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# THE BRAHMOS DEAL

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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It has been understood that there is a need to maintain a gaped eye on movements made in the South China Sea as China has stepped up its operations in the region with its notion of “The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. The briskness in their responsive policies is being highlighted, outlying the emerging Indo-Pacific on any sudden manoeuvres being made by state actors in the zone. As a result, the Indo-Pacific Community was quick to warmly welcome news of the Indian BrahMos arrangement with the Philippines. As Philippines became the first nation to import India’s BrahMos Aerospace on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2022, the deal is thought to be a watershed collective gesture towards China<sup>1</sup>. The Philippines' Marines was able to buy three batteries of the BrahMos cruise missile because of an agreement struck by Philippine’s Defence Minister Delfin Lorenzana and BrahMos Aerospace Chief Atul Dinkar Rane, valued at around \$375 million. The procurement, Lorenzana said, will help the country “bolster the firepower of the Philippine Navy, notably the Philippine Marine Corps Coastal Defense Regiment”.<sup>2</sup> This aspiration aligns with the country's goal of defending the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in the eastern South China Sea, which the People's Republic of China claims.

Talks between India and the Philippines began in early 2021 in anticipation of President Rodrigo Duterte's visit, but rumours have been circulating since 2019. The negotiations once fell through due to the COVID-19 pandemic but there seemed to be a consensus and determination in the Filipino government to increase military capability. Therefore, BrahMos as a joint venture between the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya brought an opportunity to acquire the shore-based anti-air fastest supersonic cruise missile. Scholars and academics studied the deal to better understand the dynamics of its magnitude by looking at the relationships between the parties involved: the Philippines, Russia, China, and India. While the deal has the aptitude to shake the Indo-Pacific paradigm, the purpose of this study is to critically examine current contemporary viewpoints on the transaction and analyse whether the deal can kick-off India’s defense export, knock-on

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<sup>1</sup> “India, Philippines Conclude Contract for Brahmos Missiles.” The Economic Times. Accessed March 20, 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/history-in-making-india-philippines-conclude-contract-for-brahmos-missiles-today/articleshow/89174784.cms>.

<sup>2</sup> “Philippine Marine Corps Activates Battalion to Operate BrahMos Missile System – Indian Defence Research Wing.” 2022. Idrw.org. 2022. <https://idrw.org/philippine-marine-corps-activates-battalion-to-operate-brahmos-missile-system%EF%BF%BC/>.

a militarization of nations in the South China Sea or commence deterrence of Chinese activities in the sea.

## Indian Defence Export Ambitions

The agreement is predominantly seen as an endeavour by India to domesticate its defence equipment industry while simultaneously increasing defence exports under the ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ vision. Quoting a conversation with Ajay Kumar Singh, a former Commander in Chief of Southern Command of Indian Army, “For India, it is a signal of our faith in indigenous armament manufacturing capability” as India’s ‘Defence Production & Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020’ stated it is imperative to increase promotion of exports through Lines-of-Credit.<sup>3</sup> By 2025, the document sets a target turnover of Rs 1,75,000 crores (US\$ 25 billion), with an export objective of Rs 35,000 crores (US\$ 5 billion) in Aerospace and Defence goods and services. Under this backdrop, it can be explained why India had offered a line of credit of \$ 100 million for defence purchases and an additional Special Allotment Release Order (SARO) of 31 million USD also being sanctioned to cover the initial payment.<sup>4</sup> The deal will prove to be vital for Indian foreign policy’s move towards freedom of navigation for a free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific that the Defence Minister Rajnath Singh spoke about in 2021.<sup>5</sup> Outlining the Act East Asia Policy of 2014, the deal is understood to be in the context of an endeavour to be a reliable regional security partner and increasing proactive partnerships in the regional security organizations. Philippines never had a transaction of his scale with India, and it shows an inclination to make future trades in defence equipment.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Defence Production. 2020 Draft. “Defence Production & Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020”. The Government of India.

<sup>4</sup> Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. “India to Export Defence Equipment to Philippines, Expands Reach in the Pacific.” *The Economic Times*, 3 Mar. 2021, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-export-defence-equipment-to-philippines-expands-reach-in-the-pacific/articleshow/81297651.cms?from=mdr](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-export-defence-equipment-to-philippines-expands-reach-in-the-pacific/articleshow/81297651.cms?from=mdr). Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Sibal, Sidhant. “Defence Minister Rajnath Singh Extends Support to Freedom of Navigation in South China Sea.” *DNA India*, 16 June 2021, [www.dnaindia.com/india/report-defence-minister-rajnath-singh-extends-support-to-freedom-of-navigation-in-the-south-china-sea-2895729](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-defence-minister-rajnath-singh-extends-support-to-freedom-of-navigation-in-the-south-china-sea-2895729). Accessed 13 Apr. 2022.

