Pacific, as well as a shared commitment to peacefully resolving international disputes and building capacity to withstand attack either independently or together.

The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) of 1998 and the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which granted US military officials access to Philippines' military sites, significantly strengthened the US–Philippines partnership. These defence accords, together with decades of bilateral military cooperation between the two nations, have established the Philippines as a key Indo-Pacific security partner.

Joint drills between the US and Philippine soldiers were made possible by the 1998 VFA.<sup>3</sup> The military forces take part in yearly 'shoulder-to-shoulder' exercises called *Balikatan*, which emphasise crisis or natural disaster response training and capability-building. The latest iteration of this exercise was held from 21 April to 9 May 2025, and in this edition, Japan's Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) participated for the first time. To improve the interoperability of land, sea and air capabilities, the Philippines and the United States also participate in Cooperation and Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises.

The EDCA originated soon after hundreds of Chinese and Philippine warships engaged in a months-long standoff near the disputed Scarborough Shoal in 2012.<sup>4</sup> China now controls the shoal as a result of the stalemate, but it has also prompted Manila and Washington to reconsider their response to China's actions. The two nations started conducting cooperative marine patrols in the South China Sea as part of the agreement. The agreement enables the building of new and upgraded facilities and gives US soldiers extensive access to bases at the Philippine government's invitation.

Rodrigo Duterte, Former Philippine President, was against the US–Philippines alliance and sought to terminate the VFA three times, between 2020 and 2021, but the termination was called off, reflecting the divisions at the domestic level in the Philippine political gambit, along with strategic concerns regarding China’s force posturing in the South China Sea. Finally, the VFA was sustained in 2021, following President Duterte’s notice that cited importance of the alliance amidst the evolving security dynamics in the region. However, despite this settlement, the Philippine political office continued to disrupt its relations with Washington through its unpredictable and unstable foreign policies, prompting the US administration to reconsider the 1951 MDT. While some steps were undertaken to formally review and reform the treaty under the guidance of Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, no comprehensive and complete negotiation came through under the leadership of President Duterte.

The US–Philippines alliance has made great strides. Important factors include the change-over from Duterte to Marcos and the reaffirmed US commitment to the Indo-Pacific. In 2022, President Marcos decided to fast-track the infrastructure development in the five Philippine bases. In order to guarantee increased interoperability and a quicker reaction in the event of an emergency, the two governments decided in February 2023 to add four more EDCA locations.

### WHAT IS GSOMIA?

On 18 November 2024, the GSOMIA was formally signed by Defence Secretary Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr. and then-US Defence Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III at the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Commissioned Officers’ Club in Manila.<sup>5</sup> By signing the GSOMIA, a legally binding agreement that will enable the safe sharing of classified military technology and information between the two militaries and countries, the Philippines and the US have further solidified their longstanding partnership.

Following protracted negotiations for nearly five years, the asset sharing agreement came to light in 2023, to improve interoperability between the two countries and enable improved access to high-end weapons, advanced defence capabilities and intelligence sharing. Negotiations were hard due to political uncertainties in the Duterte administration, Philippines’ ambivalent position regarding its alliance with the US, along with domestic upheaval regarding access to foreign military. In addition, the attempt to balance relations with both great powers—the US and China—

complicated the negotiations, as Philippines were reluctant to explicitly counter China.

It is expected that the agreement will facilitate the establishment of early warning systems for potential threats in the disputed waters, and to develop new procedures and protocols for securing highly classified military information. Defence Secretary Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr. described GSOMIA as a historic pact and a mark of good housekeeping for the Philippine Armed Forces. The GSOMIA is consistent with the 1951 MDT and complements other defence frameworks, such as the VFA and EDCA, according to the Department of National Defence (DND), which also highlighted the two nations' longstanding partnership.<sup>6</sup> Both treaties fostered institutional relationships between defence and intelligence communities, enabling the logistics and procedures necessary to handle classified information securely. According to the DND, it will enable the Philippines to acquire higher capabilities and big-ticket products from the US, while also offering options to pursue similar arrangements with like-minded states.<sup>7</sup> Both the Republic of Korea and Japan, two US allies that work closely with the Philippines in many areas, have their own GSOMIA in effect.

