

Strategic Convergences: Philippines' Emerging Ties Amid Power Rivalries in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Article

Purpose—To examine how the Philippines leverages relationships with the United States, China, and India, while engaging middle powers like Japan and South Korea, to ensure maritime security and promote national interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Methodology—This study employs discourse analysis of joint statements, defense agreements, and maritime dialogues, combined with thematic analysis of elite narratives, to situate Manila's decisions within the evolving security landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Findings—The Philippines employs a layered approach—strengthening defense ties with the United States as its primary security partner, maintaining pragmatic economic relations with China despite maritime disputes, and cooperating with India to boost naval capacity and technological resilience. Engagements with Japan and South Korea diversify security and financial options, forming a broad support network.

Practical Implications—The study demonstrates how smaller states can mitigate vulnerability and maintain strategic autonomy by diversifying their alliances and institutionalizing multipolar engagements. These insights are valuable for policymakers exploring middle-power strategies amid great-power rivalry.

Originality/Value—This article adds to the Indo-Pacific security diplomacy literature by highlighting the Philippines' active role in balancing major and middle powers, offering insights into maritime security practices among smaller states.

Keywords: adaptive diplomacy, Indo-Pacific security, maritime security, Philippines, rules-based order

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I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a contested region for maritime power struggles among major nations, affecting the stability and strategic objectives of both middle and secondary states. In this context, the Philippines, an archipelagic nation comprising more than 7,000 islands, occupies a pivotal position in the South China Sea disputes. Its security has been closely tied to the maritime stability and sustainable governance of marine resources, which has exposed the Philippines to vulnerabilities, such as the persistent and aggressive activities of China in the South China Sea. Over the years, it has become central to the Philippines' foreign and defense policy.

Obama's pivot to the Asia-Pacific further reinforced engagement with the Philippines for maritime security, alliance-making and naval positioning in the South China Sea, where large-scale Chinese reclamation projects threatened the status quo. The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling was a pivotal moment. Still, it led to a strategic dilemma because China declined to alter its "nine-dash line" claims, exposing the limits of international law. Additionally, China intensified its gray-zone tactics—such as water cannon incidents, collision of fishing boats, and the militarization of artificial islands—underscoring the growing urgency to reach out to external powers other than the US and China. The Philippines opted for a dual-hedging strategy combining security assistance from the US and maximizing economic gain from China. Simultaneously, the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region helped the Philippines diversify its relationships with its neighborhood, such as Japan and South Korea, through infrastructure financing, military assets and capacity-building training. These engagements complemented Manila's alliance with the US and served as safeguards against over-reliance.

At the same time, India seeks to enhance its influence as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean and beyond. The dynamic bilateral relationship between India and the Philippines is anchored in shared democratic, cultural, and historical values, as well as in a mutual vision of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. The 75th anniversary of India–Philippines diplomatic ties in 2024 highlights a renewed interest in a partnership that has historically been constrained. In the early decades of their diplomatic relations, the relationship primarily consisted of diplomatic exchanges and occasional trade. Manila's security was based on its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, serving as a deterrent during the Cold War rivalry. Meanwhile, India focused more on its immediate neighborhood and maintained a non-aligned stance, dedicating minimal diplomatic effort to the Philippines. The Philippines experienced an asymmetrical alignment, with the US as its main security guarantor, while India remained marginal in Southeast Asia. Unlike the well-studied relationships between the Philippines and countries like the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, or India with Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia, the India–Philippines relationship remains relatively underexplored.¹

India's Act East policy has strengthened the strategic partnership between India and the Philippines, creating new avenues for collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region. Maritime security challenges, such as China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, have prompted India and the Philippines to strengthen their defense cooperation, reflecting shared threat perceptions and a desire for strategic autonomy. Both nations are

dedicated to upholding an international order based on rules and respect for international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As they grow closer, India and the Philippines have shown a mutual interest in peace, stability, and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific, working together to enhance their roles in regional and global affairs. The Philippines' external relations have become more nuanced: it relies on the US for military deterrence, collaborates with China for economic growth, and cautiously seeks India and middle powers such as Japan and South Korea for engagement in order to diversify options.