## Filipino Exigency

For Philippines, the deal indicates a desire towards militarization and modernization of their defence paraphernalia. China's actions impeding the UNCLOS clauses has led Philippines to believe that such a deal is necessary to keep further hostilities at bay though until recently the nation was unwilling to take apparent steps. In November 2021, when three ships from the Chinese coastguard blocked and fired water cannons on two Philippines supply boats within the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the disputed sea, Philippines' attempt to bolster their military potential became coherent.<sup>6</sup> After China's refusal to participate in the arbitration process and complete rejection of the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's administered tribunal further fuelled the fire. The tribunal laid its conclusion that "...there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line'". On China's historic rights to resources in the waters of the South China Sea, the Tribunal concluded that "...such rights were extinguished to the extent they were incompatible with the exclusive economic zones provided for in the Convention...".<sup>7</sup> However, China has violated the judgement several times which has reaffirmed its belief in its own claims. Another factor to consider as evidenced by the 2022 Chinese aid to Philippines, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte has refused to implement the verdict in exchange for economic benefits from Beijing.<sup>8</sup> As unpredictable as Duterte is, this gives China a licence to continue its operations in the South China Sea. While the Filipino foreign policy was muted for a while, there was clearly a trigger that pushed him to sign the arrangement with India to monitor his own country's interests which becomes symbolic of their perception of China as a potential threat.

## Geopolitical Entanglements

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<sup>6</sup> Qamar, Md. Mudassir. "China-Philippines South China Sea Dispute, PCA Award and Post-Arbitral Relations. - Indian Council of World Affairs (Government of India)." [www.icwa.in](http://www.icwa.in), 5 Jan. 2022, [www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls\\_id=6872&lid=4680](http://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=6872&lid=4680).

<sup>7</sup> Goh Sui Noi, et al. "China Has No Historic Rights to Resources in South China Sea, Says UN-Backed Tribunal." *The Straits Times*, 12 July 2016, [www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/no-legal-basis-for-china-to-claim-historic-rights-to-resources-in-sea-areas-within-nine](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/no-legal-basis-for-china-to-claim-historic-rights-to-resources-in-sea-areas-within-nine).

<sup>8</sup> Feng, John. "Philippines' Duterte Says 2016 Court Ruling against China Is Trash to Be Thrown Away." *Newsweek*, 6 May 2021, [www.newsweek.com/philippines-duterte-says-court-ruling-against-china-trash-thrown-away-1589183](http://www.newsweek.com/philippines-duterte-says-court-ruling-against-china-trash-thrown-away-1589183). Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

While the deal was concluded between India and Philippines it extends to complex players indirectly as the deal was thought to “undoubtedly have an impact on the India-China, India-ASEAN as well as the Philippines-China relations” as said by Saha, an associate fellow at ORF.<sup>9</sup> While India also refrained on taking any steps before against Chinese aggression apart from border issues, this deal indicates a changing Indian will which is now demanding adherence to international rules and norms by China. India is looking for more engagement with ASEAN nations by promoting its defence export hoping for more nations to grow interested in close relations. Russia’s nod for the transaction also implied that it was unconcerned with Chinese perceptions. While the deal potentially assured Philippines friendship with India, it took Russia a step back from their relationship with China.

With the involvement of Russia through NPO Mashinostroyeniya, the deal gained a new orb of politics after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022. The sanctions imposed on Russia by United States, European Union and other nations brought to page a massive international boycott of Russia.<sup>10</sup> To evade repercussions of any domino effect, Indian ambassador to Manila clarified that India’s deal with the Philippines to supply the BrahMos missile is a bilateral transaction, and it will not be impacted by the sanctions against Russia. He also added, “I do not want to downplay the fact that the weapons system was developed and manufactured by Russia and India and there is a strong element of Russian support in the system”.<sup>11</sup> However, he assured, “This is an India-Philippines transaction, and I am quite confident that we will be able to move ahead on that bilateral basis”. It indicates how India is determined to see the transaction through with Philippines to pursue a strategy towards a free and open Indo-pacific.