The Philippines received immediate military and humanitarian aid from the US in recent times, particularly in the wake of multiple natural disasters that have affected the nation. Together with EDCA and other collaborative military initiatives, the GSOMIA is anticipated to facilitate coordinated actions like these and deepen the two nations' relationship as a further development and addition to their unwavering collaboration. Both parties emphasised that their actions are preventative measures intended for peace and protection rather than targeting any one country specifically, even if the agreement has garnered attention in the region.

### STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines sees the GSOMIA as another crucial step in strengthening its external defence posture and policy and making sure the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is even better prepared to protect the country's interests and sovereignty, given the ongoing difficulties and grave concerns in the West Philippine Sea. Philippine security stands to earn substantial benefits that will continue to benefit the nation with the full realisation and continued execution of the GSOMIA. The goals of such agreements are to strengthen the nation's defences, maintain regional stability, and uphold the rules-based international order. Strict commitment to international law and

the shared goal of peaceful cooperation in the Indo-Pacific were stressed by both the US and the Philippines. The agreement will provide the Philippines with access to more expensive and advanced US goods. Additionally, it would provide the Philippine military access to American drone and satellite surveillance systems, guaranteeing that information regarding advanced weapons and other intelligence would be kept extremely confidential to avoid any espionage, unauthorised disclosure, risks or compromise of operational capabilities.

It makes it possible to organise operations jointly using shared intelligence, which is essential for quick deployment in marine hotspots. The Philippines is positioned by GSOMIA as a component of a larger US-led intelligence-sharing hub that also includes South Korea, Japan, Australia and India. Furthermore, GSOMIA promotes the multilateral coordination of crisis monitoring, maritime domain awareness (MDA), and surveillance in disputed zones.

The GSOMIA also aligns closely with the AFP Modernisation Program, particularly under Horizon 3 (2023–2028) of the Revised AFP Modernization Act.<sup>8</sup> The Philippines has allocated US\$ 35 billion over the next 10 years as part of the initiative.<sup>9</sup> The agreement would help in guiding procurement decisions such as drones, radars and surveillance technology which may perhaps lead in AFP becoming more capable and credible in its defence posture.

GSOMIA will give Manila a greater understanding of Chinese objectives, capabilities and whereabouts. The United States and the Philippines may exchange real-time satellite which makes it possible for Manila to keep a closer eye on illegal fishing, coast guard operations, Chinese maritime militia, and the development of artificial islands. The US Department of Transportation developed SeaVision, a web-based maritime situational awareness platform. It culminates infrared data, Automatic Identification System (AIS), satellite imagery and various vessel tracking inputs to give real-time maritime intelligence, which includes identification of vessels that turn off transponders.<sup>10</sup> Philippine access to the SeaVision would enable its agencies like the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), the Coast Guard, Navy and the National Coast Watch Centre to monitor and record the movement of vessels in the EEZ, thereby significantly improving their capabilities to detect IUU activities. While GSOMIA provides the legal and security framework for sharing classified military information, SeaVision serves as a tool to fulfil the commitments under GSOMIA.

Furthermore, the rapid military or diplomatic reactions are made possible by more openness and early warning, which also lowers the possibility of surprise intrusions. The AFP and US Indo-Pacific Command intelligence workflows are streamlined by GSOMIA. The agreement marks a leap forward in intelligence capability, and regional security posture, particularly amid growing tensions in the South China Sea. It enables improved monitoring of Chinese activities in Philippine waters and reefs such as the Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal. GSOMIA would further support more informed decision-making at both strategic and tactical levels, reducing vulnerabilities to surprise and grey-zone tactics.

The Philippines stands to gain from increased security cooperation, cutting-edge defence technologies, and a better ability to respond to a variety of threats and problems now that the GSOMIA is in place. The US and the Philippines must maximise GSOMIA's capacity to enable the smooth exchange of intelligence if they hope to discourage China. The two nations' intelligence sharing, cooperation and interoperability are all strengthened by this pact.

