

INDIA-JAPAN-PHILIPPINES: A STRATEGIC MARITIME TRILATERAL OR MORE?

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Regional states like India, Japan, and the Philippines have been seeking cooperative solutions with other middle powers that can both counter the Chinese influence and fulfill other economic as well as traditional and non-traditional security objectives. Against this scenario of evolving geopolitics, is there merit in an India-Japan-Philippines trilateral? Can it play a strategic role in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain and keep China in check? Can such grouping enhance the scope of “third country” partnerships and boost the multilateralism espoused by ASEAN? This paper aims to address such questions by exploring the interconnectedness between the Philippines, India, and Japan through both the bilateral and regional lens, looking at the trajectory of the recent high-level interactions. It also explores the specific avenues of strategic cooperation, including connectivity, green transition, and supply chains, which have great potential for a trilateral synergy. It discusses how far these states are in alignment on the Taiwan question at the current moment. Finally, the paper examines the building of the India-Japan-Philippines trilateral from the maritime security perspective.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region today has become central to the fight for upholding the existing rules-based U.S.-led liberal international order, which has recently faced a stiff challenge due to the tumultuous geopolitical realities. One of the main reasons has been the rise of China and its strategic intent not just to undermine the U.S. dominance in global geopolitics but also to fulfill its “core interests.”¹ The latter is largely underpinned by multiple interconnected issues such as territorial sovereignty and integrity, national security, reunification, and regime stability while guaranteeing sustainable social and economic development.² As Chinese President Xi Jinping’s centralized power has increased, so have his insecurities. As a result, China’s list of core national

and regional interests has been expanding: Sovereignty and territorial integrity issues over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, as well as Hong Kong, are China’s “internal affairs that brook no interference.”³ Despite ambiguity among political circles regarding the inclusion of maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas that concern Japan and the Philippines, as well as the Himalayan border dispute with India as core interests, China’s tactics, including gray-zone activities and lawfare, suggest it considers all “sovereignty claims” as core.⁴

In recent years, China’s military belligerence in the subregions of the Indo-Pacific, including the aforementioned maritime and land borders with Japan, the Philippines, and India,

has become more targeted and increased in frequency, with successive incursions and other aggressive tactics, as well as a lack of intent to pursue diplomatic solutions.

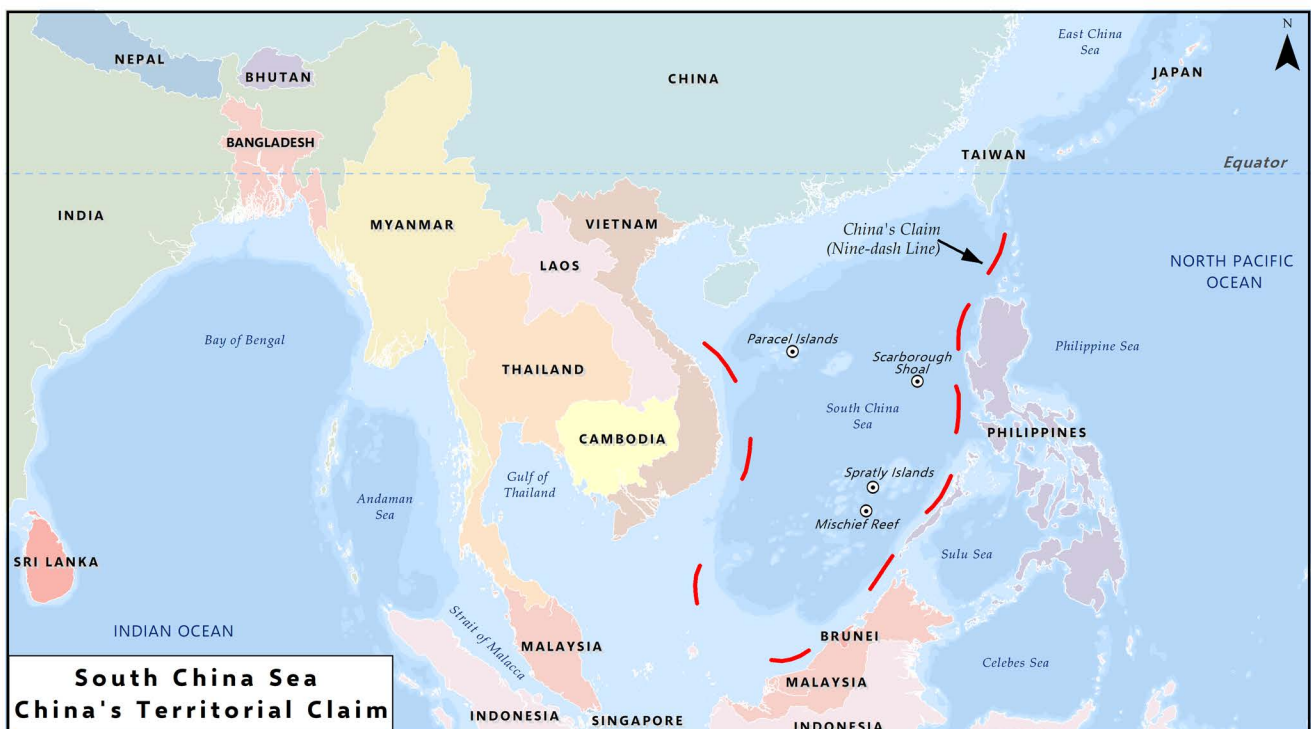
For example, in 2023, Manila accused China of carrying out multiple targeted intimidation tactics such as releasing a new “standard” map with a “10-dash line,” firing water canyons, and directing a “military grade laser light” against Philippine vessels in the West Philippine Sea (the name officially endorsed by the Philippines for the parts of the South China Sea within the nation’s exclusive economic zone [EEZ]).⁵

