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PHILIPPINES AND JAPAN DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

Japan and the Philippines share a long history of economic and cultural ties, but it was not until recent years that the two countries started to enhance their defence relations. The security environment in the Indo-Pacific region has been unilaterally challenged in the past decade, mainly by China's military expansion and assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, posing a grave challenge to regional stability. In response to these developments, Japan and the Philippines have increasingly cooperated in the defence sphere, with the aim of promoting their mutual security interests and contributing to regional peace and stability. With Japan's recent reinterpretation of its Pacifist constitution (revamping the National Security Strategy Document) and the Philippines' ever-growing skirmishes with China along the South China Sea have forged deeper defence ties between the two United States allies.

Japan and the Philippines have a long history of cooperation in various areas, including trade, investment, and cultural exchanges. The defence partnership between Japan and the Philippines has a long and complex history that spans several decades. This relationship has been shaped by a variety of factors, including regional security concerns, historical legacies, and shifting geopolitical dynamics in Asia. Following the end of World War II, Japan adopted a pacifist constitution and was placed under U.S. occupation, disbanding its military. Meanwhile, the Philippines gained independence from the United States in 1946 and started establishing its armed forces. During the Cold War (1951-1989), both Japan and the Philippines formally became Asian allies of the United States. Extensive military aid and training were provided to both of these nations by the Americans throughout this period, boosting their military capabilities. Moreover, on September 8th, 1952, the U.S. and Japan signed a treaty named 'Treaty of Peace with Japan' that led to a rudimentary build-up of Japanese armed forces under the U.S. Security Umbrella. Furthermore, the security implications brought upon the region by a divided Korean Peninsula supported the creation of Japanese 'Self-Defense Forces' in 1954, laying the foundation for a U.S.-oriented militarization of Japan. Likewise, the Philippines and the U.S. became treaty allies under the 'Mutual Defense Agreement' of 1951, greatly strengthening and bolstering the Philippines' defence forces.

With the end of the Cold War and a rising China as a regional hegemon, both Japan and the Philippines continued to reinforce their defence agreements with the United States and establish defence cooperation between them. As a result, the Philippines enhanced its Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA) with the U.S. by signing another critical defence cooperation agreement in 1998. Known as the 'Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), it provided a legal basis and rules for the rotation of U.S. troops in and out of the Philippines for military exercises. Similarly, Japan and the U.S. revised their defence cooperation in 1997, which allowed Japan to expand its military operation from its home islands to the "surrounding areas." This move was perceived as a step towards Japan's increasing responsibility for its defence. Apart from these cooperations with the U.S., both nations ramped up joint military operations in the South China Sea as well as enhanced military and maritime cooperation between them, which were mainly aimed at countering and balancing the rising dragon in the region. The 2000s saw a further deepening of defence cooperation between Japan and the Philippines. In 2006, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on defence cooperation, which establishes a framework for joint training, military exchanges, and other forms of collaboration. Moreover, the Philippines also began purchasing military equipment from Japan, including patrol boats and surveillance aircraft, further strengthening the defence relations between the two U.S. allies.

In the 2010s, defence cooperation between Japan and the Philippines became even closer as both countries faced unprecedented security challenges in the region. Since then, the strategic relations between both of these countries have been beefier. Japan supported the resolution adopted by the Philippine government against Islamic insurgency in the country and also donated ten ships valued at US\$11 million to the Philippine Coast Guard. Furthermore, Japan and the Philippines officially shared a "mutual concern" about China's increasing assertiveness in its territorial claims in and around the South China Sea, encouraging closer ties between the two 'like-minded' countries. In the year 2016, Japan and the Philippines signed a defence pact, which allowed Japan to supply defence equipment to the Philippines and also provided an enhanced framework for both nations to conduct joint research and development projects related to defence. However, in the same year, defence relations between the two countries stagnated as there was a change in the political leadership in the Philippines. Rodrigo Duterte, the new President of the Philippines, strongly

aligned himself with the People’s Republic of China, rupturing the historic relations the Western allies had with the Philippines. But this ‘bonhomie’ with China was rather short-lived, as Mr Duterte made a U-turn by reviving his country’s relations with the U.S. and its allies, especially with Japan. The diplomatic as well as defence relations between both countries reached new heights in 2023, especially under the current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and the Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. Seen as a historical development in Tokyo-Manila relations, Japanese PM Fumio Kishida oversaw the signing of several defence pacts and investment deals between the two countries with Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., on February 10, 2023, during the latter’s visit to Japan. Additionally, Marcos, Jr. also announced about a possible ‘tripartite defence talks’ and cooperation with the United States and Japan, hinting at a plausible military arrangement to counter Chinese aggression in the South and East China Sea.

