



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

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## Japan and the Philippines Seek Closer Defence Ties

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## Introduction

As tensions in Asia rise due to China's expanding influence, the leaders of Japan and the Philippines have decided to significantly strengthen their defence ties, giving Japanese troops greater access to Philippine territory.<sup>1</sup> In a recent move towards cooperation, the two island nations have made the first move in what may develop into a comprehensive defensive partnership. The rising regional tensions and China gaining influential in the region is a certain cause for this development. During his visit to Japan, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. had a meeting with his Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and discussed ways to restrain China's expanding geopolitical sway in the area. A proposed agreement that would allow the armed forces of the two countries to work together to respond to disasters was signed by both leaders. This action is widely regarded as a first step towards a deal that would allow the deployment of military units on one another's soil.

## The China Factor

The South China Sea territorial disputes, which are intensifying as a result of China's increasing assertiveness and the rivalry between the claimant states over resources, heavily involve the Philippines and Japan as key players in blocking the ambitions of China.<sup>2</sup> The seething maritime conflict between Beijing and Manila is becoming more and more linked to the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States and its allies. The Spratly Islands and the surrounding sea, including the Scarborough Shoal, a small group of rocks and reefs located more than 200 km west of Luzon, the largest and most populous island of the Philippines, are the main source of dispute in the claim between China and the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> The greatest threat to Philippine maritime sovereignty continues to come from China's 'grey zone operations,' which are measured seaborne actions that don't involve live fire but are still meant to intimidate rivals. In the past, the Philippines has adopted a more practical strategy that avoids confronting China in the hopes of gaining economic advantages, as opposed to relying on international law as a defence against China's claims. However, it does not seem to have reaped the benefits that were expected by the Philippine government.

## The US Factor

For more than ten years, China has vehemently asserted its claim to the majority of the South China Sea (SCS) as its sovereign territory, within the so-called nine-dash line.<sup>4</sup> Invading the 200-mile

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Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has recognized the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the foundation for resolving disputes in 2020. This was majorly due to the collective diplomatic efforts of these four nations. Despite the projected threats from China, the US continues to support these four nations with security assistance, cooperate with them, and hold multilateral joint exercises with their armed forces.<sup>5</sup> China intends to use force against US military Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations in China's EEZ.

The strategic importance of the Philippines to both China and the United States can be attributed to its geographic location. The archipelago forms an essential part of what is frequently referred to as the 'first island chain,' which defines China's near sea. It is situated between a section of China's coast and access to the Pacific Ocean. As a result, the Philippines is an important participant in the geopolitical conflict taking place in the area. It is likely to continue to support Washington's forward presence in the South China Sea for the US Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2014, a mutual security cooperation agreement between the United States and the Philippines called the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed. This increased opportunities for bilateral training and modernisation between U.S. forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> The US Defence Secretary, during his recent visit to the Philippines, announced US plans to accelerate the full implementation of EDCA. The Philippines also agreed to designate four new locations towards military cooperation with the US. The Philippines needs its US ally for domestic defence as it struggles to defend itself and its EEZ and is enhancing its defence ties with the US.

### **Japan-Philippines and Philippines-India Defence Ties**

Japan and the Philippines both support the established rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and are natural and vital partners for each other. Given that both frequently find themselves on the receiving end of Beijing's power projection and strategic manoeuvres in the South and East China Seas, Manila and Tokyo also perceive a rising and more assertive China as a major threat.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, defence cooperation is an essential component of the strategic alliance between the Philippines and Japan. The '2+2 joint statement' between Japan and the Philippines expresses their agreement to improve their overall defence relationship through the fusion of defence capabilities, visits by the navy, and the transfer of defence hardware. A Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) and other agreements that would provide a legal foundation for granting Japan's Self-Defence Forces and the Philippine armed forces reciprocal access are also confirmed, with an eye towards conducting joint exercises. As per this recent important defence pact, Japanese troops would be

able to participate in training exercises to deal with issues relating to natural disasters and humanitarian needs in the Philippines. In addition, the renewed agreement with the US under the EDCA could pave the way for stronger cooperation and more frequent interactions between the militaries of the US, Japan, and the Philippines.

The Philippines and India formally commenced diplomatic relations on November 26, 1949, not long after both nations gained independence. India's 'Look East policy,' a key tenet of its foreign policy, has led to closer ties with the Philippines in the area on a bilateral and regional level. The stage appears to be set for a dramatic intensification of bilateral relations, especially given recent developments in the Philippines.<sup>8</sup> During External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's first visit to the archipelago, India and the Philippines vowed to increase their security and defence cooperation and to forge a closer alliance under the Indo-Pacific strategic framework with a focus on China.<sup>9</sup> The visit took place barely a month after Manila signed a US \$374 million contract with BrahMos Aerospace Private Limited (BAPL), giving India its first export order for BrahMos missiles. The BrahMos deal represented a decisive step in the Philippines' integration into India's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

## **Way Forward**

The burgeoning momentum in Japan-Philippines relations is not only positive news for both nations but also indicates that more opportunities can be fully exploited in the near future. Placing Japan's relations first, will not only allow the Philippines to improve its domestic manufacturing capacity but will also serve as a proactive platform to expand Manila's centrality and diplomatic networks in light of the geopolitical changes taking place in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the Philippines can gain from a potential easing of restrictions on technology transfers to support its ongoing military modernisation program at a time when Japan is also looking to strengthen and promote its arms industry. The Japanese Foreign Ministry will also receive roughly US \$15.2 million in April to support the defences of allies in the Indo-Pacific. Manila can effectively take advantage of such an initiative. It is now time for major players in the Indo-Pacific, including the US, India, and Japan, to increase proactive defence cooperation measures and once more demonstrate their credibility in the defence and security realms to like-minded nations in Southeast Asia, given that nations like the Philippines in the ASEAN have started to push back against China.

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Julian Ryall, "As Japan and Philippines seek closer defence ties, could trilateral pact with US be next?", *South China Morning Post*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3210189/japan-and-philippines-seek-closer-defence-ties-could-trilateral-pact-us-be-next>. Accessed on February 20, 2023

<sup>2</sup> "The Philippines' Dilemma: How to Manage Tensions in the South China Sea", *International Crisis Group*, December 02, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/316-philippines-dilemma-how-manage-tensions-south-china-sea>. Accessed on February 20, 2023

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Burgess, "Confronting China's Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Fall 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/31/2002488087/-1/-1/1/BURGESS.PDF>. Accessed on February 20, 2023

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Premesha Saha, "Reinvigorating United States-Philippines Defence Partnership", *ORF*, February 06, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/reinvigorating-united-states-philippines-defence-partnership/>. Accessed on February 20, 2023

<sup>7</sup> "Deterring China Should Be a Common Defense Goal of Japan and the Philippines", *Japan Forward*, April 19, 2022, <https://japan-forward.com/editorial-deterring-china-should-be-a-common-defense-goal-of-japan-and-the-philippines/>. Accessed on February 21, 2023

<sup>8</sup> "India-Philippines Bilateral Relations", *Embassy of India, Manila*, December 2013, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Philippines\\_December\\_2013\\_.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Philippines_December_2013_.pdf). Accessed on February 21, 2023

<sup>9</sup> Nayanima Basu, "India, Philippines vow to expand defence ties & Indo-Pacific partnership on Jaishankar's visit", *The Print*, February 15, 2022, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-philippines-vow-to-expand-defence-ties-indo-pacific-partnership-on-jaishankars-visit/832873/>. Accessed on February 21, 2023