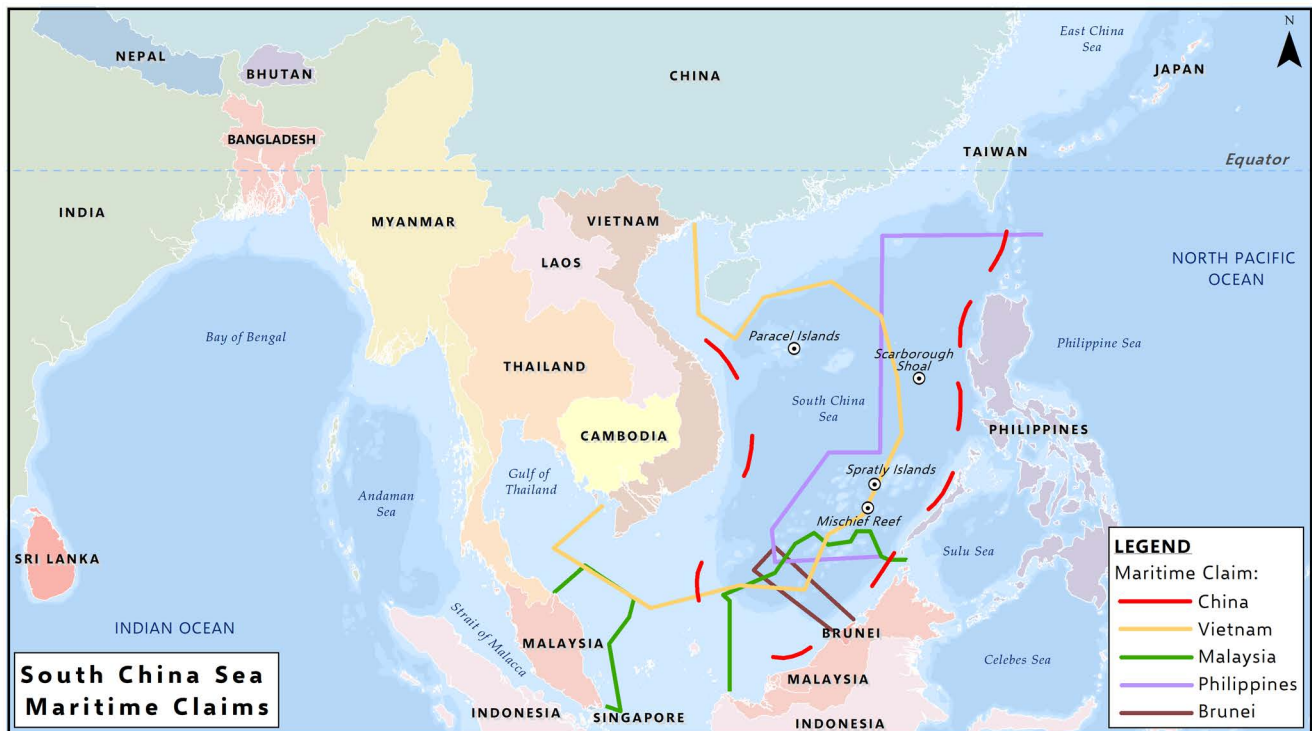
It is important to note that the naming of waters as the South China Sea is not universally preferred in the region, with other claimant countries also having their own local names (e.g., the Vietnamese calling it East Sea and the Chinese South Sea).⁶ However, it is only China that claims almost the entirety of the South China Sea—the waterway is resources-rich, as well as economically and militarily strategic—based on its “nine-dash line,” (see map below) which was rejected by the Permanent Court of Arbitration⁷ ruling in 2016 as having no legal basis but was in turn not accepted by China.⁸

Such tactics have eventually—especially after President Marcos assumed office—compelled the Philippines to

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get closer to its treaty ally, the U.S., and gravitate toward more extensive alliance-building efforts. Moreover, the Philippines’ geographical proximity (its northernmost islands off Luzon Island are about 250 km away from the southernmost tip of Taiwan) places the U.S. ally in a difficult position over a Taiwan emergency. Still, given the





extent of the China threat, the Philippines is unlikely to take a neutral stance.⁹

Similarly, over the years, Japan has been concerned about increased incursions by Chinese vessels in the East China Sea, particularly over the disputed Japanese-administered Senkaku islands (known as Diaoyu in China).¹⁰ Japan claims that China routinely violates Japanese territorial waters and airspace by sending Chinese coast guard vessels and planes into the surrounding areas (see map above). Japan has also increased its defense capabilities in response to China's varied attempts around Japan, including joint patrols with Russia.¹¹ Japan's growing economic, political,¹² and security partnerships with Southeast Asia, in particular, are central to its free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision.