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<sup>9</sup> Saha, Premesha. “How India’s BrahMos Deal Is Not Just about Philippines but Gives a Stronger Message to the Region.” ORF, 12 Feb. 2022, [www.orfonline.org/research/how-indias-brahmos-deal-is-not-just-about-philippines/](http://www.orfonline.org/research/how-indias-brahmos-deal-is-not-just-about-philippines/). Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Kim, Anthony. “Sanctions on Putin’s Russia: An Initial Assessment.” The Heritage Foundation, Mar. 25AD, [www.heritage.org/international-economies/commentary/sanctions-putins-russia-initial-assessment](http://www.heritage.org/international-economies/commentary/sanctions-putins-russia-initial-assessment).

<sup>11</sup> Tiwari, Sakshi. “BrahMos Missile: India’s “Most Promising” Weapon of Export Hits Turbulence over Russia Sanctions, Pakistan Incident?” Eurasian Times, 8 Apr. 2022, [eurasianimes.com/sanctions-on-russia-accidental-firing-of-brahmos-missile/](http://eurasianimes.com/sanctions-on-russia-accidental-firing-of-brahmos-missile/). Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

# Checking China and Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific

To examine the effects of the deal in the Indo-Pacific and on Chinese pursuit of their aims, it is imperative to be aware of how China refused to acknowledge the Indo-Pacific initiative until 2021. In a media briefing on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021, Zhao Lijian, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman spoke of how, "China has noted India's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative". President Xi Jinping also used the term for the first time when he said, "We seek high-quality Belt and Road cooperation with ASEAN and cooperation between the Belt and Road Initiative and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", during a press conference in November 2021.<sup>12</sup> Before this the country referred to the region as 'Asia-Pacific' and refused to engage in conversations about 'Indo-Pacific'. Believing the term to be a collective aggressive measure towards China, they refused to be a part of the initiative, but it is now evident that they cannot remain isolated. In this framework, when the deal manifested, China did take notice of it, but their reaction was limited. According to Dr Sriparna Pathak<sup>13</sup> "China would have taken cognizance of this deal and India being a strong enemy would not work for Xi Jinping in Chinese domestic politics" which is why she believes China did not make strong statements to indicate their thoughts on India being a strong contender.

China was envisaged to be uncomfortable with the defence deal as South China Sea is one of the potential areas for deployment. An article published by Japan Forward spoke of how, "the deal is surely going to rile China, which will try to put pressure on the Philippines through other means".<sup>14</sup> As anticipated, China did seem a little thrown off as it allocated PHP1 billion worth of military assistance aid to the Philippines which was delivered in January 2022 as a part of President Xi Jinping's 2019 commitment to assist and support the Philippine government in its counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism campaign. Considering the timing of this, it did perceive it to be an action in effort to balance ties with Philippines. Philippines has yet not abandoned its 'best friend' China as it welcomed the aid in January as Lorenzana mentioned, "This military grant from China speaks volumes on how our two nations can be

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<sup>12</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on November 23, 2021 [http://gy.china-embassy.org/eng//fyrth/202111/t20211123\\_10452076.htm](http://gy.china-embassy.org/eng//fyrth/202111/t20211123_10452076.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Expert of Chinese foreign policy and an Assistant Professor at Jindal School of International Affairs

<sup>14</sup> Borah, Rupakjyoti. "Why India Should Make Sure Brahmos Missile Deal with the Philippines Goes Through." Japan-Forward.com, 21 Jan. 2022, [japan-forward.com/why-india-should-make-sure-brahmos-missile-deal-with-the-philippines-goes-through/](http://japan-forward.com/why-india-should-make-sure-brahmos-missile-deal-with-the-philippines-goes-through/). Accessed 13 Apr. 2022.

civil, diplomatic, and friends despite some issues on territorial claims”.<sup>15</sup> However, China’s limited reaction is noticed and can be attributed to its massive military power as it yet retains its 3<sup>rd</sup> Rank out of the 142 considered for the Annual Global Fire Power review. China’s economic advantage and surplus manpower has made it easier for the nation to forge ahead considering an increasing domestic focus on reforms to strengthen their forces, especially its naval forces. In July 2021, China also tested an advanced hypersonic weapon which approached its target travelling at least five times the speed of sound.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it can be established that China for now has nothing to worry about.

Despite the Chinese argument, the sale of Brahmos as quoted by Dr Bhatt and Dr Pandey might set “the proverbial ball rolling” for a following trend of militarization of nations around the South China Sea.<sup>17</sup> While the sale might not be of an immediate threat to Chinese interests, the domino effect caused by the message sent across borders might enable a causal sequence which might lead to countries engaging in a fixture to militarize themselves leading to a security dilemma. It is to be noted that militarization of nations is subject to an array of precursors that need to converge for South China Sea nations to decide towards militarization, but the deal can invigorate ambitions. The deal has the latent potential to stimulate and encourage nations to take steps to empower themselves. The militarization of nations around the South China Sea will secure short-term security building on the theory of balance of power but does not warrant that China will curb its hostile activities. Nevertheless, they will be able to grow more capable of keeping China’s activities on check and impede the Xi government from taking any extreme decisions.

