

Everything Japan Vowed to Give Marcos Jr.

Philippine leader returns from Tokyo with a big bag full of generous infrastructure, aid and defense deals and agreements

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*Philippine **President Ferdinand Marcos Jr** triumphantly returned from his five-day trip to Japan with major economic and defense deals in his pocket.*

It was the leader's ninth foreign visit in just over eight months, with previous trips to the US and China, and proved to be his most fruitful yet.

In Tokyo, the Filipino president [secured US\\$13 billion](#) in investment pledges and another \$3 billion in loans, which according to the official readout could create as many as 24,000 jobs in the Philippines.

The two [sides discussed](#) the status of a whole range of big-ticket Japanese infrastructure projects, including the North-South Commuter Railway for Malolos-Tutuban, and the North South-Commuter Railway Project Extension.

Japan is also currently building the Southeast Asian country's first-ever underground metro system, which promises to revolutionize Manila's decrepit and clogged public transportation system.

Japan [also agreed to provide](#) the Philippines comprehensive assistance in the areas of agriculture, digital economy, the peace process in Mindanao and training of Filipino civil servants.

Historically a top source of development aid and infrastructure investments, Japan hopes to take its bilateral relations with the Philippines to a new level. Accordingly, Tokyo is finalizing an unprecedented defense aid package as well as a Reciprocal Access Agreement with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

The two sides also signaled their intent to expand joint military exercises, with an eye on a [more robust](#) US-Japan-Philippine triangular alliance amid rising geopolitical tensions with China in the region.

By several indications, Marcos Jr is cementing his country's pivot back to traditional allies after six years of a Beijing-friendly foreign policy under the authoritarian populist regime of Rodrigo Duterte.

Trade and investment deals

As expected, trade and commercial deals dominated Marcos Jr's trip to Japan, which is the only country to have [a bilateral free trade deal](#) with the Philippines.

Since coming to power, the Filipino president has made commercial diplomacy a central theme of his administration, as the Southeast Asian nation aims to boost its post-pandemic recovery amid fears of global recession and heightened inflation at home.

"Coming back, we carry with us over 13 billion US dollars in contributions and pledges to benefit our people and create approximately 24,000 jobs, and further solidify the foundation of our economic environment," declared Marcos Jr upon his arrival back in the Philippines.

The Filipino president also declared that Japan is offering around \$3 billion to finance big-ticket infrastructure projects such as the North-South Commuter Railway Project Extension and the North-South Commuter Railway for Malolos-Tutuban. Both aim to enhance connectivity among the country's more industrialized regions.

"The completion of these projects along with other large-scale development assistance projects such as the Metro Manila Subway Project and many more across the country are expected to translate to better lives for Filipinos through improved facilitation of the movement of people of goods and services," Marcos Jr added.

The two sides also welcomed progress in the Japan-led Metro Manila Subway Project while exploring further deals on the maintenance and rehabilitation of existing railway systems, most notably the Metro Rail Transit Line 3 (MRT-3).

Japan has also promised to help the Philippines modernize its failing air transport infrastructure under the New Communications, Navigation and Surveillance and Air Traffic Management (CNS/ATM) Development Project.

Last month, Marcos Jr attended the World Economic Forum in Davos with a large delegation of the country's leading business and conglomerate leaders.

Cognizant of his country's patchy reputation after six years of populist antics under his predecessor Duterte, Marcos Jr, who has also had to grapple with his family's political notoriety, is bent on "reintroducing" the Philippines to the wider world while rehabilitating his family's reputation.

In Tokyo, the Filipino president met top business leaders to discuss "the new and better business climate and investment environment in the Philippines." He also met the relatively large Filipino community in Japan, including Filipino seafarers who constitute 70% of Japan's maritime crew.

“The Japanese shipping companies also have investments and long-term partnerships with Filipino stakeholders in maritime education and welfare programs,” Marcos Jr added.

As the concurrent agriculture secretary, the Filipino president, who has been grappling with rising food inflation at home, also explored new cooperative deals with Japan, including the establishment of the Joint Committee on Agriculture and other forms of interagency mechanisms to help create “resilient and sustainable agriculture and food systems, smart technology, [and] strengthe[n] food value chain.”

Japan also offered to help the Philippines to realize its own Universal Health Coverage plan while also expanding its assistance to ongoing peacebuilding efforts in the historically restive island of Mindanao through, inter alia, “vocational training for livelihood improvement and industrial development.”

The two sides also agreed to expand people-to-people cooperation through initiatives such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) and the Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship Grant Aid of Japan (JDS).

Integrated deterrence

What made Marcos Jr’s trip particularly significant, however, was the expanded focus on defense cooperation, especially as Japan embarks on its own massive defense buildup and the Philippines restores military cooperation with its American mutual defense treaty ally.

During Marcos Jr’s trip, the two sides agreed to regularize high-level dialogues such as Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (“2+2”) and the Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue and the Political-Military (PM) Dialogue.

The Filipino president largely welcomed Japan’s new “National Security Strategy (NSS),” the “National Defense Strategy (NDS),” and the “Defense Buildup Program (DBP),” which collectively facilitate the Northeast Asian country’s re-emergence as a major defense player in the Indo-Pacific region.

The two sides also agreed to the terms of reference concerning Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) activities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in the Philippines, which simplifies joint military activities and exchanges between the two countries’ armed forces.

Down the road, Japan and the Philippines hope to finalize a Visiting Forces Agreement, which would enable more large-scale joint military exercises in addition to pre-existing Philippine-US and Philippine-Australia defense agreements.

Crucially, Japan has also agreed to provide a new package of defense aid and other forms of defense equipment transfer programs. In particular, the two sides are exploring the transfer of new air-surveillance radar systems, Japan-made 97-meter-class patrol vessels and other forms of military hardware, which could enhance the Philippines domain awareness and maritime security capabilities vis-à-vis China.

Japan is also set to assist the development of a Philippine Coast Guard Subic Bay support base, which “could serve as the home of, and the installation of satellite communications

system on patrol vessels.”

The Philippines and Japan are also exploring a tripartite security agreement with the US as part of a broader “integrated deterrence strategy” against China.

In recent years, Japan has regularly attended major joint drills in the Philippines, including the large-scale Philippines-US “Balikatan”, “KAMANDAG” and “Sama-Sama” exercises and the Philippines-Australia “Lumbas” drills.

Moving forward, the two sides also agreed to institutionalize the Japan-Philippines-US Land Forces Summit and underscored their commitment to deepening defense exchanges through trilateral mechanisms such as the Japan-Philippines-US Trilateral Joint Staff Talks and the Japan-Philippines-US Trilateral Defense Policy Dialogue, as well as the JSDF’s participation in Philippines-US joint exercises.

“It is something that we certainly are going to be studying upon my return to the Philippines. I think just part of the continuing process of strengthening our alliances because in this rather confusing, and I dare say dangerous situations, that we have,” Marcos Jr said, referring to ongoing discussions for a tripartite Philippine-US-Japan security agreement.

“So that is, I think, a central element to providing some sort of stability in the face of all these problems that we are seeing around us,” he said.

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Featured image: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (L) and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida listen to their national anthems at the prime minister’s official residence in Tokyo, Japan, February 9, 2023. Image: Pool / Twitter

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