For India, Xi's decade-old rule has been marked by consistent escalations—including the 72-day-long Doklam stand-off in 2017, the bloody Galwan conflict in 2020 that has defined India's new assertive stance against China, and the Tawang skirmish in 2022—that belied hopes of regaining normalcy along the border with China. Therefore, India's multi-alignment foreign policy has not only helped its accelerating closeness with the U.S., even in security matters, but also allowed increased partnerships with actors like Australia, the European Union (EU), and Japan, as well as Southeast Asian states like the Philippines

and Vietnam via its evolving Act East Policy (AEP) that prioritizes India's extended neighborhood (see map on India's oil exploration activities in the South China Sea).

As regards the new "standard" map by China, India, too, has strongly protested against the inclusion of the disputed Aksai-Chin plateau and Arunachal Pradesh (called South Tibet by China) as part of Chinese territory—the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam have all reportedly rejected the latest map as baseless.¹³

Significantly, India, Japan, and the Philippines have increased their military budgets due to the increasing threat perception and changing geopolitical tides (see Table 1). In December 2022, in a historic shift from its self-defense oriented strategy, the Japanese cabinet approved three new strategic documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program. Then in December 2023, the Japanese cabinet approved a 16 percent increase in military spending (about \$56 billion defense budget) for 2024 and eased its postwar ban on lethal weapons export to "like-minded" countries.¹⁴ India has allocated a total defense budget of US\$75 billion to promote self-reliance, defense modernization, and arms exports.¹⁵ The Philippines has reportedly approved a hefty updated 10-year modernization plan worth \$35.62 billion, which will include submarine acquisition, enhancing naval

Table 1. Military Expenditure: India, Japan, Philippines (2012-2022) in constant 2022 US\$ million

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
India	55142,1	55178,6	57867,1	58416,9	64374,7	68909,5	71336,2	76372,3	76835,6	76348,5	80955,8
Japan	46034,9	45844,6	46335,4	47149,4	46869,3	46559,2	48903,0	50293,9	49862,8	50957,5	53946,5
Philippines	3178,5	3628,4	3366,1	3683,6	3792,5	4506,5	4786,8	4772,3	4915,4	5546,1	4166,5

Source: SIPRI, 2024.

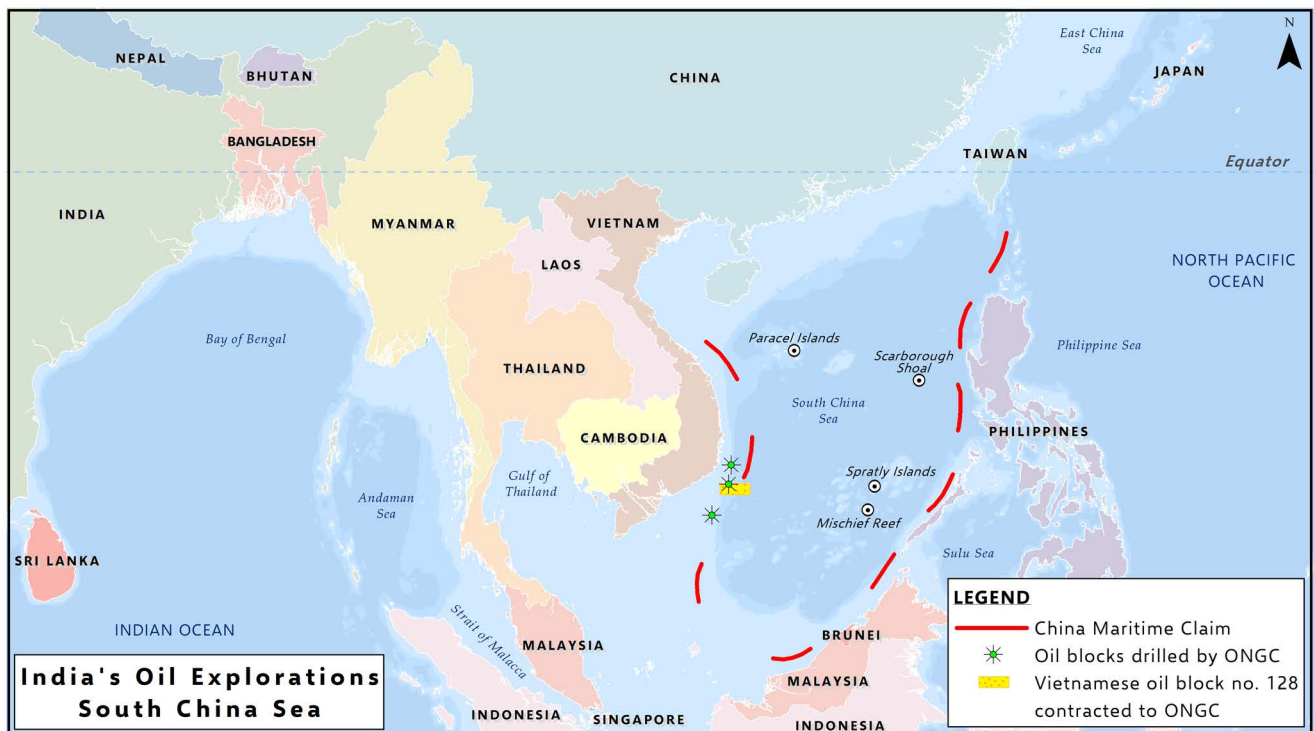
capabilities, and exploring and exploiting natural resources within its EEZ.¹⁶

