

US Missile Moves in Philippines Raising Stakes Around Taiwan

By [Uriel Araujo](#)
Global Research, May 10, 2026

Region: Asia, USA
Theme: Intelligence, Militarization and WMD

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The Taiwan issue has largely faded from the global spotlight amid the Hormuz Strait blockade, the explosions, and all the oil anxieties currently engulfing the Middle East. With Washington and Tehran once again edging dangerously close to direct confrontation, many observers may have assumed the Indo-Pacific theater had entered a temporary lull, so to speak. And yet another geopolitical crisis is quietly escalating: the latest developments have to do with Taiwan and involve the United States and the Philippines (plus Japan). This deserves close scrutiny.

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The US and the Philippines have launched in fact the largest-ever edition of the (ongoing) annual Balikatan military exercises, involving over 17,000 troops alongside forces from allied countries such as Japan and Australia. More troublingly, the United States deployed the NMESIS anti-ship missile system in Batanes, a strategically sensitive Philippine island chain located near the Luzon Strait: this is one of the key maritime corridors in any Taiwan contingency.

The Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) is specifically designed to deny enemy naval access in contested maritime environments. In practical terms, the deployment signals, plain and simple, that Washington is preparing operationally for the possibility of a Taiwan-related conflict scenario involving maritime interdiction and anti-access warfare near China's periphery.

Unsurprisingly, Beijing views these developments as yet another step in the consolidation of a US-led containment architecture around itself. Chinese analysts increasingly see the Philippines as being transformed into a forward operating platform for American power projection in the Indo-Pacific. Those concerns are only amplified by the fact that Washington has already deployed Typhon missile systems to that country – and this week reportedly conducted the first Tomahawk missile launch from the platform on Philippine soil (during the ongoing Balikatan exercises). What was initially presented as a temporary deployment has now evolved into operational missile testing in the Philippine theater itself. Alongside parallel missile exercises involving Japanese forces, the message is clear enough: from China's perspective, Manila is increasingly becoming a key hub for US military operations aimed at containing Beijing.

During the Biden years, one may recall, Washington repeatedly tested Beijing's red lines under the banner of "deterrence" and "strategic reassurance." The most notorious episode was former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taiwan, which triggered major Chinese military drills around the island and arguably inaugurated a new era of openly militarized brinkmanship in the Taiwan Strait.

As I argued, in 2024, influential circles in the US favored a long-term strategy of destabilizing its Asian rival through pressure along its geopolitical periphery, including Taiwan. The island thus became a strategic lever of sorts in the broader American-Chinese systemic rivalry.

Back in 2022, I noted that any Taiwan conflict could quickly expand beyond the island itself, potentially drawing in actors across the broader Indo-Pacific and even the Himalayan theater. Such a scenario, albeit unlikely, should not be readily dismissed: the current military exercises might reveal a deeper strategic transformation underway in Asia.

The Philippines under President Marcos Jr. has markedly expanded military cooperation with Washington, also granting America broader access to bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Many of these facilities are located in northern Philippine territories facing Taiwan. Again, from Beijing's perspective, this further expands the US-led military arc; that is, America's so-called "first island chain" containment approach.

Meanwhile, Japan is also assuming a more explicit military role in Taiwan-related contingency planning. Japanese aforementioned participation in missile exercises alongside Washington and Manila signals Tokyo's accelerating departure from its traditional postwar security posture.

In other words: the Taiwan issue is becoming increasingly multilateralized. This bilateral US-China dispute is evolving into a regional military architecture involving the Philippines, Japan, Australia, and potentially NATO-linked partners as well (even amid the current Atlantic Alliance crisis). As I wrote, NATO has long sought a more permanent footprint in the Indo-Pacific under the pretext of defending the so-called "rules-based international order."

The danger here lies not only in intentional escalation but in the logic of military systems themselves. Once missile batteries, naval assets, logistics corridors, and joint command structures become entrenched across a region, the threshold for crisis rapidly lowers. Military planners begin thinking in terms of operational windows, chokepoints, and preemption scenarios. We've seen that happen in [Eastern Europe](#).

The Luzon Strait is particularly important in this regard: any blockade or conflict involving Taiwan would almost certainly center on maritime control around this corridor. By deploying anti-ship systems in Batanes, the Atlantic superpower is effectively signaling that it intends to contest Chinese naval movements in precisely this space. And this is why Beijing's reaction could be sharp. For Chinese strategists, the issue increasingly resembles encirclement. No wonder: from the South China Sea to Guam, from Japan to the Philippines, China perceives an expanding network of American military pressure points designed to limit its freedom of maneuver.

All this unfolds while much of the world is distracted by the Middle East crisis. Yet Taiwan remains one of the most structurally dangerous geopolitical arenas on the planet. Taiwan, after all, sits at the heart of the [semiconductor industry](#) and the advanced technology [supply chain](#). Any major disruption there would send shockwaves across virtually every industrial sector worldwide, from AI infrastructure to automotive manufacturing.

In other words, Taiwan's territorial dispute also represents a systemic-risk issue for the global economy itself. And that is precisely why the current militarization around the island should alarm policymakers everywhere.

The world today is already unstable enough: turmoil in the Middle East, energy insecurity, tariff conflicts, and escalating competition among great powers. Opening yet another major front in East Asia would not simply "contain" the Asian superpower. It could push the international system into a far more dangerous and unpredictable phase.

One should thus monitor the new developments in the Pacific very closely.

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Uriel Araujo, Anthropology PhD, is a social scientist specializing in ethnic and religious conflicts, with extensive research on geopolitical dynamics and cultural interactions. He is a regular contributor to [Global Research](#).

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