## Potential Pitfalls

While the agreement has the potential to be pivotal, the stakeholder countries have faced numerous hurdles in carrying it out since it was announced. On 9<sup>th</sup> March during routine

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<sup>15</sup> Philippine News Agency, and Priam Nepomuceno. “PH, China Remain Friends despite Territorial Issues: Lorenzana.” [www.pna.gov.ph](http://www.pna.gov.ph), 9 Feb. 2022, [www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1167374](http://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1167374).

<sup>16</sup> The Guardian. “China launched second missile during July hypersonic test, reports say.” *The Guardian*, 23 November 2021, [www.theguardian.com/science/2021/nov/23/china-launched-second-missile-during-july-hypersonic-test-reports-say](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/nov/23/china-launched-second-missile-during-july-hypersonic-test-reports-say). Accessed 27 April 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Bhatt, Dr Pooja, and Dr Aparajita Pandey. “The BrahMos Sale to Philippines; Implications and Prospects.” *Financial Express*, 7 Jan. 2022, [www.financialexpress.com/defence/the-brahmos-sale-to-philippines-implications-and-prospects/2400954/](http://www.financialexpress.com/defence/the-brahmos-sale-to-philippines-implications-and-prospects/2400954/). Accessed 13 Apr. 2022.

maintenance, a technical malfunction led to the accidental firing of a missile into Pakistan. The Pakistani air force said that the missile travelled at Mach 3 - three times the speed of sound - at an altitude of 12,000m (40,000ft) and flew 124km (77 miles) in Pakistani airspace before crashing.<sup>18</sup> This incident raised many questions and Philippines requested clarity on whether BrahMos had any technical malfunctions. While India confirmed that there were no technological issues and that an investigation was ongoing, the country's image has been tarnished. With the esteem of India's high-tech defence system on stake, the Indian Air Force has a lot to explain to ensure confidence on the equipment as other nations like Vietnam and Indonesia also covet the missile system which puts potential future sales in jeopardy.

Another potential threat is Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the American federal law on imposing sanctions on any nation that has significant transactions with Russia. As Russia is co-manufacturer of BrahMos, CAATSA sanctions if imposed can bring the house of cards down and hamper the Indian dreams of becoming independent in defence manufacturing. The sanctions would not only prevent India from creating a strong defence linkage but also cease any further sales of defence equipment from India. While the sanctions would hurt its economy, India would be stuck between making decisions as Russian arms make up half of India's total military imports as per SIPRI data for 2020. Countries would disengage with India in this light bringing any hopes for transactions to a pause. Considering Philippines is an American ally, one hopes that United States will consider repercussions and make exceptions as President Biden is contemplating on the imposition of CAATSA sanctions.

## The Way Forward

The BrahMos deal brought the potential for a new turn in Indo-Pacific relations and as the aftermath unfolds, we will be able to see whether the deal will turn into a decisive factor in changing relations in the South China Sea. While India and Philippines were able to send a very strong message from their side, it is evident that continuous militarizing is not a solution to the long-term issue. In the long run, both sides need to open more effective communication channels for negotiations on the conflict since neither party has appraised the Hague verdict.

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<sup>18</sup> "India Investigates Missile That Landed in Pakistan." BBC News, 15 Mar. 2022, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60747342](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60747342). Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.



Bi-lateral negotiations can be the key to solving disputes in the South China Sea, but for short-term it becomes necessary for Philippines to continue with the deal and acquire further military equipment as it can give the nation some leverage to bring China to the negotiating table with a better advantage. With the Philippine presidential elections to happen in May 2022, it will also be necessary to take into consideration the foreign policy inclinations of the next president. It will be interesting to see how Duterte's successor deals with China, and whether they follow the footsteps of their predecessors in moving toward self-sufficiency and independence. As far as the question of other nations militarizing in the Indo-Pacific to deter China is concerned, there is a lot that one needs to manifest to witness the effects of the deal before concluding that it will be key in shifting the Indo-Pacific dialogue. Convergence of interests and capability to acquire such weapons is needed but nations will need to tactically hedge between national security and relations with China. Deterrence to Chinese actions can no longer be an individual endeavour but needs to be a collective one. While such deals might not strategically increase military capabilities, it is one step forward in fulfilling tactical needs and building state-to-state relationships.

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