

THE US-JAPAN-PHILIPPINES TRILATERAL - BUILDING A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE REGION?

Mateusz Chatys

November 2023

SUMMARY

The establishment of a new trilateral U.S.-Japanese-Philippine format may potentially diminish some of the advantages the Philippines gains from maintaining separate bilateral relations with Japan and the United States. On the other hand, this novel approach presents an opportunity to create a platform that facilitates the coordination of initiatives aimed at enhancing the interoperability capabilities of the armed forces and other entities, such as the coast guard, through joint maneuvers and patrols. Therefore, the upcoming actions of the Philippine government will be of paramount significance. Manila should strive to strike a balance between American influence and Japan in future trilateral discussions, ensuring itself a stronger negotiating position and the ability to potentially reject proposals from Washington that may be perceived as too risky from Manila's standpoint.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Given China's continued aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region, striving for changes in the security architecture through collective cooperation is the best solution to effectively deter China while minimizing the risk of escalation to a conventional armed clash.
2. The completion of a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between Japan and the Philippines is essential for advancing trilateral cooperation with the United States, as it establishes a crucial legal framework necessary for reinforcing security collaboration.
3. A trilateral relationship with unequal weight distribution may, instead of enhancing a collective regional security posture, ultimately undermine its foundational principles, thus the Philippines should work closely with Japan to counterbalance American influence.

INTRODUCTION

China's escalating assertiveness in regional waters, marked by the construction of artificial island bases and their militarization in the South China Sea, along with the China Coast Guard's incursions into the territorial waters of the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, has significantly shifted the power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. This changing landscape poses a significant security concern for Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, which is a treaty ally to both nations. While China has, of late, refrained from risky maneuvers to disrupt the status quo in the East China Sea—unlike its approach in the South China Sea—the rapid expansion of China's coast guard and navy fleet remains a tangible threat to Japan's administrative control due to frequent intrusions that may become unsustainable over time. Given the shared threat perception, a well-balanced U.S.-Japanese-Philippine security trilateral has the potential to address collective security concerns in both the East and South China Seas. It can also help counteract the effectiveness of gray zone coercion and serve as a deterrent against escalation.

This analysis stems from the acknowledgment of the evolving power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and the necessity for regional countries to adapt to new security challenges

linked to Chinese revisionism, evident in its increasingly assertive behavior. China's expanding economic and military capabilities call for adjustments in the region's security architecture and the establishment of collective cooperation formats. These formats can enhance the ability to counterbalance China's capabilities and share the associated risks required to thwart Chinese coercion. Consequently, this CAA Brief aims to examine the threat perceptions of the Philippines, Japan, and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. It also delves into recent developments in security cooperation between the Philippines and Japan, which is pivotal in advancing toward trilateral cooperation involving all three nations.

THE SIMILARITIES OF THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Both the Philippines and Japan are entangled in maritime and territorial disputes with China. In the case of Japan, the focal point of contention is the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has heightened pressure against Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) through maritime patrols, consistently breaching the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands since the end of 2008 [1]. Over time, the intensity of patrols has increased, involving not only PLA Navy ships but also maritime militia, coast guard, and survey vessels. As per Japanese studies, there has been an increase in the duration during which China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels remain near the Senkaku Islands. Before mid-January 2000, each fleet usually changed every 15 days. However, since then, the rotation frequency has decreased to approximately once a month, resulting in a doubling of the number of days per dispatch. This shift is linked to the larger size of CCG vessels. Additionally, regularly sailing within the contiguous zones has become a common practice, with the total number of days reaching a record high of 336 days in 2022 [2].

The primary objectives of China's strategy are twofold: to interfere with Japan's administration of the islands and to normalize Chinese law-enforcement presence within the islands' territorial waters. Additionally, China has implemented a strategy to exert control by conducting prolonged law-enforcement patrols within the 12 nautical miles of the Senkaku Islands [3].

The latest record in this regard was set in April 2023, where a total of four CCG vessels lingered in Japanese territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands for over 80 hours [4].

Similar actions by Beijing, albeit on a much larger scale and with greater intensity, can be observed toward countries involved in disputes in the South China Sea, particularly the Philippines. Over the past decade, China has developed and fully militarized at least seven artificial islands, creating 3,200 acres of new land [5]. Furthermore, the CCG and maritime militia consistently obstruct Southeast Asian countries from freely accessing the resources within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). In the case of the Philippines, this is notably evident in terms of access to fishing grounds near Scarborough Shoal, over which China assumed de facto control in 2012.

