

Japan-Philippines Moving Toward US-led Trilateral Alliance

Kishida promises Marcos Jr 'official security assistance' during trip to Manila as a China-balancing trilateral alliance comes into view

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*"I am honored to have the opportunity to be the first Japanese Prime Minister to speak here at the Congress of the Philippines, which has a long tradition," **Fumio Kishida** said before the Special Joint Session of Philippine legislature during his two-day official visit to Manila last week.*

During the historic speech, the Japanese leader maintained that the two countries have now reached a "golden age" of bilateral relations amid an unprecedented convergence of strategic interests.

Barely a year after launching a new era in "[realism diplomacy](#)" and vowing to [double Japan's defense spending](#) as a percentage of its gross domestic product (GDP), Kishida visited Southeast Asia to bolster defense ties with like-minded partners.

Already [a top investor](#) and [leading export destination](#) for the Philippines, Japan is now pursuing closer defense cooperation with the neighboring nation.

During his visit to Manila, Kishida unveiled a new security assistance package highlighted by a coastal radar surveillance system. Japan is [also expected to provide](#) more multi-role vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) as part of burgeoning bilateral maritime security cooperation.

Crucially, Japan is also pursuing a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with the Philippines, which could lay the foundation for expanded bilateral defense exchanges including regular wargames and partial basing access in the future.

Kishida also visited Malaysia during his Southeast Asia trip, where he pushed for a [“new vision of cooperation”](#) centered on upholding a rules-based order in the region.

Along with the Philippines, Bangladesh and Fiji, Malaysia has been selected as among the beneficiaries of Japan’s new Official Security Assistance (OSA) program with a focus on countering China’s naval assertiveness.

Cognizant of the geopolitical relevance of Kishida’s regional tour, China’s state-backed newspaper Global Times [lambasted](#) the Japanese leader’s visit as a “troublemaking journey” that offered “gift packs” that mainly contained “lethal weapons.”

All Weather Allies

This wasn’t Kishida’s first visit to the region. As former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe’s former top diplomat, he had regularly toured the region amid Tokyo’s booming strategic ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc.

Throughout the past decade, Kishida was one of the central figures in the steadily expanding strategic cooperation between Japan and the Philippines amid shared concerns over China.

Image: Then-president Rodrigo Duterte with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the National Aquatics Center in Beijing, August 30, 2019. Photo: Philippine Presidential Photo / Robinson Ninal



Although Manila experienced dramatic shifts in its relations with the US and China under former Philippine president **Rodrigo Duterte**, Japan successfully maintained a positive momentum in its relations with the Southeast Asian nation.

In fact, Duterte, who repeatedly lambasted the West in favor of China, quietly welcomed expanded military cooperation with Japan. Last year, the two countries held their first-ever “2+2” meeting, which saw Duterte’s top cabinet members, **Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin and Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana**, flying to Tokyo to meet their counterparts and, accordingly, “strengthen defense cooperation in light of the increasingly harsh security environment.”

Though Duterte was largely conciliatory in his rhetoric toward Beijing, his top diplomat and defense chief [expressed](#) “serious concern” over the Asian power’s maritime assertiveness and, together with their Japanese counterparts, “strongly opposed” any unilateral action that undermines regional peace and security.

Even as the then-Filipino president maintained “neutrality” on the Ukraine war, the Philippines broadly joined Western nations in condemning Russia’s actions and, similar to Japan, [voted to suspend](#) Russia’s membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council.

At the time, Japan had also steadily expanded ties with other like-minded regional states, most notably Vietnam and Malaysia, both of which also received maritime security assistance from Tokyo amid rising tensions with China in the South China Sea.

During his latest Southeast Asian tour, Kishida invited Philippine and Malaysian leaders to attend the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation in Tokyo in December.

In many ways, however, the Philippines, a fellow US treaty ally strategically located between the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, represents a major prize for Japan.

During his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last year, Kishida promised a new era in “realism diplomacy.” Japan, he promised at the time, “will be more proactive than ever in tackling the challenges and crises that face Japan, Asia and the world.”

Aside from a defense buildup at home, Japan is also expanding its networks of military cooperation overseas with a special focus on Southeast Asia, where Tokyo enjoys tremendous goodwill.

In annual surveys conducted by the [Institute of Southeast Asian Studies \(ISEAS\)](#) in Singapore, Japan has consistently topped the list of ASEAN’s preferred external partners among regional thought leaders.

This is especially true in the Philippines, where Japan is seen as an “all-weather ally” which has provided more economic benefits than any other nation and is now also exploring military cooperation like never before.

During his meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Kishida announced [a whole series of new agreements](#) covering tourism, mining, environment, natural resources and construction in pursuit of a truly comprehensive partnership.

Japan, which is currently building Manila’s first subway [among other multi-billion-dollar projects](#), also vowed to further assist infrastructure development under the supervision of a High Level Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation.

A senior Japanese cabinet member told the author that Japan is also exploring large-scale manufacturing investments that could potentially turn the Philippines into a regional automotive industry hub.

Toward a Trilateral Alliance

Kishida also officially unveiled Japan’s Official Security Assistance (OSA), beginning with a \$4 million grant to provide a coastal radar system for the Philippine Navy in order to enhance the Southeast Asian nation’s maritime domain awareness capacity vis-à-vis China.

Japan is also [expected to provide](#), at least, five more 97-meter-long vessels for the PCG to boost its maritime security capabilities.

This is, however, likely just the tip of the iceberg. The two [sides also reaffirmed](#) their commitment to finalize a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) to “further strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries.”

Once finalized, with Philippine legislative ratification, the Visiting Forces Agreement-style deal will likely facilitate even larger and more robust joint military exercises as well as the transfer of more sophisticated weapons systems to be aimed mainly at China.



Generals from the US, Japan and the Philippines pose at Camp Asaka, Japan, on December 11, 2022.
Photo: Twitter Screengrab / Stars and Stripes

Standing before his Japanese guest, Marcos Jr confidently declared:

“We are cognizant of the benefits of having this arrangement both to our defense and military personnel and to maintaining peace and stability in our region.”

The two sides also signaled their commitment to developing a de facto trilateral alliance with the US, especially given the proximity of both Japan and the Philippines to Taiwan.

Japan views support from ASEAN nations, particularly the Philippines, as crucial to deterring any potential Chinese kinetic action against the self-ruling democratic island that Beijing views as a renegade province that must be “reunified” with the mainland.

Last year, foreign and defense ministers [from both sides explicitly](#) “underscored the importance of each country’s respective treaty alliance with the United States and that of enhancing cooperation with regional partner countries.”

With Manila granting the US Pentagon access to prized bases close to Taiwan’s southern shores and now also exploring a VFA-style deal with Tokyo, a Japan-Philippine-US (JAPUS) trilateral alliance would likely be the logical next strategic step.

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Featured image: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr review an honor guard during a welcome ceremony in Manila on November 2, 2023. Image: Twitter Screengrab / Pool

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