Above all, as a result of multiple such factors, regional states with much to lose, like India, Japan, and the Philippines, have been seeking cooperative solutions with other middle powers that can both counter the Chinese influence and fulfill other economic as well as traditional and non-traditional security objectives. Apart from strengthening bilateral ties on strategic fronts like technology, supply chains, and defense deals, these states have contributed to the region becoming the center of rising minilateralism—the smaller ad-hoc groupings seen as an alternative to larger, consensus-bound multilaterals, which for long have been losing their sheen.

As reflected by the continued importance of the centrality

of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN)—of which the Philippines is a member and both Japan and India dialogue partners—by both individual states and vital regional minilaterals like Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), it is clear that multilateralism, though still in crisis, is far from dead. However, these minilaterals have the potential not only to build solid partnerships beyond bilaterals but also to help plug some of the gaps in multilateralism.

Against this scenario of evolving geopolitics, a trilateral framework between India, Japan, and the Philippines—an idea suggested by the author at the age of minilateralism—may offer a workable solution to address some of the uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region that these three countries may face in Indo-Pacific in times to come.



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Can it play a strategic role in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain and keep China in check? Will it have any impact on the Taiwan crisis? Will it add weight to the U.S. quest for reinvigorating the liberal international order via its multiple partnerships? In what avenues can the three democratic states cooperate? Can such a grouping enhance the scope of “third country” partnerships and boost the multilateralism espoused by ASEAN?

This paper aims to address such questions by first exploring the interconnectedness between the Philippines, India, and Japan both through the bilateral and regional lens, looking at the trajectory of the recent high-level interactions. It also looks at the specific avenues of strategic cooperation, including connectivity, green transition, and supply chains, which have great potential for a trilateral synergy. It also looks at the Taiwan question and how far these states are in alignment at the current moment. Finally, the paper examines the building of the India-Japan-Philippines trilateral from the maritime security perspective.

Exploring Congruence with the Philippines for India and Japan

At the outset, the India-Japan-Philippines trilateral would draw on the need and imperative to strengthen the free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) narrative, which supports the U.S.-led vision of the existing rules-based liberal international order; enriches the three states’ respective national visions for the region; and, espouses ASEAN centrality, in turn strengthening the regional multilateral connect. Thus, the trilateral can enable the greater participation of the Philippines in the region’s geopolitical mechanisms while providing India and Japan an avenue for enhanced engagement with Southeast Asia. But how do their bilateral connections feed into this bigger picture?

India-Philippines: Going the Distance?

For India, ties with the Philippines are no longer under the shadow of the ASEAN, which is still a major part of India’s AEP focus as a bloc. Even as the AEP, announced in 2014, enhanced the scope of the bilateral ties, it was only after Philippines President Rodrigo Roa Duterte came into power in 2016 that the needle truly moved.¹⁷ Duterte’s controversial foreign policy drew flack for its “reactionary” pro-China, anti-U.S. narrative, but his aspirations for manifesting an “independent” foreign policy meant that ties

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with neighbors and countries like India and Japan were an opportunity for the Philippines “to show its determination to partner for change.”¹⁸

In 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also became the first leader to visit the Philippines in over 35 years and signed an agreement to boost cooperation in defense and logistics with Duterte, who also visited India the following year.¹⁹ One of the most important outcomes of the newly revitalized ties was India’s growing role in the Philippine defense modernization plan.²⁰ In 2022, the two countries signed an agreement for India to provide three BrahMos supersonic cruise missile batteries to the Philippines for an estimated US\$375 million—reportedly, the first export order for the missile co-developed by India and Russia.²¹ At the same time, Duterte’s deference to China certainly affected the growth of the India-Philippines strategic relationship in regional matters. He even underplayed the ruling of the Tribunal constituted under Annex VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) as “just a piece of paper.”²²

