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The Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement: Complementing and Cementing the Hub-and-Spokes System

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From L-R: Japan's Defence Minister Minoru Kihara, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Philippine Defence Minister Gilberto Teodoro, and Philippine Foreign Minister Enrique Manalo pose for a photo following the signing of the Reciprocal Access Agreement at the Malacanang Palace in Manila on 8 July 8, 2024. (Photo by LISA MARIE DAVID / POOL / AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Signed in July 2024, the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between Japan and the Philippines aims to facilitate regular exchanges and activities between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF).
- Similar to a visiting forces agreement, the RAA is the third cooperative defence undertaking for both nations given years of closer security cooperation as well as a response to increased regional geopolitical uncertainty.
- Since embarking on a strategic partnership in 2015, Japan and the Philippines have expanded security cooperation that includes Japan's assistance in the modernisation of the Philippine coast guard, a military hardware transfer agreement, Japan's provision of Official Security Assistance (OSA), and the forging of a new trilateral with the United States (US).
- Heightened geopolitical uncertainty in the region involving multiple flashpoints has accelerated security cooperation between Japan and the Philippines.
- Despite possible domestic political challenges in both countries, it is expected that the RAA will be ratified speedily and act as a security buffer especially at a time when the regional commitment of the US hangs in the balance in light of its upcoming presidential elections.

INTRODUCTION

On 8 July 2024, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko and Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA)¹ between their countries. The monumental agreement was hailed as a critical watershed in the “shared endeavour to ensure a rules-based international order to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific”.² The RAA rode on the current momentum of security initiatives undertaken by the Marcos Jr. administration which include the historic inaugural Japan-Philippines-US trilateral summit held last April 2024,³ and the second Australia-Japan-Philippines-US quadrilateral defence ministers’ meeting held in May 2024.⁴ In both meetings, the leaders expressed concern over the “dangerous and aggressive behaviour”⁵ of the People’s Republic of China in the South China Sea (SCS) and the East China Sea (ECS), as well as their commitment towards a “free, open, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific.”⁶

For the Philippines, Japan is only the third country with which it has such an agreement. Manila signed visiting forces agreements respectively with Washington in 1998⁷ and Canberra in 2007.⁸ In view of the geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific region, this paper examines the salient points of the RAA, how the agreement complements the US-led hub-and-spokes alliance system, and challenges to its effective implementation.

THE RAA AND JAPAN-PHILIPPINES SECURITY COOPERATION

Although the formal negotiations for the RAA commenced in November 2023, initial discussions for a similar agreement began as early as November 2015, during the final months of the late Philippine President Benigno Aquino III’s administration.⁹ Six months later, the populist leader Rodrigo Duterte was elected as Aquino’s successor. Duterte upended Philippine foreign policy by forging closer relations with China despite the latter’s aggressive and unlawful behaviour in the SCS. It was not until the final year of the Duterte administration that Manila began to recalibrate its foreign policy. During the First Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2) held in April 2022, the two countries underscored their commitment to discuss “frameworks to facilitate reciprocal visits as well as reciprocal provision of supplies and services in order to further enhance and facilitate cooperation such as exercises between the JDSF and the AFP”.¹⁰

During Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.’s visit to Japan in February 2023, Manila and Tokyo reaffirmed their commitment to an RAA.¹¹ Negotiations for the RAA took off following Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s visit to the Philippines in November 2023. This coincided with Japan’s provision of the coastal surveillance radar system under its Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework.¹²

Under its preambular provisions, the RAA underscores the two countries’ “shared interests in regional and global peace and stability and international order based on the rule of law.” Composed of 29 articles, the RAA will serve as the legal framework for “mutually determined cooperative activities conducted”¹³ by the Japanese and Philippine armed forces. The agreement also outlines three principles in which such activities would be conducted: “(a) do not adversely impact upon the national interests of the Receiving State, or the readiness or

capabilities of the Force of the Receiving State; (b) are carried out with due regard for public safety; and (c) do not interfere unnecessarily with navigation, aviation, telecommunication, or land travel to, from or within the Receiving State.”¹⁴

As the name of the agreement suggests, the provisions of the RAA are applicable when cooperative activities are conducted in either the Philippines or Japan. The agreement provides that clearances shall be “expeditiously grant[ed]” by the receiving state to the sending state for access by the vessels or aircraft of the latter to the ports or airports of the former.¹⁵ Manila and Tokyo also agreed to exempt their forces “from any requirements to apply for a visa on entering and departing” the receiving state.¹⁶ For purposes of cooperative activities, the two countries also agreed that the visiting force may “temporarily use” the public utilities and services of the receiving state.¹⁷ The parties likewise agreed to “make reasonable efforts” to address requests “for access to and use of facilities, areas and related services” vis-à-vis cooperative activities.