This research paper is divided into five sections, where the first section introduces the importance of learning about the Philippines' adaptive diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region. The second section examines the policy engagement and evolution of India–Philippines institutional mechanisms, from maintaining a symbolic diplomatic relationship to a structured strategic cooperation and the centrality of maritime disputes with China that urged the Philippines to recalibrate its foreign policy. The third section examines the Philippines' relationship with China after the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which initially showed friendliness but later led to a fallout. The fourth section is centered around the growing focus of the Philippines toward its immediate neighborhood, especially Japan and South Korea, whose developmental and security assistance have contributed to the strengthening of the Philippines' operational readiness in the turbulent waters of the South China Sea. The fifth section builds on the emerging partnership between India and the Philippines, grounded in a commitment to a rules-based order and alignment with each other's dynamic national interests in the Indo-Pacific. The paper concludes by placing these relationships within the broader Indo-Pacific power dynamics, emphasizing how the Philippines utilizes the three main poles—the US, China, and India—while engaging middle powers as force multipliers to strengthen its strategic independence.

II. Policy Engagement and Institutional Mechanisms

India and the Philippines established diplomatic relations in November 1949, but for years, it remained a cordial yet somewhat distant relationship. They occasionally engaged through multilateral settings such as the United Nations and the Non-Alignment Movement. The Philippines, the US, and India shared an asymmetrical strategic alignment. While Manila's security orientation was anchored and underpinned by the Mutual Defence Treaty, which guaranteed US support during external aggression,² India focused on its neighborhood under the Look East Policy. This approach kept bilateral engagement shallow and sporadic. India's Look East policy shifted its focus toward the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, including Vietnam, Singapore, and the CML countries—Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos—for trade expansion.³ Parallel to this, the Obama administration's pivot to the Asia-Pacific renewed a “strategic reinstatement” in maritime engagement and naval repositioning through the deepening of alliances, which became security leverage for Manila. This encouraged Manila to pursue a “twin-hedges” strategy, where Manila balanced growing Chinese assertiveness through defensive posturing and strengthening ties with the US while sustaining economic interests through a functional

relationship with Beijing.⁴ Furthermore, Manila focused on selective balancing in the maritime region.

India's Act East Policy became the springboard for strengthening the bilateral ties from token diplomacy—limited to symbolic exchanges toward a functional diplomacy—to one embedded in institutional mechanisms, policy frameworks, and defense and maritime cooperation in the South China Sea.⁵ Today, the Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation, which was established in 2007, has become a key platform for discussion on developmental sectors such as digital economy, health, agriculture, trade, tourism, and cooperation in security and defense of both democracies.⁶ This institutional engagement has provided a solid foundation for expanding the scope of cooperation and fulfilling certain objectives of the New Delhi-Manila dynamism. Even the “Strategic Partnership Declaration 2025–2029” has reaffirmed that through sectoral coordination bodies and a mutual commitment to strengthen bilateral relations, the region can ensure continued stability, peace, and prosperity.

2.1 Maritime Disputes

Although institutional mechanisms set a basic framework for cooperation, the turning point in Manila's external relations was driven by growing maritime disputes with China. These conflicts transformed the Philippines' security outlook from general policy considerations to immediate strategic priorities. The South China Sea became more than just contested water, it became the central focus around which Manila adjusted its hedging strategies, defense alliances, and diplomatic policies. In this context, maritime tensions served as the main link connecting institutional frameworks to tangible security collaborations.

China grounds its claims in the South China Sea based on its Nine-Dash Line, a cartographic underlining with historical posing. In 2012, China took control of the disputed Scarborough Shoal from Manila, which lies among the Spratly and Paracel island groups. However, the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague invalidated the Nine-Dash Line, first inscribed on a 1949 Chinese map, stating it has no legal basis. The Chinese government has called the Permanent Court of Arbitration Verdict null and void and has continued to claim 80 percent of the South China Sea, including critical trade routes, islands, and their relevant waters. The Chinese reclamation and revamp of the Spratly Islands, including Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs, led to the construction of airstrips, deep-water harbors, and reinforced hangars.⁷ This incident entrenched the Philippines's dependence on external security partners amid the growing US–China trade war.

