Philippines Looks to Bolster Fleet with Retired Patrol Coastal Boats

The Cyclone-class coastal patrol ship USS Zephyr (PC 8), shown here returning to Naval Station Mayport after a 2016 deployment to the U.S. 4th Fleet area of operations in support of Joint Interagency Task Force South's mission, which included counter illicit drug trafficking in the Caribbean. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Brian G. Reynolds*

As the U.S. Navy divests itself of its Cyclone-class of Patrol Coastal (PC) boats, the Philippine navy (PN) has said the PCs would be welcome in its fleet.

In a statement, PN chief Vice Adm. Giovanni Carlo Bacordo said, "The PN has manifested its interest in the decommissioned Cyclone-class patrol vessels [CCPVs] of the

U.S. Navy as a stop-gap to the decommissioned legacy PN ships. As to how many, that depends on the seaworthiness and efficiency of the CCPVs that will be offered, and this will be determined by the PN Joint Visual Inspection Team.

“We have manifested our interest with JUSMAG [Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group] and U.S. INDOPACOM,” the Indo-Pacific Command, he added.

At present, the PN has one Cyclone-class patrol vessel in its service, the BRP General Mariano Alvarez (PS 38), formerly the ex-USS Cyclone (PC 1), which was transferred to the PN in 2004.

Of the 14 ships in the class, four were loaned to the Coast Guard but later returned. The lead ship, Cyclone, then was transferred to the Philippines in 2004.

Three of the remaining 13 USN PCs were recently decommissioned. Ten more remain in service in Bahrain as part of the U.S. 5th Fleet. Of the three retired ships, the U.S. Navy said one would be made available for foreign military sale, but the other two would be scrapped.

USS Zephyr (PC-8), USS Shamal (PC-13) and USS Tornado (PC-14) were decommissioned in March. All three ships were based in Mayport, Florida, where they supported the U.S. 4th Fleet with counter-drug trafficking and illegal migration patrols in the Eastern Pacific, off Central America and in the Caribbean.

“These three warships have served our Navy and our country well,” said Capt. Mike Meyer, commander, Naval Surface Squadron Fourteen. “Each of them has operated well past their designed service life, with their crews contributing demonstrably to meeting our national objectives.”

The Navy said Zephyr and Shamal would be scrapped, while Tornado would be considered for possible foreign military sale.

BRP General Mariano Alvarez (PS38) at Naval Base Cavite, Philippines, in 2019. *DEFENSE OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES*

According to a USN release, the decision to decommission these three ships stems from the fact they all exceeded their designed service life. “Based on the rising cost of modernization efforts, the Navy will receive a better return by decommissioning and freeing up funds to invest in other platforms,” the statement said.

The PCs were specifically tailored to support Special Operations Forces insertion and extraction and related duties. In that role, however, the PCs were too large for covert missions, but too small to effectively serve as surface combatants. So, the Navy planned to divest itself of the class, transferring the lead ship to the Philippines, and loaning three more to the Coast Guard. Events surrounding 9/11, however, made clear the need for ships able to operate in littoral waters.

PCs have four diesel engines and four screws, capable of

speeds up to 35 knots. They have a range of 2,000 to 2,500 nautical miles and an endurance of 10 days.

For their size, they are well armed. The U.S. ships were upgraded with remotely-operated stabilized 25 mm guns, and carried unmanned aircraft for surveillance and monitoring of boarding parties. Griffin missiles were installed on 5th Fleet ships to be used against surface threats.

And unlike many patrol vessels, PCs look like a surface combatant. “We’ve got a beautiful silhouette coming over the horizon with the sun in the background,” said Lt. Cmdr. Roger Young, who commanded officer of USS Firebolt (PC 10) in 2018. “I mean, you say, ‘that’s a warship.’”

Increased interoperability

The top military officer in the Indo-Pacific theater said the U.S. is committed to its Philippine ally and treaty partner. That means a more capable navy.

In Congressional testimony, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Adm. Phil Davidson said his command is focused on strengthening allies and partners.

“The United States’ network of allies and partners is our principal advantage against any adversary. USINDOPACOM depends upon the collective capabilities of our allies and partners to address the challenges to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” Davidson said. “Through increased interoperability, information-sharing, and expanded access across the region, we will present a compatible and interoperable coalition to our adversaries in crisis and armed conflict. Terrorism continues to pose a security challenge in the Philippines, and USINDOPACOM is committed to helping the Philippines ensure that the southern Philippines does not become a safe-haven for terrorists that would threaten the entire region. I am also focused on helping to develop the territorial defense capability of the Armed Forces Philippines and look forward to

re-engaging with the Philippines National Police Maritime Group to continue improving their ability to protect their sovereign interests."

PN modernization

The PCs were designed for a 15-year life service. But Zephyr, for example, served for 26 years.

While the PCs are more than two decades old, they are decades newer than a pair of recently deactivated ships in the PN, the 221-foot BRP Quezon (the former USS Vigilance (AM-324),) and 185-foot BRP Pangasinan (formerly USS PCE 891). Both ships were commissioned in the U.S. Navy in 1944. Quezon was commissioned in the PN in 1967, and served for 53 of years with the Philippine Navy. Transferred from the U.S. to the Philippines in 1948, Pangasinan had 72 years of service with the Philippine navy when she was decommissioned.

Even as older ships are retired, the PCs would be among the newer and more capable ships in the PN.

"This makes sense for the Philippine navy," said retired Capt. Brian Buzzell, who is very familiar with the Philippine navy and the regional security issues. "They have had the lead boat for years. The issue will be what armaments will come with the boats."

Buzzell notes that China has been ratcheting up the pressure on the Philippine government to accept their incursions into their economic zones. "The Cyclone-class PC would be a perfect vessel to patrol the disputed fishing areas," he said. "Additionally, the PCs would complement the two new South Korean frigates."

The PN recently added two new Jose Rizal-class frigates built in South Korea, the BRP Jose Rizal (FF 150), commissioned in 2020; and BRP Antonio Luna (FF 151), commissioned at Subic Bay in March of this year.