Mindful of the sensitives in both countries, Manila and Tokyo explicitly provided in the RAA that the agreement shall not be “construed as providing a basis for a [p]arty to establish its military facilities in the territory of the other [p]arty.”¹⁸ Neither does the RAA create a joint command and control structure for the forces of the two countries.¹⁹ In addition, the agreement also outlines the guidelines for protection of cultural and indigenous people’s heritage and human health safety, as well as that of the environment.²⁰ Moreover, the RAA has provisions on disciplinary jurisdiction,²¹ accidents and incidents,²² and dispute settlement.²³

Cognizant of the guidelines in the RAA, the agreement established a joint committee to serve “as a means for consultation between the Parties on all matters requiring mutual consultation regarding the implementation” of the pact. The agreement also opened the possibility of creating working groups under the joint committee. The RAA will take affect following ratification by the Japanese Diet and the Philippine Senate.²⁴

THE RAA: COMPLEMENTING THE US “HUB-AND-SPOKES” ALLIANCE SYSTEM

The RAA is a significant step in advancing the Japan-Philippines strategic partnership. Historically, after World War II, Japan-Philippines relations were focused on economic and development cooperation. While the same still figures prominently, the relationship began to focus on the strategic dimensions starting from the 2010s.²⁵

Beyond the bilateral relationship of Japan and the Philippines, it is important to view the RAA in the broader context of the regional security architecture. Traditionally, the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region has been viewed as comprising of two major components: the US-led system of alliances, and multilateral platforms of dialogue and cooperation, particularly those led by ASEAN. For much of the Cold War and beyond, the US-led system of alliances – often characterised with the US as the “hub” and its allies as the “spokes” – has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. The security provided by the US and its allies allowed countries in the region, including China, to develop their respective economies.

As the regional security environment continues to evolve, the US-led system of alliances also needs to adapt to the shifting balance of power between Washington and Beijing and their

heightened strategic competition. Although continued US presence in the region is welcomed, the same may not be sufficient in countering China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea and elsewhere. This therefore entails increased cooperation between and among US allies in the region. After all, there is no NATO-like structure in the Indo-Pacific that provides for an overarching collective deterrence and defence system as is the case in Europe.

As China became more aggressive in pushing for an expansionist policy, using a whole range of military and non-military tools at its disposal, countries with shared interests began to forge closer security relations with each other. In 2017, Australia, India, Japan, and the US agreed to resume the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) with the aim of preserving "a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond".²⁶ In 2021, the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US (AUKUS) was formed wherein London and Washington will help Canberra in "acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy".²⁷ In 2023, Japan, South Korea, and the US convened their first stand-alone trilateral summit²⁸ with the aim of ensuring that the three countries are "aligned in [their] objectives and in [their] actions, generating the common capacity required to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is thriving, connected, resilient, stable, and secure".²⁹ In April 2024, Japan, the Philippines, and the US also convened their first trilateral summit in which they agreed, among other things, to launch a Luzon Economic Corridor.³⁰ The summit was preceded by a Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) between Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the US.³¹

Amidst these various minilateral platforms of cooperation and dialogue, the RAA between the Philippines and Japan could complement the US-led hub-and-spokes system of alliances in advancing a rules-based international order in the following ways.

First, the RAA will solidify defence diplomacy between the two US allies. By having a legal framework in which the JSDF can visit the Philippines, Tokyo has a better opportunity to mutually enhance its capabilities with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) through joint exercises and training. The JSDF could also potentially boost cooperation with the AFP in other areas such as intelligence, maritime domain awareness, and contingency planning. Since the RAA is a reciprocal agreement, similar cooperative initiatives can also be conducted by AFP personnel in Japan.