Notably, India acknowledged the award of the Tribunal in 2016, highlighting its support for the “freedom of navigation and overflight, and unimpeded commerce” under the international rule of law.²³ However, it was only in 2023, under the leadership of President Ferdinand

Table 2. India-Philippines: Bilateral Official Visits

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Event / Meeting</i>	<i>Date</i>
Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, India, and Ma. Theresa P. Lazaro, Under Secretary for Bilateral Relations and ASEAN Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines	4th Strategic Dialogue between India and the Philippines	2022-08-17 to 2022-08-18
S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, and Teodoro L. Locsin Jr., Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines	Bilateral meeting reviewing developments in relations and discussing future engagement. Also, an exchange of views on regional and international issues	2022-02-10 to 2022-02-15
Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs, India, and Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., President of the Philippines	Special Envoy representing India at the inauguration ceremony of the President of the Philippines	2022-06-22
Rodrigo Roa Duterte, President of the Philippines	State visit on the occasion of 70 years of diplomatic relations	2019-10-17 to 2019-10-23

Source: India Ministry of External Affairs Official Site, https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visits.htm?2/outgoing_visits

Marcos Jr., that India upgraded its stance on the award by highlighting “the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea in this regard.”²⁴ This signals that their shared stance on the China threat should bring about greater regional cooperation, even on disputed matters. Moreover, high-level interactions such as between the Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and the Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo in 2023 for the fifth Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) meeting have seen an uptick (see Table 2). The result has been a momentum for the preferential trade agreement (PTA) negotiations, the proposal for which has been in the air since 2020.²⁵ The PTA will help reduce or eliminate trade barriers, including tariffs. Although India has a free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN, taking into account the specific aspirations of individual states, a separate trade deal with the Philippines might offer enhanced benefits at the back of expanding trade and unrealized trade potential.

Besides economic security avenues like supply chain resilience both bilaterally and multilaterally, both India and the Philippines are also geared to enhance cooperation on maritime security.²⁶ The enhancement of ASEAN-India maritime collaboration will only strengthen this factor. Events like the India-hosted ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise 2023 will inculcate the right environment for

promoting an “open, inclusive, balanced, transparent, and rules-based regional architecture,” under the ASEAN centrality umbrella as highlighted by the Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.²⁷ This is especially true as the “risk of miscalculation” and deliberate (mis)adventures by China are increasing in the Indian Ocean, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and East China Sea as a whole.²⁸

Japan-Philippines: Converging Security Interests, Consolidating Abe’s Path?

Japan has accelerated its outreach to Southeast Asia in the wake of intensifying China-U.S. strategic competition; shifted away from its pacifist orientation; and hardened its China stance. It is especially looking at increasing security cooperation with Southeast Asian states like the Philippines, which are also increasingly threatened by China’s aggressive tactics.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s trip to Manila in November 2023—the first since he assumed office in 2021—and President Marcos’s visit to Tokyo for the Japan-Philippines summit meeting at the sidelines of the “Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation” in December the same year bolstered Japan’s plans to increase military-oriented cooperation with the Philippines (see Table 3).

Table 3. Japan-Philippines: Bilateral Official Visits

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Date</i>
Mori Masafumi, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Japan, and Benjamin E. Diokno, Secretary of Finance, Philippines	13th Meeting of the Japan-Philippines High-Level Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation	2022-11-04
Mori Masafumi, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Japan	Courtesy call to Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., President of the Philippines	2022-11-03
Hayashi Yoshimasa, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan	Official visit to the Philippines: Attendance at the Philippine Presidential inauguration and courtesy call on President Marcos; courtesy call on President Duterte; Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting; courtesy call on Vice President	2022-06-29 to 2022-07-01
Motegi Toshimitsu, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan	Meeting with Teodoro L. Locsin Jr., Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines	2020-01-09
Izumi Hiroto, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Japan, and others; Carlos G. Dominguez, Secretary of Finance; Ernesto M. Pernia, Secretary of the National Economic and Development Authority; and others on the Philippine side.	8th Meeting of the Japan-Philippines Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation	2020-06-18
Abe Shinzō, Prime Minister of Japan	Meeting with President Duterte	2019-11-04
Kono Tarō, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan	Meeting with Teodoro Lopez Locsin Jr., Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines; courtesy call on the President of the Philippines	2019-02-09 to 2019-02-11

Source: Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official Site, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/philippinel/index.html>

As part of the latest deals, Japan will provide the Philippines with a coastal radar system worth US\$4 million through Official Security Assistance (OSA). The OSA is restricted to non-lethal equipment transfers, such as patrol boats and radar systems, to the armed forces of “like-minded countries.” A Memorandum of Cooperation between their coast guards was signed too, which will facilitate maritime safety capacity building. Notably, the two sides are also looking to reach an early conclusion in the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) negotiations. China has found this move unpalatable, with its state media criticizing it as a “quasi-alliance.”²⁹