The absence of enforcement mechanisms limited the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which aimed to bolster the UNCLOS further. However, Manila's legal standing in the regional discourse on maritime governance is still undermined. “Intentional” collision of Chinese coast guard ships with Filipino supply boats and coast guard ships has increased in recent years, indicating a risk of escalation in the South China Sea.⁸ While Manila achieved a legal win at The Hague, it continues to face strategic vulnerabilities in the South China Sea, necessitating a balance between confrontational and cooperative economic strategies with China.

III. The Philippines’ Approach to China Post-2016

The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision was a groundbreaking legal advancement reaffirming the boundaries of China’s Nine-Dash Line claims. However, the lack of sanctions severely diminished its real-world significance. Even though the ruling bolstered the normative power of UNCLOS, Manila has struggled to implement it in reality due to China’s persistent gray-zone behavior, including water cannon incidents and naval blockades. This disconnect between law and power suggests how weaker states usually only obtain symbolic, instead of material, influence through international arbitration. On the Philippine side, the decision framed did not conclude foreign policy decisions, which continued to be punctuated by a back-and-forth between accommodation and defiance toward Beijing.

The general elections in Southeast Asia’s oldest democracy saw a record 80 percent voters’ turnout and elected Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Republic of the Philippines, who promised change.⁹ He signaled a pivotal approach to an independent foreign policy based on diplomacy and economic cooperation, rather than confrontation with China. Undoing his predecessor Benigno Aquino III’s posturing of a closer tie with the US, President Duterte’s first state visit to China marked a significant thaw in the diplomatic relations between Manila and Beijing. Hua Chunying, the then-Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, described the encounter during the visit as having taken place in an “amicable and candid atmosphere,” marking a diplomatic rapprochement.¹⁰ The signing of bilateral cooperation documents signaled an extension beyond economic trade and infrastructure, offering Manila an immediate developmental gain. However, critics warned it risked entangling national security with financial dependence.

Furthermore, it became the hook for China’s cornerstone project—the Belt and Road Initiative’s ambitions for the inclusion of the Philippines. In 2018, the Philippines officially joined China’s Belt and Road initiative. For the Philippines, BRI membership translates into greater access to the “Red Market” and positions Manila on the radar of Chinese investors and creditors as an expanded source of financial channels.¹¹ Beijing emerged as Manila’s leading trading partner in 2018 with bilateral trade amounting to \$14.08 billion or 16.6 percent of the total trade.¹² The boost to Manila’s trade aligned with Beijing’s economic outreach, providing an inlet to pursue the revisionist Chinese national interest.

3.1 Decentralization and Growth

Manila’s BRI membership intersected with the *Build Build Build* (BBB) Program of the Duterte administration’s spending plan for infrastructure modernization and economic growth, dubbed as the “Golden Age of Infrastructure” by 2022. The BBB program is a component of *Ambisyon Natin 2040* (the Philippines’ long-term vision) and the “Dutertenomics” objective of social inclusivity and decentralization of growth centers in the Philippines. It is also included in the Philippine Development Plan (2017–2022), which makes it crucial for the nation to take steps in this direction. Post-pandemic, Manila needed a rapid economic recovery, to which China contributed by securing two bridge link construction contracts for Davao City and a cargo railway in Luzon. This positions China as

a critical partner in the Philippines' developmental trajectory. The further spate of infrastructure initiatives, such as the Subic-Clark railway project, a 71-km single-track cargo railway from Subic Bay Freeport Zone to Clark International Airport, and the connecting North Railway project, the Samal Island–Davao City bridge project, highlight how Manila's strategic drive for connectivity and decentralized development is deeply interconnected with China-backed infrastructure.¹³ However, tapping into several external sources for funds has created a sense of "treat or threat" among the Filipinos, exposing the deeper vulnerabilities.