In summary, the defence partnership between Japan and the Philippines has evolved over several decades, from a period of limited cooperation during the Cold War to a close strategic relationship in the 21st century. The two countries now work closely together on a range of defence issues, reflecting their shared security concerns and the changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. The purpose of this paper is to examine the significance of the Philippines and Japan's defence partnership and its potential implications for regional security in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the paper also focuses on how the partnership is crucial for maintaining regional stability and ensuring peace in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of multiple geopolitical factors that have shaped the Japan-Philippines Defence Partnership as well as examine the future prospects of such strategic cooperation.

The Significance of a 21st Century ‘Japan-Philippine Security Partnership’

The significance of the defence partnership between the Philippines and Japan cannot be understated, particularly when considering its potential implications for regional security in the Indo-Pacific. As two key players in the region, their collaboration holds immense promise for promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in an area riddled with complex security challenges. The

partnership has emerged as a testament to the shared vision of the two nations for forging a resilient and secure Indo-Pacific region.

Firstly, the defence partnership between the Philippines and Japan serves as a crucial pillar for maintaining regional stability. Both nations have been confronted with a range of security threats, including territorial disputes, piracy, and the rise of non-state actors. By joining forces, they fortify their capacity to deter aggression and protect their shared interests in the region. This cooperative approach offers a compelling alternative to unilateralism, emphasising the significance of multilateral cooperation in addressing regional challenges. Moreover, the Philippines and Japan's defence partnership contributes to the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. As China's influence continues to grow, it is imperative for regional nations to maintain a delicate equilibrium to avoid the destabilising effects of hegemonic dominance. The collaboration between the Philippines and Japan provides a counterweight to potential imbalances, fostering an environment that promotes mutual respect, adherence to international law, and peaceful dispute resolution. In doing so, it helps prevent the emergence of a power vacuum and reduces the risk of conflict.

Furthermore, the defence partnership carries potential implications for regional security through its focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). The Indo-Pacific region is prone to natural disasters, which necessitate swift and coordinated responses. The Philippines and Japan's collaboration in this area enables them to pool their resources, expertise, and capacities to efficiently respond to crises and mitigate the humanitarian impact. This not only saves lives but also enhances regional resilience in the face of natural calamities, ultimately contributing to the overall stability of the Indo-Pacific. Lastly, the defence partnership between the Philippines and Japan also has the potential to spur economic development in the region. Security and stability are essential preconditions for sustained economic growth. By fostering a secure environment, the partnership creates an atmosphere conducive to trade, investment, and regional integration. This, in turn, opens up avenues for enhanced economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and people-to-people exchanges. Such collaborative efforts have the potential to drive economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, benefiting both countries and the broader region.

Chinese Dragon in the South China Sea: The Catalyst

The South China Sea, a maritime region ensnared in complex geopolitical tensions, has emerged as a compelling factor in the forging of a robust defence partnership between Japan and the Philippines. This strategic alliance, rooted in shared security concerns and a collective desire for regional stability, has found resonance due to the escalating disputes in the South China Sea. In other words, the Japan-Philippines partnership showcases the convergence of two nations, bound by the common thread of safeguarding their maritime interests and navigating through the treacherous waters of international politics. To comprehend the significance of the South China Sea in this bilateral relationship between Japan and the Philippines, one must delve into the multifaceted nature of the territorial disputes plaguing the region. China's expansive claims and assertive actions through 'Nine Dash Lines', which contravene international law, have not only alarmed neighbouring countries but also spurred a sense of urgency to counterbalance its growing influence. The Philippines, one of the principal claimants in the South China Sea, has faced recurrent encroachments on its exclusive economic zone by China, leading to maritime conflicts and territorial tensions. Japan, while not a claimant itself, shares the concern over China's disregard for the rule of law and the potential disruption of vital sea lanes of communication and trade. Furthermore, Japan also fears that China will portray a similar attitude of assertiveness in the East China Sea, where both nations have a territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands.