The upping of defense and security cooperation continues with what former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō started in 2012, during whose term the foreign direct investment, including private investment deals, development aid, and military ties with the Philippines grew.³⁰ The resulting bonhomie has led to increasing security cooperation—port visits and coast guard, air force, and naval exercises—as well as the start of “2+2” foreign and defense ministerial

meetings in 2022, only the second country in Southeast Asia to have such a format with Japan.³¹ Over the last decade, a steadily growing closeness with Japan has turned the country from an “post-War unfriendly nation” to one of its best strategic partners “almost at par with the U.S.”³²

Key Areas of the Trio’s Common Strategic Goals

Besides core military interests, including arms equipment sales, economic and energy security concerns, and regional integration challenges, there are significant grounds for the growing bonhomie between the three states.

Economic Security: Revitalizing Supply Chains

In this regard, Tokyo already shares Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the Philippines and India. A potential India-Philippines PTA, can enable the three nations to aim for a robust economic framework that will push regional growth. As such, closer strategic bilateral turns will allow greater synergy within multilaterals such

as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF; India, Japan, and the Philippines are all members). As India has now already withdrawn from the Regional Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP; both Japan and the Philippines have ratified it, with the Philippines the last country to do so), the ASEAN-dominated trade deal that aims to ease market access among members, the IPEF is the next best thing—the IPEF not being a traditional FTA notwithstanding.³³ Apart from the trade pillar (to which India is not a party), the recently concluded supply chain agreement and negotiations on the clean economy and fair economy pillars should help develop action plans for a more mature cooperation.

On its part, the Philippines can look at evolving Indo-Pacific initiatives or platforms like the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) between Australia, Japan, and India, which should undoubtedly engage Southeast Asian economies like Vietnam and the Philippines at some stage for a more comprehensive regional approach. Participation in the SCRI could help the Philippines correct its logistics services and provide competitive pricing while raising its economic profile.

This would help Manila to integrate with regional and global supply chains more easily. Moreover, with manufacturing firms diversifying away from China into South Asia and Southeast Asia, a key destination is the Philippines, as is India. Therefore, as valuable contributors and consumers, the trio can be instrumental in developing alternate value chains via the SCRI and the IPEF in partnership with other members and major regional economies like Australia or South Korea.

Infrastructure Woes and Geopolitical Aims

One of the most important avenues for trilateral cooperation should be infrastructure connectivity. The complementarity between India's AEP, Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI), and President Marcos's Build Better More Policy (which looks to expand on the Duterte administration's "Build Build Build" program) would be critical. As one of the fastest growing economies in the Southeast Asia region (fastest in 2024, beating Vietnam and Malaysia) and in line with the Philippine government's goal of reaching "Upper Middle-Income Country (UMIC)" status by 2025, as per the Philippine Development Plan for 2023-2028, such trilateral partnership will boost this prospect.³⁴

Philippines' infrastructure needs can be met by India and Japan through their joint infrastructure connectivity initiatives, particularly infrastructure-building projects. For India and Japan, this will give impetus to their shared goals of third-party cooperation in the geopolitically vital regions on the Indo-Pacific. Such an infrastructure-centered trilateral will also help India and Japan strengthen their ASEAN outreach and take forward their Indo-Pacific strategies.

At the same time, Japan is looking to support the Philippines' public-private infrastructure development projects, including railway, agriculture, and renewable energy domains. Kishida has already talked about continued public-private support for infrastructure development, such as the Dalton Pass and the Manila Metro, which will boost the Philippines' new Build Better More policy.³⁵ The Manila project—the first "mass underground" subway system in the country—which began during the Duterte era and is expected to be completed by 2027, is estimated to cost more than US\$7 billion, financed through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Official Development Assistance (ODA) loans.³⁶

India's investments in the Philippines are estimated at around US\$5 billion in multiple fields, from technology to infrastructure.³⁷ Notable companies are Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Larsen & Toubro, GMR, Bioseeds, Tata Motors, Thermax, Adani Ports, and Sun Source Energy. Lately, there has been increased interest in connectivity-related ventures in sectors like aviation and airports, railways, maritime and ship-building, and road transport.³⁸

Renewables

In renewables, the Japanese company Advantec, via the JICA's public-private partnership program, inked an agreement with the Philippines in 2023 to address power woes in the country by supplying solar power to factories.³⁹ This will aid the Philippine government's target to achieve 35 percent renewable energy share by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040.