Soon, the post-pandemic support heightened concern over dependency on Chinese financing. The BBB program and BRI have, in the past few years, become more detached from Philippine society, with growing default rates on China's concessional loans worrying about debt entrapment. Suspicions and concerns have tainted the relationship.¹⁴ China's failed bid to respond to the Philippines' funding appeal for two rail lines in Luzon and one in Mindanao, where it emphasized negotiations for a loan agreement, not a bilateral process, led to tensions.¹⁵ Furthermore, delays in six other funding projects led Manila to seek better interest rates and a grace period for loan repayment from Japan, straining Manila–Beijing relations.¹⁶ Such incidents weakened cooperation and fueled conflicts within the Philippines.

The political leadership under President Marcos Jr. also witnessed a growing anti-China stance. His visit to the headquarters of the US Indo-Pacific Command at the peak of disembarkation with China indicated a gradual reorientation towards the US. The alignment gesture through reaffirmation of the Mutual Defence Treaty, including joint patrols, increasing US access to Philippine bases, intelligence sharing, and maritime security cooperation, signaled an enhancement of bilateral defense cooperation.¹⁷ This reinforcement, framed as capacity-building as part of the US outreach, ultimately led to Manila's withdrawal from BRI in 2023, while solidifying relations with the US. Manila's shift toward Washington is primarily viewed as a security-focused move, but its concurrent efforts to engage with other regional players, such as India, indicate a hedging strategy of diversification in both security and economic relations.

IV. Philippines Relations with its Neighborhood

When China's funding under the BRI slowed down, President Duterte diversified economic relations with other foreign partners, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, the US, and India, among others. Manila's *Build Build Build* infrastructure program benefited from the reassessment, which was financed by Japan and the Asian Development Bank. It was subsequently pushed forward with projects such as the Metro Manila Subway, the North–South Commuter Railway, and the Malolos-Clark Railway.¹⁸ Japan's involvement went beyond just providing funding; it also included technology transfer and project management, establishing high standards in infrastructure development. South Korea also improved its engagement with the Philippines through its Korea Export-Import Bank, having signed agreements to finance projects such as the Panguil Bay Bridge and the New Cebu International Container Port enhancing connectivity.¹⁹ Although Australia is not a

major financier of the BBB program, it still contributed to Manila under its 2017 Partnership for Infrastructure initiative, focusing on sectors such as disaster-resilient infrastructure, transportation, and energy. Under Canberra's Aid Investment Plan (AIP 2015–2020), it supported Manila through the improvement of the local government's capacity and infrastructure for rural communities.²⁰ These efforts contributed to Manila's goal of reducing its dependence on China, thereby promoting sustainable investment in its growth trajectory.

Over the past few decades, Manila's relations with regional and international partners have shifted from strictly bilateral defense arrangements to institutionalized maritime dialogue institutions, which serve as critical tools for coordinating regional strategy. As such, these maritime dialogues—launched in 2011 between the Philippines and Japan—have established information sharing and coordination platforms for maritime domain awareness and Coast Guard training and development. Thereby, they have functioned as consultative frameworks to align national maritime priorities with collective security norms within the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the Australia–Philippines Dialogue enhanced capacity-building for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and strengthened maritime law enforcement and surveillance capabilities in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, the South Korea–Philippines dialogue added to the defense industrial cooperation framework, utilizing maritime security as a catalyst. As a result, relationships between neighbors in the immediate neighborhood were explicitly stated. Consequently, to build a closer working relationship with the QUAD members, the Philippines engaged in trilateral dialogue with both the United States and Japan and also initiated parallel dialogue with India, thereby embedding the regional deterrence mechanism into rule-based partnership arrangements. Additionally, the Philippine government extended outreach efforts to the European community through the UK–Philippines dialogue, providing European interest in the Indo-Pacific, followed, shortly thereafter, by the France–Philippines dialogue, which provided additional support to defense modernization through the delivery of patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard and initiated/stimulated discussions regarding a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement between France and the Philippines.²¹ The inaugural maritime dialogue between New Zealand and the Philippines stemmed from Manila's expansion to its South Pacific partners, to work on climate resilience and maritime security.²² In tandem, the Philippines' informal outreach to Taiwan within a politically sensitive maritime region articulates an extension of its adaptive maritime policies in the sectors of fisheries and humanitarian assistance as a way of functional cooperation. Thus, collectively, these maritime dialogues represent Manila's evolving maritime governance and reinforce the Philippine government's status as a critical linkage actor in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