The successful takeover of Mischief Reef in 1995 and Scarborough Shoal contributed to Beijing's development of unconventional tactics below the threshold of war, known as gray zone operations.

One of the latest examples of such activities is the use of swarm tactics, as seen in 2021 when around 220 militia boats (posing as fishing vessels) were deployed around Whitsun Reef—an uninhabited feature in the Union Banks located 170 nautical miles from the westernmost island of Palawan. The Philippine Navy and Coast Guard are increasingly grappling with dangerous maneuvers carried out by CCG units and maritime militia in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. In some instances, Chinese ships have resorted to using water cannons or military-grade lasers to hinder or prevent conducting patrols and resupply missions. Recently a particularly sensitive issue in bilateral relations is the operation of the Philippine outpost on the wreck of the BRP Sierra Madre, intentionally grounded near Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 to strengthen the Philippines' position in the South China Sea. It is noteworthy that in 2023, Philippine resupply missions to outposts on Second Thomas Shoal and Thitu Island have become key targets of coercive operations by the Chinese fleet, raising the threat of uncontrolled escalation of tensions in the region [6].

China's gray-zone operations in the South and East China Seas are designed to secure its territorial and maritime claims while undermining the sovereignty of other claimant states over disputed features.

These tactics in both cases involve the use of maritime law enforcement vessels to patrol contested waters, harass fishing and resupply vessels, and assert China's claims in both disputes.

Due to the close geographical proximity of the Philippines and Japan to Taiwan, coupled with their status as treaty allies of the United States, there is a significant likelihood that Chinese aggression against Taiwan could lead to a direct confrontation between the United States and China. Given the strategic importance of Taiwan for the United States, it becomes nearly impossible for the Philippines and Japan to avoid getting involved in a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Consequently, the issue of Taiwan's status poses a threat to all three countries. The Philippines, in particular, faces a critical situation as it has around 200,000 overseas foreign workers based in Taiwan [7]. In the event of a conflict erupting in the Taiwan Strait, the evacuation of these workers would be a top priority for the government in Manila.

THE EVOLUTION OF JAPAN-PHILIPPINES SECURITY COOPERATION

Despite the historically complex relationship between the two nations, primarily stemming from the Imperial Japan occupation during World War II, the Philippines stands out as a natural security partner for Japan. Both countries share the characteristic of being archipelagic nations and have faced an increasing security threat from Beijing. Additionally, their status as long-standing American treaty allies has resulted in the development of similar military practices under American influence, facilitating more accessible cooperation between them. As a result, the gradual strengthening of bilateral security cooperation in recent years should not come as a surprise.

The initial indication of cooperative development came with the initiation of regular security dialogues in 2005 [8]. It was during this period that the Philippines first approached Japan, seeking material support to enhance its coast guard capabilities. Regrettably, Japan's ability to provide such assistance was hindered by its 1967 "Three Principles of Arms Exports". A breakthrough occurred in 2011 when leaders from both nations agreed to expand consultations and exercises between their respective coast guards and navies. In the subsequent year, the two countries entered into a strategic partnership pact aimed at bolstering maritime security in the Philippines. Although

Japan's initial security cooperation was confined to the training of non-military organizations, such as the Philippine Coast Guard, it laid the groundwork for further defense activities [9].

Following the adoption of a revised "Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology" by Shinzo Abe's government in 2014, Japan's capacity to supply defense equipment to foreign nations was significantly enhanced.

In the context of collaboration with the Philippines, the pivotal moment came in 2016 when the government in Manila signed a Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement. This agreement crucially restricted the Philippines from selling or transferring the received equipment to third parties [10]. Consequently, Japan, through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) program, financed the construction of ten unarmed Parola-class Multi-Role Response Vessels (MRRVs) for the Philippine Coast Guard. These boats were successfully delivered between 2016 and 2018 [11].

