# Building a Philippine defense hub

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A welcome development sidelined by the recent midterm elections was the offer by US-based global security and aerospace company Lockheed Martin to establish a local innovation hub that will put the Philippines closer to its dream of having its own strong and reliable defense industry. Jess Koloini, director of business development at Lockheed Martin’s Integrated Fighter Group, shared during her recent visit to the Philippines their company’s intent to establish here a facility similar to its Center for Innovation and Security Solutions in Abu Dhabi that will help develop a pool of Filipinos who can contribute to the development of the country’s nascent aerospace sector.

“It’s really meant to be a facility that brings together leaders from Philippine academia, leaders from technical institutions in the Philippines, with worldwide leaders from Lockheed Martin and other US institutions to do joint research and development,” she said.

The project would also involve granting scholarships for programs related to aerospace engineering, aerospace education and training, a valuable knowledge exchange that will strengthen the foundation on which the Philippines can build its domestic defense industry.

The offer, however, is tied to the acquisition of 20 F-16 Block 70 multi-role aircraft worth $5.58 billion under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) mechanism, a deal deemed timely amid China’s increasing aggression in the South China Sea.

## Sweeping claims

As US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said during his visit, among his first as the new Secretary of Defense under the second Trump administration, the United States was firmly committed to “reestablishing deterrence in the Indo-Pacific”, knowing full well how China was flexing its muscles to assert what it believes to be its sweeping claims over one of the world’s most important sea routes.

The US F16s will compete against Sweden Saab that is offering its Jas-39 and possibly also against South Korea-based Korea Aerospace Industries’ KF-21 to comply with the government’s “Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept.”

Companies such as European defense giants Fincantiere of Italy, Germany’s Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems and Spain’s Navantia have also offered to provide the Philippines with next-generation submarines to strengthen the capabilities of the Philippine Navy, which is on the frontlines of the battle to secure Philippine waters.

## Credible defense posture

Like Lockheed Martin, these companies’ multi-billion-dollar offers come with promises to provide technology transfer, meaning they are coming in not just with weapons but valuable knowledge transfer as well. The offers are indeed tempting and the Philippine military must carefully weigh its options as the country seeks to bolster its arsenal to establish a credible defense posture against threats to its rights over the West Philippine Sea. Adding to the sense of urgency is the belief expressed by Armed Forces Chief Gen. Romeo Brawner that any conflict that will erupt between China and Taiwan will inevitably involve the Philippines, which has many citizens working and living in Taiwan. That feared confrontation may not come soon – perhaps never – but that does not mean that the threat should be taken lightly.

Rather, the ever-present possibility should provide the impetus for the Philippines to act now, by both investing in the military hardware and software to strengthen internal defenses from external threats and in grabbing opportunities such as building an innovation hub for the future.

## Geopolitical shifts

After all, the Marcos administration has already signaled its commitment to build local defense capabilities with the signing last year of Republic Act 12024 or the Self-Reliant Defense Posture Revitalization Act, which seeks to boost the local production and manufacturing of defense assets and hardware to support the weapon and ammunition requirements of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and other law enforcement agencies.

This goal will take some time to achieve, but the Philippines must take advantage of its growing number of defense and security allies in the Asia-Pacific region to jumpstart its own modernization. “It’s a logical move forward for a country that finds itself at the fulcrum of geopolitical shifts and volatilities,” said President Marcos during the signing in October last year of the landmark legislation.Those volatilities are showing no sign of easing, thus the Marcos administration should seize the rare opportunities arising from these emerging partnerships to fortify the country’s own defense capabilities to deter transgressions in its territorial waters.

Indeed, while the Philippines has been promised reliable partnerships – the US, for example, always talking about its “iron-clad” commitment to the country’s defense – in the long run it must be ready to stand alone with a strong, dynamic and innovative defense sector it can proudly call its own.