4.1 Intersection of National Security and Modernization

Besides connectivity projects, the Philippines sought to boost defense cooperation. South Korea and the Philippines have elevated ties to a strategic partnership amid growing security challenges, initially focused on modernizing their armed forces to counter regional threats. Earlier, South Korea had also delivered the final batch of FA-50 fighter jets, underlining the maturing defense industrial partnership. Both governments agreed to enhance coast guard collaboration, while considering the revival of the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant,

as well as providing military support for the Philippines' second modernization plan.²³ The integration of energy collaboration and defense modernization indicates a comprehensive alignment, with Seoul positioning itself as a dependable partner that meets both Manila's economic and security needs. Additionally, the Philippines–South Korea strategic partnership resembles a hedging approach—securing defense equipment and training from Korea while maintaining economic ties with Japan and others. This shows Manila's recognition of interconnected vulnerabilities, such as maritime insecurity in the South China Sea and domestic energy shortage issues. Through institutionalized coast guard cooperation, Manila envisions to improve its maritime domain awareness in contested waters, supporting broader Indo-Pacific efforts, such as the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative.

Washington and Manila sought a stronger partnership, marking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of mutual diplomatic relations in 2021 through a joint statement to launch five initiatives, including a maritime security dialogue, support for phase two of military modernization, identifying additional Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements (EDCA) locations, infrastructure projects at EDCA sites, and General Security of Military Information Agreement.²⁴ The alliance between the US and the Philippines continues to be the key element of Manila's deterrence strategy, especially in the South China Sea, where American Freedom of Navigation Operations support international maritime rights law.

The alliance continues to modernize with the other regional countries within the security architecture. The signing of seven bilateral agreements, including those on defense cooperation and a commitment to equip and train for enhanced maritime surveillance in the broader Indo-Pacific, has deepened the Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership.²⁵ The visit of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to Manila marked a first in 20 years, resulting in the upgrade of bilateral ties to a strategic partnership that reinforces the importance of the Indo-Pacific region. Only Canberra and Washington have bilateral Status of Visiting Forces Agreements with Manila, which enable the two countries to conduct joint exercises, high-level visits, dialogues, and interoperability training.²⁶ The emergence of a quadrilateral grouping among the US, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, known as "SQUAD," further demonstrates Manila's centrality in the evolution of minilateralism in countering China's belligerence in the wider Indo-Pacific region. The Philippines relies on Indo-Pacific allies for security, while maintaining the status of free and open sea lanes of communication, and balances its economic interests with those of China, which drives its collective partnerships.

V. Philippines' Approach to India

While the US alliance remains central to Manila's security architecture, policymakers have recognized the strategic vulnerabilities of relying heavily on one partner, especially given the complex issues raised by South China Sea disputes. In this context, India's rise as a credible Indo-Pacific actor offers Manila an alternative and complementary partner to enhance defense capabilities and maritime security. India's support for ASEAN centrality and its expanding presence in regional infrastructure and security discussions in

accordance with the rules-based order, make it an appealing partner for the Philippines. Additionally, India's ability to provide concrete defense solutions, rather than mere rhetorical backing, sets it apart from other middle powers. As a result, the Philippines–India relationship has strengthened, with strategic goals now translating into practical defense cooperation, technology transfer, and joint maritime projects.

