

Japan, the Philippines, and the United States: A New Era of Partnership through Trilateral Defense and Security Cooperation

By Dr. Miyoko Taniguchi

Introduction

On April 11, 2024, a historic trilateral summit took place at the White House between the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. The leaders of the three countries agreed to deepen security and economic ties, with a [joint statement](#) outlining their shared commitment to maintaining a free and open rule-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region. The strengthening of trilateral cooperation is a significant strategic move to institutionalize the deterrence and response capabilities of US allies and partners, especially to protect the territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS). The institutionalization and operationalization of this “minilateral” cooperation, based on long-standing US-Japan and US-Philippines bilateral relations, is also a measure to mitigate any political uncertainty and instability that may arise as a result of the 2024 US presidential election.

The Impetus for Trilateral Cooperation: The Change of Leadership in the Philippines

Arguably, the recent development of trilateral cooperation was made possible by “Bong Bong” Marcos’s succession to the Philippine presidency, specifically regarding the country’s foreign and security policies. Marcos’s predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), was critical of US security policies and initiated a [revival of ties with China for economic gains](#) under the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#), downplaying the sovereignty dispute in the SCS. Underlying his [doubts regarding US help in the event of a full-blown conflict in the SCS](#), the president announced the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in February 2020. The announcement was primarily a [retaliation against a canceled US visa for his personal ally](#). After the termination process was suspended three times, the VFA was [restored in July 2021](#) owing to a [US donation of COVID-19 vaccines](#) and the realization of the VFA’s importance. Thus, the so-called “[independent foreign policy](#)” gave rise to numerous setbacks in strengthening national defense postures.

With the clear articulation of the [president’s position on upholding the 2016 arbitral ruling](#) from the start of Marcos’s term in 2022, the Philippines–US alliance was reinvigorated. Accordingly, trilateral cooperation is being institutionalized through high-level interactions and military engagement since June 2023, as China’s assertive actions in the SCS continue to escalate. However, it also brings to the fore, for the first time in a multilateral context, the consistent capacity-building and defense, in terms of coast guard activities, assistance Japan has been providing to the Philippines over the past decades.

Long-standing Japanese Defense Capacity-Building with the Philippines

Japan and the Philippines have shared liberal values and strategic interests. Beginning with [capacity-building assistance for maritime “safety” in the 1980s](#), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has developed capacity-building on law enforcement in maritime “safety” with the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) through Official Development Assistance (ODA). After the agreement of the [Strategic Partnership in 2011](#), which is composed of economic and security cooperation, [Japan pledged to provide ten 40-meter patrol boats to the PCG in 2013](#) while promoting aid for “[Quality Infrastructure](#),” in an apparent move to counterbalance China’s BRI. Subsequently, Japan’s initiatives were incorporated into the [Free and Open Indo-Pacific \(FOIP\)](#) vision in 2016.

Dr. Miyoko Taniguchi, 2023–2024 AAS EWC RICE participant and Professor of International Relations and Peace Studies at Miyazaki Municipal University in Japan, asserts that the “strengthening of trilateral cooperation [between the United States, Japan, and the Philippines is a significant strategic move to institutionalize the deterrence and response capabilities of US allies and partner...”

The recent acceleration of China's assertive actions in the SCS has resulted in the further strengthening of security ties between the two countries. In 2023, Japan provided the Philippine Navy with a coastal radar system through a new non-ODA grant scheme entitled [Official Security Assistance \(OSA\)](#). The aim of OSA was to enhance the capabilities of the armed forces and related organizations of like-minded recipient countries—the other first-year OSA recipients were Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Fiji. In May of this year (2024), both countries agreed to sign a [Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement \(RAA\)](#), which is similar to the VFA, to provide a legal framework for the Self-Defense Forces of Japan (SDF) to temporarily visit the Philippines for military exercises and operations. Thus, the development of bilateral cooperation is viewed as a quasi-alliance.

Strategic Interests and Rationales of Trilateral Cooperation

The joint strategic interests and complimentary rationales behind advancing trilateral cooperation can be explained as follows:

“Japan maintains a geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific as a regional hub through this cooperation by taking more roles in regional security to share the burdens with the United States. Although Japan cannot act as a security guarantor due to constitutional constraints, it remains a regional power with the will and capabilities to maintain a rules-based international order...”

First, despite the risk of escalating tensions with China and the entrapment of Taiwan in a contingency, the Philippines sees cooperation with the United States and Japan as a means to gain strategically significant resources and support. These strategic benefits include assistance to increase deterrence and military capabilities, wider channels and more mechanisms for economic development, and diplomatic support for maintaining national sovereignty in the SCS. Conversely, given the doubt surrounding the US commitment to the role of security guarantor in the SCS and wider region, bringing Japan into the cooperation allows the Philippines to mitigate some of these concerns. Trilateral cooperation with Japan serves not only to keep the United States engaged in the Indo-Pacific but also to allow the Philippines to reduce its dependence on and increase its bargaining power with the United States.

Second, Japan maintains a geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific as a regional hub through this cooperation by taking more roles in regional security to [share the burdens with the United States](#). Although Japan cannot act as a security guarantor due to constitutional constraints, it remains a regional power with the will and capabilities to maintain a rules-based international order, sharing democratic values and strategic interests with the United States and the Philippines. The recent revision of the National Security Strategy, accompanied by an [increase in the country's defense budget](#), indicates Japan's commitment to becoming more proactively engaged in national, regional, and international security. Under Japan's initiative, trilateral cooperation with the Philippines broadens the purview of efforts beyond East Asia to include Southeast Asia, covering the ECS, SCS, and the defense of the associated sea lanes.

Third, through this cooperation, the United States promotes more burden-sharing with Japan in regional security with a military footprint in Southeast Asia to enhance deterrence and response capabilities in the SCS and Taiwan Strait. Given lingering doubts partners have regarding the possibility of US disengagement from the region, trilateral cooperation helps maintain the US commitment to its allies, especially where there are maritime border disputes. The military presence of US forces in the northern parts of the Philippines through the expanded [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement \(EDCA\)](#) strengthens deterrence across the Taiwan Strait.

Overall, this trilateral cooperation, as part of minilateralism efforts based on the US-led hub-and-spokes alliance system, can function as a mechanism to strengthen security ties among like-minded states and complement the US alliances. Moreover, trilateral engagement is more resilient against policy shifts and changes in leadership, especially the upcoming US presidential election, in all three countries. Thus, it serves to keep the US engaged in the region and maintains the continuity of security and defense policies in the Indo-Pacific.

Dr. Miyoko Taniguchi, Professor of International Relations and Peace Studies at Miyazaki Municipal University in Japan, can be contacted at taniguchimiyokojp@gmail.com.