By 2015, Japan and the Philippines had jointly conducted the first coast guard and naval exercises in the South China Seas, focusing on anti-piracy operations and the management of unplanned encounters at sea [12]. Simultaneously, Japan gradually increased the frequency of its ships' port visits to the Philippines. In reciprocation, the Philippine government granted permission for Japanese military aircraft to refuel in the country, exemplified by the historic landing of a Japanese P-3 maritime patrol aircraft on Palawan Island in the western Philippines in 2015 [13]. A notable progress in their cooperation took place in 2018 when, for the first time since the post-war period, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces deployed an armored vehicle unit to take part in the Balikatan exercises organized by the Philippines and the United States. Four years later, Japan reached another significant achievement by deploying two F-15 fighter jets for collaborative exercises with the Philippine Air Force [14].

From the perspective of material support, it is worth paying attention to the talks initiated by Manila and Tokyo in 2015 regarding the transfer of three retired TC-90 trainer aircraft from Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force to the Philippines for use as maritime patrol aircraft. Ultimately over the course of 2017-2018, Japan donated five TC-90 Beecher

Turbo-prop aircraft as part of its ODA to help the Philippines build its surveillance capacity. The entire process necessitated changes to Japan's national security law to allow the transfer of excess defense materiel at amounts below their original cost, showcasing Japan's extensive involvement in engaging the Philippines on security matters [15].

The significance of material cooperation with Japan was underscored during Rodrigo Duterte's presidency. Despite his decision to strengthen ties with China at the expense of relations with the United States, as reflected in the limited procurement of American hardware, Manila continued to cultivate relations with Tokyo. This commitment was evident in discussions in 2019 about the potential acquisition of Japanese air surveillance radars. The outcome of the negotiations was the signing of a \$100 million contract in August 2020 between the Philippine Department of Defense and Mitsubishi Electric (MELCO) for three fixed air-surveillance radars and one mobile radar system. Notably, this marked the first instance of a Japanese company transferring completed defense equipment to a foreign government since the establishment of the Japanese government's Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology in April 2014. The initial unit of the air-surveillance radar system was delivered to the Philippine Air Force in October 2023 [16].

The most significant advancement in bilateral security cooperation occurred in April 2022, marked by the inaugural foreign and defense ministerial meeting, commonly referred to as "2+2." The primary focus of the meeting, as underscored by Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, was to enhance collaboration in the field of defense amidst rising security threats.

Although not explicitly stated, the joint statement identified China as the primary source of concern. The document expressed serious apprehensions about escalating tensions in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Furthermore, the meeting in Tokyo sparked formal discussions on a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). Similar to a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the RAA establishes a legal framework for foreign armed forces to temporarily visit the Philippines for military exercises and operations, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Concluding such an agreement has the

potential to establish the groundwork for expanded bilateral defense exchanges, encompassing regular wargames and partial basing access in the future [17].

The discussions initiated during the 2+2 meeting set the groundwork for a deeper bilateral relationship, as illustrated by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's visit to the Philippines in November 2023. During his trip to Manila, Kishida made history as the first Japanese leader to address the joint session of the Philippine Congress. He proclaimed that the relations between the Philippines and Japan had entered a "golden age," [18] echoing the sentiment expressed by former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte during his presidency when describing the bilateral strategic partnership [19]. Furthermore, both nations inked the Official Security Assistance (OSA) grant aid, allocating \$4 million for a coastal radar system for the Philippine Navy [20]. This marked the Philippines as the first beneficiary of the OSA framework established under Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy [21]. Additionally, Japan is expected to finance five more MRRVs for the Philippine Coast Guard [22].

However, the most significant outcome of the leaders' meeting in Manila was the announcement of the commencement of negotiations on the RAA. Currently, the Philippines only has such agreements with the United States and Australia. If finalized, this would be Japan's first RAA with a Southeast Asian country.

The prevailing indications suggest that it is only a matter of time before the agreement is sealed, given the expressed full support from the Philippine legislative leadership, which plays a pivotal role in ratifying any VFA-style deal [23].

FROM BILATERAL TOWARDS TRILATERAL COOPERATION

The announcement of the initiation of negotiations on the RAA is prompting increasingly valid inquiries regarding the potential consolidation or formalization of trilateral cooperation among the Philippines, Japan, and the United States. The expanded access of Japan's Self-Defense Forces to Philippine territory, under conditions akin to those already granted to the American military through the VFA, introduces entirely new possibilities for these nations in terms of military training and maneuvers. These activities are geared towards enhancing interoperability skills essential for maintaining regional

stability and developing robust integrated deterrence capabilities. This is particularly significant as all three countries not only express their readiness to move in this direction but have already taken concrete steps.