Prime Minister Modi's first visit to Manila in 2017 to attend the 15th India-ASEAN Summit and the 12th East Asia Summit symbolized India's commitment to ASEAN centrality as part of the Act East Asia framework and the broader Indo-Pacific region.²⁷ In 2018, Shri Narendra Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Manila on a state visit in 36 years. The meeting saw the signing of four agreements, including defense cooperation. Following up, Filipino President Duterte gave the nod for the Horizon 2 Priority project under the Philippines' modernization program and sought the urgency of procuring BrahMos missiles from India in 2022.²⁸ The first batch of the shore-based supersonic cruise missile BrahMos was delivered to Manila in early 2024, marking a significant turning point in Manila's approach to maritime disputes. This delivery, amid ongoing tensions between Manila and Beijing for several months, enhanced Manila's defensive posture,²⁹ thus signaling a shift from declaratory commitment to actionable deterrence and reinforcing Manila's need for a credible maritime security partner in the Indo-Pacific region.

Within the context of an intensifying regional geopolitical landscape, the expansion of navy-to-navy partnerships became evident in the first-ever quadrilateral joint naval exercise. The drill featured a US guided missile destroyer, the USS *William P. Lawrence*; one Japanese large aircraft carrier, the *Izumo*; an Indian-deployed destroyer, the INS *Kolkata*; a tanker, the INS *Shakti*, and a Philippine patrol vessel.³⁰ This exercise was important not just for its operational aspects but also as a token of Manila's evolving willingness to move beyond a traditional US-focused defense stance. By collaborating with India and Japan alongside the US, the Philippines showed Manila's willingness to join an intra-security network in the Indo-Pacific. These partnerships improve interoperability and technical familiarity between forces, but more importantly, they position Manila as an active participant in regional maritime security frameworks. Amid growing disputes in the South China Sea, this multilateral cooperation carries substantive strategic implications. It indicates Manila's strategic hedge, boosts its deterrence capabilities and emphasizes its role for like-minded powers (rephrase) committed to a rules-based order in contested waters.

Manila has sought to strengthen naval cooperation with New Delhi on multiple occasions, such as after Cyclone Amphan, when the Indian Navy aided in the repair of the BRP Ramon Alcaraz.³¹ Since August 2020, there has been a steady increase in joint naval exercises—such as PASSEX, between Manila and New Delhi—operating in the South China Sea to enhance interoperability and maritime cooperation. Manila was not only acknowledging India's role as a crisis responder but also broadening its partnerships beyond the US and Japan. Although these initiatives were small compared to major multilateral drills, they held significant symbolic value. They helped establish India as a trustworthy maritime partner.

5.1 Maritime Security Challenges

The Indian Coast Guard and Navy, with their Philippine counterparts, also recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding that specifically sought to enhance professional

linkages between the two Coast Guards in the domains of maritime law enforcement, maritime search & rescue, and marine pollution response, along with joint exercises and training collaboration.³² The deployment of the guided missile destroyer INS *Delhi*, fleet tanker INS *Shakti*, and anti-submarine warfare corvette to Manila, as part of India's general deployment in the South China Sea, has strengthened its maritime partnerships with friendly countries, thereby boosting its security. The first ASEAN–India Maritime Exercise held in 2023 operated in two phases, the harbor phase and the sea phase, reiterating India's strategic interests in upholding ASEAN centrality and fostering mutual understanding of regional security. For additional maritime security, India signed a Coast Guard Cooperation Agreement with Manila in 2023, which also supported the Philippines' decision to conduct “white hull to white hull diplomacy,” referring to the extensive use of Coast Guard vessels to counter China, which has made the country reticent in deploying its naval forces.³³ Thus, what might seem like technical exercises and repair missions signal Manila's gradual recalibration of the security calculus in the South China Sea.

Even under India's Act East Policy, the launch of the “Vaccine Maitri” program readily helped the people of the Philippines, thus bolstering India's image as a global health leader. India's pharmaceutical capabilities helped the Philippines benefit from broader efforts to combat the COVID-19 health crisis. India's contributions were viewed as both humanitarian and strategically significant, advancing India's vision of becoming the “Pharmacy of the World” and strengthening alliances in Southeast Asia. India–Philippines trade surpassed the \$3 billion mark in the fiscal year 2022–23, underscoring their commitment to grow together in the region. Manila's economic abilities have enhanced, while its GDP remains stable at 5.4 percent growth, during the first quarter of 2025.³⁴ These numbers have presented a need to accelerate negotiations for the Preferential Trade Agreement.³⁵ The expansion across key sectors, including maritime security and AI, has opened new business opportunities and ways for cooperation.