Alongside India's interest to achieve Net Zero Emissions by 2070, in addition to attaining the short-term targets, including meeting 50 percent of energy requirements from renewables, the three states could frame infrastructure in energy transition as a focus point.⁴⁰

Digital Access & Innovation

Another critical area for joint trilateral cooperation is innovation and creating digital connectivity infrastructure. Manila is one of the beneficiaries of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), a flagship project for the Global South countries, and India's capacity-building program, including for upscaling skills, could be extended to the high-tech sector.⁴¹ Jaishankar has already underscored India's commitment to "share its digital innovations for the benefit of local communities in the Philippines across sectors," from disaster resilience to financial technology.⁴² Japan is also looking to promote digitalization in ASEAN countries. So, under the India-Japan Digital Partnership, they could enhance the regional digital economy by partnering with the Philippines.

What of the Taiwan Crisis – Solidarity or Disinterest?

Additionally, Japan, India, and the Philippines are particularly concerned about the regional, cross-border impact of the new normal in the Taiwan Strait and the return of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan, which could lead to renewed or accelerated efforts at forceful reunification by China. Beijing's attempts at altering the status quo could force an unnecessary military standoff, even pushing the U.S., its allies, and partners into the fray, particularly if the U.S. treaty allies escalate their rivalry with China.

In this regard, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has seen a growing solidarity for Taiwan notwithstanding the differences surrounding the respective ongoing war and conflict.⁴³ Both Japan and the Philippines highlighted the possibility of the war in Eastern Europe spilling over to East Asia amid still-evolving policies.⁴⁴ Even as India does not subscribe to the parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine—calling them "misleading" and disregarding the "complex regional histories," India has boosted its high-tech, economic, and strategic cooperation with Taiwan.⁴⁵

Notably, after the recently concluded Taiwanese elections, India (the Indian Envoy to Taiwan Manharsinh Laxmanbhai Yadav), Japan (Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yōko), and the Philippines (President Marcos) have in different capacities congratulated the Taiwanese President-elect William Lai, highlighting the potential for democratic solidarity "without necessarily developing official diplomatic relations."⁴⁶

A Maritime Trilateral in the Indo-Pacific: Call of the Times?

The Indo-Pacific strategies and visions of both India and Japan take into account countering not only China's unilateral actions in the Himalayas, the Indian Ocean, and the East China Sea, as well as the South China Sea but also regional development and inclusivity bound by their common embrace of ASEAN centrality. The official statements of both India and Japan, including their respective strategies, namely Japan's FOIP, India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative (IPOI), as well as their Quad vision repeatedly avow their commitment to focus on ASEAN centrality.⁴⁷

Naturally, Southeast Asia has become a focus of India's and Japan's intensified individual outreach to the Asian subregion. However, as if to betray a bowed commitment to "ASEAN centrality," regional powers, such as India and Japan, tend to play with individual Southeastern states. In this context, the Philippines, in particular, loomed as a preferred partner sharing the values and interests for both India and Japan. As part of their third-country cooperation aims, Japan and India should naturally look at cultivating trilateral synergies with the Philippines as a viable option in Southeast Asia.

The Philippines, as a long-standing U.S. ally, is one of the main ASEAN states to embrace the Indo-Pacific construct, and as an aspiring power desiring a greater say over regional concerns, it is looking to deepen regional integration via cooperation with major economies like India and Japan, as discussed in the above sections.⁴⁸ The strategic importance of the Philippines in strengthening the Indo-Pacific network and the emerging security architecture certainly must be considered by both India and Japan. The newly formed quadrilateral framework between Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the U.S. and its focus on the military dimension testifies to the strategic importance of the Philippines.

A likely area of cooperation for the proposed trilateral would be strategies to counter and hinder China's maritime assertiveness, given their shared goal of limiting China's maritime influence. As claimant states in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, China and the Philippines share "sovereignty disputes" in primarily Scarborough Shoal, Second

Thomas Shoal, Reed Bank, and the Spratly Islands.⁴⁹ Importantly, as mentioned earlier, the Arbitral Tribunal ruled in the Philippines' favor in 2016; it also held that "China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone."⁵⁰

However, during the early part of Duterte's rule, as discussed earlier, Manila ignored the ruling as it sought closer ties with China while "separating" from the U.S.⁵¹ As a result, both the Philippines and China even pursued several joint development agreements in the SCS.⁵² This conciliation can be explained by Duterte's desire to capitalize on China's growing economy and signal to the U.S. about the Philippines' intent to diversify its relations.

However, Duterte's China bet did not pay off on the expected lines. In the latter half of Duterte's term, he castigated China not only for rejecting the Tribunal's ruling but also for escalating "unwanted hostilities" by "blatantly infringing" on Philippine jurisdiction.⁵³ Indeed, now under Marcos, Manila has started on a "muscular approach" to China, including revitalizing ties with the U.S. and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁴

In the context of this shifting perception in Manila, India's and Japan's outreach to the Philippines becomes more salient. India and Japan are not parties/non-claimants to the South China disputes. However, China's reclamation and island-building activities, as well as increased military incursions and attempts at redefining boundaries, have increased the threat perceptions for the extended neighborhood. If China, through such measures, takes control of the maritime routes in the South China Sea, it will impact not just the claimant states but regional stability as well as the economic and energy security of East Asia.⁵⁵ For example, 80 percent of Japan's energy imports that travel through the South China Sea will be impacted. China's universally intimidating tactics will have repercussions for other strategic interests, such as potential access to maritime commons.⁵⁶ Similarly, for India, China's successful tactics in the South China Sea will allow it to impudently expand its intentions in the Indian Ocean (e.g., the Bay of Bengal).