In this context, it is noteworthy to highlight Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s visit to the United States in May 2023. During this visit, the President of the Philippines, along with his American counterpart, announced the advancement of cooperation in trilateral formats involving Japan and Australia.

President Marcos proposed an initiative for joint patrols in the South China Sea [24]. Subsequently, in June, the first-ever coast guard exercises involving the United States, the Philippines, and Japan were conducted in the waters of the South China Sea off the coast of Bataan province [25]. This was soon followed by the first-ever quadrilateral joint patrols by Japan, the United States, Australia and the Philippines in the South China Sea [26].

Furthermore, the initial meeting of national security advisers from the three countries took place in June 2023. Discussions during this meeting encompassed strengthening trilateral defense and security capabilities, collaboration on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and the implementation of initiatives to maintain a free and open maritime order. While the protection of the economic order was acknowledged, particular emphasis was placed on the security component, especially in the maritime domain [27].

In July, the inaugural trilateral meeting of foreign ministers occurred on the sidelines of the the ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' Meetings in Jakarta. During this meeting, maritime security emerged as a key area of cooperation [28]. Two months later, a second meeting in the same format was convened on the sidelines of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in New York. This time, the discussions centered on the challenging strategic environment in the South China Sea, implicitly alluding to incidents involving the Chinese fleet near the Second Thomas Shoal [29]. Additionally, an "action plan" was announced to be developed, aiming to bolster trilateral cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts [30].

An examination of recent months indicates that the frequency of interactions among representatives from all three countries remains notably high. This underscores the strong commitment of these governments to solidify the tripartite format. The impending completion of the RAA between Japan and the Philippines is expected to expedite this process. This sentiment is reflected in the remarks of Philippine National Security Advisor Eduardo Año, who emphasizes that enhanced cooperation among Japan, the US, and the Philippines is vital for safeguarding freedom of the seas in the South China Sea and promoting international law [31].

CONCLUSIONS

In numerous aspects, Japan is swiftly becoming the most comprehensive strategic partner for key Southeast Asian nations, particularly the Philippines. Over the past decade, Tokyo has progressively solidified its role as a crucial maritime security ally for Manila. Japan has supplied modern patrol vessels, surveillance aircraft, and radar systems to the Philippines, thereby enhancing the maritime domain awareness of the country amidst the escalating coercive activities of China in the South China Sea. With a focus on the South and East China Seas, as well as Taiwan, the two fellow US allies are exploring a new VFA-style arrangement. This deal aims to pave the way for the establishment of a trilateral alliance involving Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, serving as a deterrent against potential kinetic actions by China in the region.

Collectivizing efforts to counter increasingly assertive and even aggressive Chinese behavior, while offering clear advantages, also introduces certain challenges. Legitimate concerns arise about the evolving trilateral collaboration, suggesting that the Philippines may struggle to maintain an independent relationship with and strategy toward China. From the perspective of the Philippines, there's a likelihood that Tokyo's tendency to defer to Washington on security decisions could result in American dominance within the trilateral partnership, potentially proving more restrictive than reassuring for Manila, particularly in the event of the crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, the broadening of the U.S.-Japanese-Philippine trilateral may come at the cost of the highly prioritized bilateral defense ties with Japan. For the Philippines, this bilateral relationship is integral to a larger strategy aimed at diversifying security partners. The main rationale for

cultivating the security relationship with Japan rests on two key aspects: firstly, it provides an avenue for closer collaboration with a U.S. ally, and secondly, it serves as a shield for Manila, helping to avoid the severe repercussions from Beijing that could result from even more profound cooperation with Washington [32].

Last but not least, the U.S.-Japanese-Philippine trilateral arrangement may contribute to heightened divisions within ASEAN. The majority of member states generally refrain from explicitly aligning themselves in the rivalry between the United States and China. The Philippines' involvement in the trilateral format could be met with skepticism by other ASEAN members, even though some of them also lean towards one of the parties (for instance, Cambodia is often seen as aligned with China). Nevertheless, it is crucial to underscore that the Philippines is becoming increasingly disillusioned with ASEAN's passive stance toward Chinese activities in the South China Sea. Many member states appear more inclined to appease Beijing rather than uphold regional solidarity. Consequently, there is a growing perception in Manila that it should place more reliance on its traditional like-minded allies [33].

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