5.2 Soft Power Diplomacy

The increase in people-to-people diplomacy between New Delhi and Manila has fostered cultural cooperation over the decades. Manila has its own rich legacy of epics and mythological tales. Notably, the Philippines has its own indigenous epics and scripts, such as the “*Biag ni Lam-Ang*” belonging to the Ilocano community, the Hiligaynon people's “*Hinilawod*,” and the “*Darangen*” from Maranao. These epics have a structure similar to the Ramayana, with heroes, gods, and moral precepts. For example, while the stories themselves are different, the UNESCO-recognized *Darangen* epic of the Maranao people has some thematic similarities with the Ramayana, including heroics, wars, and divine intervention. The vibrant Indian diaspora community also contributes to the social and economic fabric of the Philippines. In India, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines tend to bring together youth and cultural exchanges with celebrations like hosting university students on the International Day of Yoga.

The development of Philippines–India relations reflects Manila's strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific, where symbolic acts have grown into dynamic partnerships. Prime Minister Modi's 2017 visit, the 2024 BrahMos missile agreement and an expanded naval cooperation show India's capacity to offer Manila tangible defense tools and a dependable crisis

response partner.³⁶ Concurrently, India's support through Vaccine Maitri and increasing bilateral trade highlight the broader, multi-faceted nature of this relationship, blending security, economic, and societal aspects.³⁷ For Manila, India is not just a new partner but a crucial hedge—helping diversify security options beyond its traditional reliance on the United States and Japan. This diversification is layered: unlike India, which supplies hard security assets like missile systems and naval cooperation, Japan and South Korea focus on economic diplomacy, infrastructure funding, technological aid, and capacity-building in maritime security.³⁸ These complementary collaborations reflect Manila's targeted approach to integrating various security and development support networks. Therefore, the India–Philippines partnership is part of a larger strategy, with Japan and South Korea playing equally essential roles in Manila's Indo-Pacific hedging efforts.

VI. The Way Forward

As an archipelagic nation, the Philippines faces notable challenges in maritime governance, particularly in maritime domain awareness. The capacity of maritime authorities to gain a comprehensive and real-time understanding of the country's extensive marine areas is constrained by limited surveillance capabilities, insufficient assets like aircrafts and patrol ships, and weak information-sharing channels. Maritime governance suffers from overlapping mandates, inadequate budgets, policy incoherence, and reduced efficiency and responsiveness to waterborne threats.³⁹ The executive order dated 2024, initiated by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., aimed to establish a “unified, coordinated, and effective” maritime security system.⁴⁰ This initiative sought to address and close the resource gap and facilitate the integration process. However, domestic reforms alone are insufficient to guarantee credible deterrence and effective maritime monitoring, highlighting the crucial role of external partnerships in Manila's strategy.

The United States remains the Philippines' most significant security partner. The bilateral partnership has been strengthened through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which, over the decade, has provided American forces with rotational access to recently added bases across Luzon and Palawan—areas strategically near the South China Sea. This takes the total to nine American bases in the Philippines. This collaboration supports the Philippines' Maritime Defense Architecture by enhancing surveillance capabilities, creating a safety net against gray-zone coercion, and facilitating joint patrols and intelligence access that Manila cannot achieve independently. Additionally, the US Coast Guard has expanded its presence in Philippine waters, conducting training and joint patrols to improve the country's monitoring abilities. Thus, domestic reforms focus on establishing consistent maritime governance, while US support helps put these plans into action by offering essential tools, data, and security guarantees. This interaction strengthens the Philippines' capacity to defend its maritime rights in disputed waters without provoking China, maintaining a necessary balance between deterrence and restraint.

