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# Philippines debates return of US forces

Mark Townsend in Manila

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When Barack Obama meets Xi Jinping this week the South China Sea is likely to feature high on the agenda as Washington seeks to counter Beijing's increasingly assertive claims to contested waters.

But as the US president prepares to welcome his Chinese counterpart to the White House amid a confrontational mood between the two nations, one plank of his strategy lies stalled in the Supreme Court of the Philippines.

Leftwing groups in the South-east Asian country — a US treaty ally locked in a territorial dispute with China — are challenging a 10-year defence co-operation agreement signed by Mr Obama in 2014 that would allow the US military to return to bases across the Philippine archipelago.

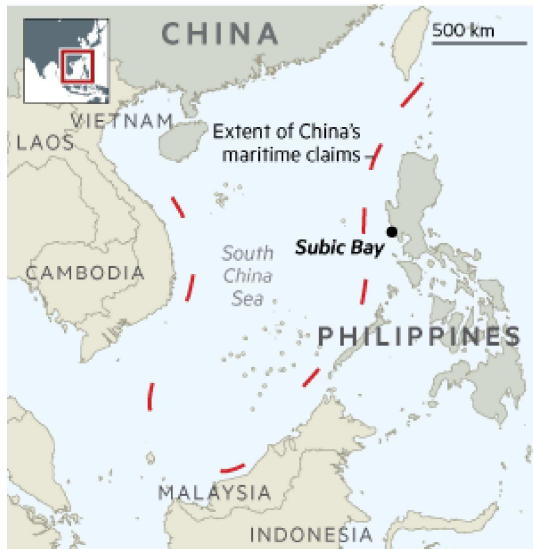
The bases include strategically important Subic Bay, which the US left in 1992 after the Philippine Senate refused to ratify a treaty to extend Washington's lease on bases. The area has since been redeveloped into an industrial and commercial free zone.

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Analysts say a return to Subic, which is within 500 miles of Chinese projects to build islands on remote coral atolls, would radically alter US offensive capability and bolster support for Philippine forces that lack the resources to offer any serious deterrent to China's territorial advances.

"The Philippine leadership frequently talks about the need to establish a minimum credible deterrent," said Zachary Abuzza of Southeast Asia Analytics. "I doubt that will ever come close to happening."



According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the country's defence spending amounted to just 1.1 per cent of gross domestic product in 2014, among the lowest in the region. The US provides about \$50m a year in direct military assistance but a request by Philippine President Benigno Aquino to increase financial support is being met with caution by the US.

Mr Abuzza says increased co-operation and joint patrols from Subic would send a strong message to China.

"US involvement does give People's Liberation Army planners pause, so reopening Subic and operating joint maritime patrols is important for security," he said. The

US relies on a defence pact with Japan and bases in the American territory of Guam to oversee operations in the South China Sea.

The US embassy in Manila said it would not comment on the legal challenge as it did not want to "place pressure or influence on Philippine decision makers".

For Mr Obama the legal wrangling over the agreement and delay in its implementation is a frustration. Yet Tess Del Rosario, visiting senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, says opposition to the agreement does not represent the body politic. "The reigning sentiment as per a survey conducted [in the] first half of the year revealed that the prevailing anxiety among Filipinos is war with China — this result will certainly mute any opposition to US military presence."



The US carrier Independence leaves Subic Bay in 1992

Analysts say the US response to China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea has been lacklustre. The waters, where Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims, is thought to be rich in oil and gas. The Philippines must act cautiously on any ramp-up of US military presence ahead of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague rules on its claim under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

On Tuesday Mr Aquino dismissed a call by Beijing for a bilateral dialogue, insisting that other claimants in the South China Sea dispute be included in talks. Mr Obama is due to visit Manila in November to attend a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group.

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