In such a scenario, a trilateral will enable tighter engagements with China's rival claimant (the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Brunei) and non-claimant (Indonesia [officially], Australia, India, Japan, the EU, and the U.S.) regional and extra-regional stakeholders in a

"win-win" cooperation. India, which was "neutral" about the South China Sea disputes, has become more vocal and is even offering military aid to China's rival claimant states in the region. India has called out China for its militarization of the South China Sea in 2023 (as also the Taiwan Strait after former U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial Asia visit in 2022). Preserving maritime order and India's maritime interests is central to India's relationship with the Indo-Pacific stakeholders, including the Philippines.

India and the Philippines have, in fact, redoubled their efforts in this arena during 2023. During a visit by the five-member delegation of the Philippine Coast Guard to India in 2023, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on enhanced maritime cooperation. Plus, a bilateral naval drill was held in the West Philippine Sea at the end of last year, which predictably drew a sharp reaction from China.⁵⁷

After the Abe era, Japan also emphasized greater security cooperation with ASEAN claimants.⁵⁸ Kishida's new "Golden Age" with Southeast Asia focuses on maritime cooperation.⁵⁹ Not only is maritime safety included within its recent upgrade of ties with ASEAN, but Japan has also conducted two important exercises in 2023, reaffirming its commitment toward "reinforcing maritime domain awareness and maritime law enforcement in the Indo-Pacific."⁶⁰

The suggested trilateral will strengthen the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, supplement the U.S.' renewed focus on the Philippines, and boost claims for reinvigorating the international order.⁶¹ To further maritime synergies, India, Japan, the Philippines, and the U.S. should consider restarting joint naval exercises a la the maiden one in 2019.⁶²

An important factor of trilateral cooperation here too will be infrastructure. The Philippines is keen to "establish strategic cooperation, resilient supply chains, and solid digital infrastructure" among like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific.⁶³ It wants to diversify away from its dependence on China, especially for infrastructure financing. If India and Japan help via capacity-building mechanisms, especially in maritime security, Manila would be able to challenge China's maritime aggression more effectively and emerge as a leader for strengthening the regional rules-based order.

Notably, the Japan-Philippine “2+2” meeting has also furthered the prospects of enhancing connectivity in the Sulu-Celebes Seas and their surrounding areas—which comprise some of the busiest trade routes, are a center for marine biodiversity, and are prone to maritime terrorism and piracy.⁶⁴ With India in the mix too, the Philippines and Japan can help multiply investment opportunities in maritime infrastructure, tourism, coastal development, and the blue economy so as to curtail organized illicit actors.⁶⁵ As this subregion of Asia covers the tri-border area between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, opportunities via third-country partnerships will immensely help the regional integration plans.

In sum, an India-Japan-Philippines trilateral has immense potential in multiple avenues, from infrastructure connectivity to digital access, with its core in the maritime arena. It would also help the three partners leverage individual advantages. The India-Japan-Philippines trilateral can emerge as a platform to ease the common post-pandemic strain that has been exacerbated by multiple global conflicts—from the Ukraine war to the Israel-Hamas war.

Notably, the trilateral would provide a platform for three-way dialogue between New Delhi, Tokyo, and Manila, thereby promoting synergy and facilitating the Philippines’ increased participation in other frameworks such as within a “Quad Plus.”

At the same time, the prospect of an India-Philippines-Japan trilateral would have to bear the onerous responsibility of creating constructive mechanisms to further their own respective and shared regional interests. It also needs to consider the need to reiterate the essence of multilateralism, such as the ASEAN ideals of consensus and unity amidst diversity.

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Acknowledgements –

This paper is a revised and extended version of my article “India-Japan-Philippines: Making of a Maritime Trilateral?” originally published in Japan Forward, April 20, 2021, <https://japan-forward.com/asias-next-page-india-japan-philippines-making-of-a-maritime-trilateral/>. I would like to thank Japan Forward for granting permission to use the text.

Besides, I appreciate the assistantship provided by Ana Carolina De Oliveira Assis and Giorgia Piovesan for tables and data for this paper. A sincere note of thanks goes to Prof. Kei Hakata of Seikei University of Japan, and Dr. Brendon J. Cannon of Khalifa University of the UAE for their valuable suggestions and comments.

This paper is an outcome of the author’s keynote address at the international conference “Bridging Borders: Triangular Cooperation for Regional Prosperity between the Philippines, India, and Japan” jointly organized by the Stratbase ADR Institute and Japan Foundation in Manila, the Philippines, on March 1, 2024.

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