Second, the RAA could also strengthen the links with the US and other allies and partners. As noted earlier, the RAA is the third such agreement that the Philippines has with other countries. Indeed, Manila's VFA with Washington has served as the legal basis for the conduct of the Balikatan and other military exercises of the two countries. With the VFA with Canberra coming into effect, Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel have been able to take part in the Balikatan exercises as an actual participant and not a mere observer – which has been the status of Japan and other countries. With the RAA, however, Japan could likewise be an actual participant in this and other exercises – thus providing an avenue to strengthen ties and capabilities with the US and other allies. In the future, the RAA could potentially allow Tokyo to take part in initiatives under the Philippines-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), should Manila and Washington agree to it.

Third, the RAA would allow Japan to support the Philippines in times of crisis – and vice versa. In 2013, the US was able to mobilise its forces and aid the Philippines quickly in the aftermath of super typhoon Haiyan. This was in large part because a legal framework was already in place that allowed such help to come into the country. In the event that future devastating incidents

take place in Japan or the Philippines, both can easily allow their respective militaries to send aid relatively easily due to the clear parameters set by the RAA.

The cumulative effect of the above points is that the RAA provides the mechanism through which Japan and the Philippines can mutually strengthen their capacities in countering the threats and security challenges that China presents to both countries, especially in the maritime domain. Not unexpectedly, China has criticised the RAA, viewing the agreement as a move towards “bloc confrontation or a new Cold War”.³² The *Global Times*, a Chinese propaganda outlet, alluded that the RAA is another move by the US, which has “used the South China Sea issue as a means to contain China” with Japan and the Philippines as its “pawns”.³³ Beijing is implying that the RAA is nothing more than an orchestrated move by Washington to coerce its allies – Japan and the Philippines – in its strategic competition with China.

China’s propaganda overlooks the critical fact that the RAA is an exercise of agency on the part of Japan and the Philippines. Both countries have legitimate interests – which happened to be shared by Washington – to protect against China’s aggressive behaviour in the maritime domain. The Philippines and China have overlapping maritime and territorial claims in the SCS, while Japan and China have a territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands in China) in the East China Sea. Both Japan and the Philippines also have shared concerns over a contingency in the Taiwan Strait and its potential to escalate to a region-wide conflict. More broadly, Japan and the Philippines – along with Taiwan – are part of the first island chain which China seeks to dominate to alter the power equilibrium to its favour. Thus, by forging the RAA, Manila and Tokyo do not merely yield to the supposed demands of another power. Rather, both are exercising their strategic autonomy to help each other address shared security challenges.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

The RAA is a significant milestone in the strategic partnership of Japan and the Philippines. However, there are significant challenges ahead facing its effective execution.

The RAA must be ratified by the legislatures of both countries. In the case of the Philippines, the RAA will likely achieve the necessary two-thirds vote in the Senate with members of the upper chamber already expressing support for the agreement.³⁴ Thus far, there has been minimal domestic opposition to the RAA invoking Japan’s war crimes, controversies tied to its ‘comfort women’ issue, and the prospect of increased militarisation.³⁵ Polling shows that Japan enjoys relatively high levels of trust among the Filipino public.³⁶ A similar sentiment is shared with Philippine practitioners and scholars, based on the 2024 State of Southeast Asia survey carried out by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.³⁷ The Marcos Jr. administration will likely nudge its allies in the Senate for speedy ratification of the RAA, before the May 2025 midterm elections. On Japan’s part, it is anticipated that Kishida’s recent exit as prime minister will not significantly affect Japan’s commitment to the RAA.

China would likely try to undermine the implementation of the RAA through influence operations in the Philippines. The election of pro-China Philippine officials in both national and local levels could potentially hinder the implementation of the RAA. In 2020, for example, then-President Duterte ordered the abrogation of the VFA with the US although he reversed

his decision the following year.³⁸ Nonetheless, the decision led to some degree of uncertainty over the future of the Philippines-US alliance. Also, in 2023, then-Cagayan Governor Manuel Mamba led a campaign to oppose the establishment of an EDCA site in his province while calling for closer ties with China.³⁹ While the campaign did not succeed, the incident showed the extent of China's influence operations to alter Philippine foreign policy.⁴⁰

The RAA between Japan and the Philippines is a historic agreement. After all, it is the first such agreement that Japan has with an Asian country. The RAA is further proof that the Philippines is a test case of Japan's gradual expansion of its regional security role in Southeast Asia. It is the sustained implementation of the agreement that could make an impact in enhancing the two countries' defence and deterrence capabilities, thereby complementing efforts to preserve the rules-based international order and reinforcing the agency of small and middle powers within the ongoing intense superpower rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁸ RAA, Article VIII, Paragraph 3.
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