Nevertheless, in this intricate web of maritime politics, Japan and the Philippines have discovered common ground to foster a robust defence partnership. Japan's longstanding commitment to peace and security in the region, coupled with its technological advancements and military capabilities, has made it an attractive partner for the Philippines. Japan's assistance in enhancing the Philippines' maritime surveillance and patrol capabilities has been instrumental in strengthening the latter's maritime domain awareness. By doing so, both nations aim to ensure the freedom of navigation and unimpeded trade in the South China Sea, a vital lifeline for their economies. Furthermore, the partnership between Japan and the Philippines extends beyond the realm of defence. They have collaborated on various infrastructure projects, including the development of ports and other critical maritime facilities. Such ventures not only bolster connectivity but also contribute to the

overall economic growth and development of both countries. This multidimensional cooperation serves as a testament to their commitment to upholding the rule of law, promoting regional stability, and countering China's expansionist ambitions.

However, it would be remiss to perceive the Japan-Philippines defence partnership solely through the lens of the South China Sea dispute. Both countries recognise the broader strategic implications of their alliance. Japan seeks to diversify its security engagements and expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific, while the Philippines aims to strengthen its defence capabilities and benefit from Japan's technological expertise. Together, they aspire to establish a rules-based order and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, transcending the confines of the South China Sea. In brief, the South China Sea, with its simmering territorial disputes and escalating tensions, has emerged as a crucial factor in forging the defence partnership between Japan and the Philippines. Both nations are navigating the choppy waters of international politics, driven by the imperative to counterbalance China's assertiveness and preserve the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Beyond the disputes themselves, this partnership also embodies the broader aspirations of Japan and the Philippines to establish a rules-based order and foster a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).

‘The USA Factor’

The United States of America has played a significant role in forging the defence partnership between Japan and the Philippines. This alliance is a strategic manoeuvre that strengthens the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region and bolsters the interests of these nations. Firstly, the historical context of US-Japan relations is paramount to understanding the dynamics of the Japan-Philippines defence partnership. Following the end of World War II, the United States played a crucial role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Japan. Through the imposition of a security framework, the United States ensured Japan's security and facilitated its economic development. This close relationship between the two nations laid the foundation for future collaboration in various spheres, including defence. Secondly, the United States has long been a key ally of the Philippines. The Mutual Defence Treaty signed between the two countries in 1951 solidified their security alliance, with the United States pledging to defend the Philippines in the

event of an armed attack. This alliance has been instrumental in maintaining regional stability and deterring potential aggressors. Against this backdrop, the United States has actively encouraged defence cooperation between Japan and the Philippines. Recognising the common interests and security challenges faced by these nations, the United States has played the role of a facilitator, leveraging its own strong alliances to encourage cooperation among its partners.

As stated earlier, the significant factor driving the Japan-Philippines defence partnership is the rising assertiveness of China in the region. China's increasing military capabilities and territorial ambitions in the South China Sea have raised concerns among neighbouring countries, including Japan and the Philippines. These nations view the United States as a reliable security partner that can help counterbalance China's influence. As a result, they have sought to deepen their defence ties with each other and with the United States. The United States has responded to these concerns by actively supporting trilateral defence cooperation between Japan, the Philippines, and itself. This trilateral approach ensures that these nations can share intelligence, conduct joint military exercises, and enhance their collective defence capabilities. The United States provides technical expertise, military equipment, and training opportunities, further solidifying the defence partnership. Moreover, the United States has also pursued a policy of hedging against potential threats in the region. By encouraging defence cooperation between Japan and the Philippines, the United States strengthens its position as a regional power and reinforces its strategic interests. This partnership serves to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific region, ensuring the free flow of commerce and preventing any hegemonic domination.

Japan and the Philippines: A Delicate Dance in the Realm of Defence

In the realm of international relations, alliances are often forged and partnerships are established to ensure the security and prosperity of nations. Among these alliances, the emerging defence partnership between Japan and the Philippines has garnered significant attention. However, such partnerships are not without their challenges, and it is imperative for both nations to navigate these complexities with tact and foresight. One of the fundamental challenges faced by Japan and the