Moreover, joint military exercises between US and the Philippines such as Balikatan, help train Filipino forces in intelligence fusion, command and control, and ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) operations. The AFP modernisation programme includes initiatives to upgrade C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance). However, the AFP still lacks sufficient advanced equipment, such as long-range UAVs, SIGINT (signals intelligence) platforms, and space-based assets to fully utilise shared Intel. Its ability to fully leverage GSOMIA is constrained by technical, organisational and human capacity gaps. The Philippines must invest in training and retention of intelligence personnel and further build secure communication systems.

### IMPACT OF GSOMIA ON THE US STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

GSOMIA facilitates several critical components of the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, including intelligence sharing, and deterrence architecture against China, especially in the South China Sea. It complements several defence initiatives that exist between the US and the Philippines, like the annual Balikatan exercises,<sup>11</sup> or the expansion of sites under EDCA that now includes Naval Base Camilo Osias, Camp Melchor Dela Cruz, Lalo Airport and Balabac Island,<sup>12</sup> along with broader multilateral agreements

like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). They allow for enhanced interoperability for the forces of both the nations, thereby ensuring a calculated and comprehensive response to regional threats. For instance, the EDCA sites gives logistical hubs support for the US forces, while GSOMIA enables a seamless flow of intelligence to support operations in these regions.

It further supports operational readiness in the First Island Chain, by enabling real-time intelligence sharing of the Chinese military, along with constant updates on cyber threats and maritime activities. This capability is crucial to maintain situational awareness and ensures rapid response.

However, the reliability of the political and security apparatus of the Philippines is crucial for the effectiveness of GSOMIA. For a smooth intelligence-sharing mechanism, robust cybersecurity measures along with political stability is important, both of which are in question in the Philippines. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2022–2024 also highlight these concerns, and the risks posed by internal instability and inconsistent enforcement of security protocols.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, without fully addressing these vulnerabilities, the benefits deriving from GSOMIA could be undermined.

### RISKS AND CHALLENGES

Apart from the advantages that GSOMIA offers, there lie certain risks and challenges that must be addressed to ensure maximum benefits. One of the most important concerns is regarding cybersecurity breaches. The Philippines has been subjected to espionage and infiltration by the Chinese attackers; this evokes questions regarding the security of intelligence sharing. A report by Bloomberg in January 2025 used multiple sources to claim that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) along with several other agencies were attacked by Chinese hackers, including the infamous APT 41 from early 2023 to June 2024. The aim of this cyber-attack was to extract sensitive information and military documents related to the West Philippine Sea.<sup>14</sup>

The repeated incidents of cyber breach underscore the need for stringent cybersecurity measures. Lessons from the episodes of intelligence leaks like Edward Snowden revelations that exposed global surveillance programmes in operation by the NSA,<sup>15</sup> highlights the severe consequences of failing to secure sensitive data.

Another issue that revolves around GSOMIA is the minimal support it had from the domestic stakeholders in the Philippines. The International Crisis Group reports on Philippines' internal security emphasised that securing

political and public support for such agreements is crucial for the success of such a partnership, considering the political dynamics of the country.<sup>16</sup> In absence of such measures, there can be political challenges and discontent. Moreover, the increased influence of the US has been a contentious issue for a long time. Many critics argue that this could erode the sovereignty of the Philippines, and hence needs to be dealt with careful diplomacy.

Moreover, to achieve effective implementation of GSOMIA seamless coordination between various agencies like the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP), the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA), and the Department of National Defence (DND) is required. However, bureaucratic rivalries and institutional inefficiencies have been their recurring feature, forestalling coordination.

### CONCLUSION

The signing of GSOMIA marks a significant moment in the US–Philippines defence cooperation, allowing the Philippines to get high-end US assets like missile systems, unmanned platforms and satellite imagery, while ensuring America’s commitment of security. As the bilateral relationship between the two countries prosper under President Marcos Jr and President Donald Trump, institutionalising robust mechanisms for cybersecurity, streamlining processes within intelligence agencies, investing in AFP C4SIR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) capacity will be crucial. GSOMIA provides a template for multilateral cooperation among democracies that are countering China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. If leveraged to the best possible extent, it can serve as a bulwark against coercive actions in the West Philippine Sea, underpinning a rule-based system in the Southeast Asia. Hence, it is crucial to institutionalise this development in a way that will enable the alliance to handle new regional security concerns better and endure political shifts in Manila and Washington.

### NOTES

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