The Philippines' relationship with China remains one of the most complex and contentious aspects of its engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Despite close geographic proximity and strong economic ties, Manila continues to contend with Beijing's assertive actions in the South China Sea. Incursions into waters claimed by the Philippines, particularly around the

Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, highlight the power disparity between the two countries. Although the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision nullified Beijing's broad nine-dash line claims, China has declined to accept the ruling. Manila faces a delicate balancing act—serving as a major investor and trading partner while dealing with coercive tactics, such as water cannons and ramming fishing vessels—struggling to safeguard its sovereignty while reaping economic benefits. Nevertheless, geographic proximity makes complete disengagement impossible; instead, engagement must be managed. This pattern reflects the broader hedging strategy often adopted by middle powers in the Indo-Pacific.

The Philippines looked for support in its neighborhood, increasing bilateral talks with Japan and South Korea to strengthen its security posture. Japan's cooperation with Manila is framed under its FOIP strategy, emphasizing a rules-based order and freedom of navigation, aligning with Manila's priorities in the South China Sea. Their partnership is highlighted by recent Official Security Assistance and Official Development Assistance, enabling the transfer of advanced equipment to the Philippine Navy and Air Force. This reinforces Japan's posture of considering the Philippines as a crucial partner in Southeast Asia. Japan has provided coast guard patrol vessels, maritime radars, and disaster response equipment, and through the Japan International Cooperation Agency it has facilitated capacity-building programs, boosting the Philippines' institutional readiness and technical competence. Similarly, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy also highlighted Southeast Asia as a crucial region benefiting Manila's hedging strategy. Despite South Korea's normative role in the Philippines' deterrence strategy, the supply of FA-50 fighter jets and naval equipment, such as Miguel Malvar-class frigates and Offshore Patrol Vessels, contributed to the operational readiness of the Philippines. Thus, by leveraging Japan's rules-based policy combined with South Korea's military support, the Philippines is reinforcing its strategic legitimacy with a balancing act in the Indo-Pacific.

As India and the Philippines celebrated 75 years of diplomatic ties in November 2024, followed by President Marcos Jr.'s state visit in August 2025, they elevated their strategic partnership, moving beyond symbolic camaraderie. The trajectory has been one of considerable improvement and growing cooperation in defense and maritime security, indicating an institutional upgrade toward a structured and stable Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the Philippines' modernization efforts could benefit from India's expertise in naval shipbuilding, offshore patrol vehicles, and surveillance and defense technology. This is relevant for enhancing the country's coast guard capabilities through dual-use platforms for humanitarian and other missions' surveillance. Beyond hardware cooperation, the partnership centers on maritime cooperation, including formal exchanges through the maritime dialogue and joint defense and industry mechanisms closely aligned with shared norms, thereby reaffirming their support for UNCLOS and a rules-based regional framework order. By incorporating this enhanced partnership into its strategic framework, Manila not only broadens its security alliances but also gains access to credible, complementary capabilities that strengthen its sovereignty and maritime resilience in a contested environment. Furthermore, India's image as a "Vishwa Bandhu" has enabled its proactive engagement in Southeast Asia, treating the region as its extended neighborhood. Vishwa Bandhu refers to India's identity as a multi-vector diplomatic actor and a reliable partner, while consistent with its national interests.⁴¹ This marks a crucial turning point, as India now occupies a core partner status in the tapestry of Manila's security and development, and is no longer an actor on the periphery.

The Philippines has adeptly employed a strategic balancing act among the three central poles of the Indo-Pacific—the United States, China, and India—aligning its national interests with a nuanced approach that combines security, economic, and diplomatic considerations. At a time of contradictions and cooperations, hedging is the operative tone of statecraft.⁴² By maintaining strong ties with these key players and engaging middle powers like Japan and South Korea, Manila has constructed a diverse, supportive architecture that reinforces its strategic autonomy. Moving forward, its success will hinge on institutionalizing this balancing strategy through mechanisms such as ASEAN centrality and targeted multilaterals, ensuring resilience in a shifting geopolitical landscape characterized by escalating great power competition. Ultimately, the Philippines exemplifies an emerging model of adaptive middle-power diplomacy in the complex and contested Indo-Pacific region.

Notes

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