Philippines is the delicate balance of power in the region. Japan, with its technological prowess and formidable military capabilities, naturally holds a position of influence. On the other hand, the Philippines, as a smaller nation, must exercise caution to ensure its interests are safeguarded without being overshadowed by its larger partner. This calls for a delicate dance of diplomacy, wherein the Philippines must assert its autonomy while recognising the strategic benefits of aligning with Japan. Another challenge lies in the historical baggage that often accompanies bilateral relationships. Japan's occupation of the Philippines during World War II continues to cast a long shadow over their shared history. The scars of the past can still be felt, and it is crucial for both nations to address these sensitivities and foster an environment of trust and understanding. Open and sincere dialogue, accompanied by efforts to acknowledge and reconcile the past, can serve as a stepping stone towards a more robust and resilient partnership. Furthermore, economic considerations play a significant role in shaping defence partnerships. Japan's economic might and its advanced technology sector offer immense potential for collaboration and development. However, the Philippines must ensure that this partnership is not solely driven by economic interests but also by a shared commitment to regional stability and security. A comprehensive approach that balances economic cooperation with defence cooperation will be essential in nurturing a meaningful and enduring partnership.

Recommendations for strengthening the Japan-Philippines defence partnership are manifold. Firstly, both nations should actively promote people-to-people exchanges, fostering greater cultural understanding and trust. This can be achieved through educational and cultural initiatives, such as student exchange programmes and joint research projects, that facilitate interaction and collaboration at various levels of society. Secondly, the two nations must deepen their military cooperation through joint exercises and capacity-building initiatives. This would not only enhance their operational capabilities but also contribute to regional security and stability. Regular bilateral and multilateral exercises, focused on areas such as maritime security and counterterrorism, can foster interoperability and build confidence among the armed forces of both countries. Moreover, the Japan-Philippines defence partnership should extend beyond bilateral cooperation and actively engage with other regional players. This could involve trilateral or multilateral engagements with like-minded countries such as the United States, Australia, and India, who share a common interest

in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region. By leveraging collective strengths and resources, such collaborations can effectively counter common security challenges and promote a rules-based international order.

To summarise, the Japan-Philippines defence partnership presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. By navigating the delicate balance of power, addressing historical sensitivities, and pursuing a comprehensive approach that encompasses economic, cultural, and military dimensions, both nations can forge a partnership that is mutually beneficial and contributes to regional peace and prosperity. It is through sustained dialogue, trust-building, and strategic cooperation that the Japan-Philippines defence partnership can thrive and stand as a testament to the enduring bonds between the two nations.

Conclusion

The Japan-Philippines defence partnership holds significant strategic importance in the face of an increasingly assertive China. As the rise of China's military capabilities and territorial ambitions threaten stability in the region, both Japan and the Philippines have recognised the necessity of strengthening their cooperation in defence and security. This partnership not only serves to safeguard their respective national interests but also contributes to the broader goal of maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its growing military presence pose a direct challenge to the sovereignty and security of both Japan and the Philippines. Hence, by deepening their defence collaboration, these two nations are better positioned to deter potential threats and safeguard their maritime interests in the region. Furthermore, the partnership sends a strong signal to other regional actors like North Korea and Russia that the Japan-Philippines alliance is committed to upholding the rule-based international order guided by the principles of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

One cannot discuss the Japan-Philippines defence partnership without acknowledging the critical role of the United States. As a longstanding ally and security guarantor for both countries, the U.S. factor cannot be overlooked. The presence of American military forces in the region, combined with their shared commitment to the principles of democracy and freedom, strengthens the

foundation of the Japan-Philippines defence partnership. A potential trilateral defence cooperation among Japan, the Philippines, and the United States would contribute to a robust security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, ensuring a balance of power that deters aggression and fosters regional stability. Moreover, the paper argues that this trilateral partnership could also expand into a regional defence organisation or could combine with the AUKUS security pact, gradually becoming ‘AUKUS +’ in the near future.

However, the Japan-Philippines defence partnership also faces its fair share of challenges. Both countries must contend with resource constraints, technological gaps, and operational limitations that can hamper their collaborative efforts. Additionally, political sensitivities and historical grievances may occasionally strain the partnership, requiring deft diplomacy and mutual understanding to overcome such obstacles. In light of these challenges, several recommendations have been made in the paper, which are aimed at resolving such complexities and ensuring that the partnership between these two nations prospers in the near future.

Looking ahead, the future prospects of the Japan-Philippines defence partnership appear promising. As both countries continue to face common security challenges, there is ample room for further deepening their cooperation. The ongoing efforts to bolster defence ties, combined with the strong commitment of their political leaderships, indicate a trajectory of increasing collaboration. By harnessing the shared values of democracy, rule of law, and respect for international norms, the Japan-Philippines defence partnership has the potential to not only ensure the security of their nations but also contribute to a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region for generations to come.

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