

# What US withdrawal from Western Pacific mean for China?



By Fuad Shahbazov  
Policy analyst

## OPINION

On August 11, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered the deployment of the USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) and its escorts from the West Pacific to the Middle East in light of flaring tensions between Israel and Iran along with pro-Iranian armed forces.

Although the move is aimed at bolstering the US presence in the Middle East and protecting Israel against the potential massive attack of Iran and its backed forces, the withdrawal from another strategically important Western Pacific region left a significant security gap as China's influence rose significantly.

The US-China confrontation peaked over the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea in the last few years. Beijing has long considered the South China Sea as its internal waters, triggering conflict with neighboring Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. As such, several incidents occurred between Chinese and Philippines border guards in the sea while the US issued warnings to Beijing. Nevertheless, the US and China prefer to maintain a lower profile in this dispute, avoiding confrontation.

The US's recent decision to re-deploy to the Middle East came less than two months after Austin directed the Roosevelt, also on a Pacific deployment, to replace the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group in the Red Sea. Indeed, their arrival will add to the recent surge in US forces in the Middle East and further strengthen the American force's posture there. Nonetheless, the US Navy's absence from the region reinforces China to bolster its influence in the region.

The US ship's partial removal from the Western Pacific region does not represent a particular significance as the balance of naval power in the Western Pacific has been altered in favor of the Chinese Navy. For instance, the US Navy went from having a 76-warship advantage over China in 2005 to having a 39-combatant deficiency in 2023, based on similar ship and submarine comparisons. In this sense, in early 2024, the US deployed five aircraft carriers and their escort ships in the Western Pacific Ocean to cover the disputed East China Sea and South China Sea. Indeed, Chinese navy ships have regularly sailed through the tension-filled seas and



An F/A-18F Super Hornet prepares to make an arrested landing on the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) on August 10, 2024.  
● US NAVY

intermittently conducted maritime provocations and intimidations to those of other Asian countries, which are among the US treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's global ambitions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, are evident. Hence, since 2019, Beijing has boosted the production of ships, including submarines and aircraft carriers, to quell potential threats in its close vicinity. In 2024, Beijing confirmed that it is testing its third aircraft carrier, the Fujian, which, when fully operational, will be the world's largest conventional aircraft carrier. Unlike its predecessors, the Fujian is equipped with advanced technologies such as electromagnetic catapults and arresting gear, allowing it to launch a variety of aircraft more efficiently.

Unlike the US and other regional states, Japan nervously watches Beijing's rising ambitions and naval exercises in its immediate border, particularly following the US retreat from the region. It is unlikely that China will downgrade its naval exercises and efforts to alleviate neighbors' concerns while obtaining harsh rhetoric against Taiwan and other states. On the other hand, China will further strengthen ties with Russia, particularly between the navies, as the two held joint naval drills in 2024, forcing the US to focus more on protecting its own borders rather than projecting power abroad. This shift could diminish the United States' ability to counter China's strategic moves in Asia-Pacific and beyond.

The full article first appeared on Caliber.Az.



## Philippines Washington's new front line against China



By Nick Aspinwall  
Journalist

## OPINION

When the US and Philippine militaries concluded their largest-ever joint military exercises on May 8, they cemented a surprisingly robust security alliance that is crucial to containing China — both in the South China Sea and beyond.

Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has re-embraced its historic security ties with the United States. Washington has been happy to increase arms transfers and make new infrastructure promises that bring the Philippine government in Manila closer to Washington and its regional allies, including Tokyo. It's a stark contrast with Marcos Jr.'s predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, who favored closer ties with Beijing and in 2020 temporarily withdrew the Philippines from an agreement allowing US forces to visit and train in the country.

China has responded to Marcos Jr.'s turn toward the United States by firing water cannons at and ramming Philippine vessels multiple times in the South China Sea, where Beijing has competing territorial claims with several countries including the Philippines. In June, a Philippine navy sailor on a resupply mission to the disputed Second Thomas Shoal lost his thumb in a confrontation with armed members of the Chinese Coast Guard. It's the most consistent pressure Beijing has applied since an international court of arbitration ruled in favor of Manila's maritime claims in 2016.

So far, Washington has been eager to help Manila, with whom it's had a mutual defense treaty since the Philippines gained independence from the United States in 1946. Filipinos overwhelmingly opposed the turn toward China made by the otherwise popular Duterte administration and mostly viewed the United States as a valued partner in maintaining the

country's territorial sovereignty.

There have been hints towards wider potential alliances. This year's Balikatan, or "shoulder-to-shoulder," joint military exercises took place primarily off the Philippine coasts and in maritime areas facing China, from the southern tip of Palawan, a western island, to the remote northern islands of Batanes province, which lie fewer than 125 miles from Taiwan.

In Ilocos Norte, the closest mainland Philippine province to China, the United States and the Philippines recently simulated repelling a coastal invasion using howitzer guns and Javelin missiles, then followed it with a maritime strike exercise days later.

During Balikatan, troops conducted maritime exercises in the waters around Batanes, which the Philippines is fortifying with US help in case of a conflict in Taiwan or the Luzon Strait, which separates the two countries. China respond-



US troops take part in joint US and Philippine army drills in Laur, Philippines, on August 9, 2024.  
● EZRA ACAYAN/GETTY IMAGES

ed by sending a warship and two other vessels close to an island where troops were conducting war games, according to the Philippine Coast Guard.

Balikatan's expansion into the South China Sea and the Luzon Strait served as "a clear message" on the scope of US-Philippine security," said Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, a defense analyst and journalist focused on Philippine-US military ties. This year's exercises were the first time the United States and the Philippines had conducted exercises directly in disputed areas of the South China Sea and marked the largest presence the US military has staked out in Batanes.

The United States also briefly deployed its Typhon mid-range missile launcher for the first time in the Asia-Pacific. The launcher can reach targets in Taiwan and mainland China along with Chinese military bases in the South China Sea — a considerable increase in range over existing missile systems.