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Message to Beijing

Notwithstanding their alliance with Washington, the Philippines and Japan are determined to strengthen their own defence capabilities

Following years of intensive negotiations, the Philippines and Japan have consolidated their military cooperation with a new defence pact. Under the recently signed *Reciprocal Access Agreement*, the two Asian countries will define procedural rules for joint activities involving troops from one country visiting the other and a legal status for the visiting troops. The new agreement will facilitate joint military manoeuvres and disaster relief operations and improve interoperability between the Japan Self-Defence Forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

There are only two other countries with which Japan has concluded similar agreements: Great Britain and Australia. It is no coincidence that both are allies of the US, along with the Philippines. Even if it is not a fully-fledged alliance agreement, the new defence pact dramatically illustrates how much Tokyo and Manila have converged in their strategic orientation and threat perceptions. Both countries are witnessing China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the East and South China Seas. The situation is particularly threatening for the Philippines: territorial disputes in the South China Sea have almost led to open conflict with China on several occasions.

Last year alone, there were at least three clashes between Chinese naval forces and Philippine ships. On five occasions, China used water cannons against Filipino ships carrying out patrols and supply runs in the disputed areas. In June, the Chinese coast guard went one step further: it captured a Philippine boat travelling to the Second Thomas shallows and forcibly disarmed the naval officers on board. A Philippine military contingent is stationed on the heavily disputed reef. The incident has increased the risk of a direct armed confrontation, especially if China decides to use force to expel Philippine troops from disputed areas in the region. Above all, however, there is growing concern about a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which lies right between the Philippines and Japan.

A strong American commitment

The intensified Philippine-Japanese security partnership reflects two things: firstly, the US-led strategy of 'integrated deterrence' against China and secondly, the obvious endeavour of the two Asian countries to play a greater strategic role in shaping their own security environment in their region. The Philippines is endeavouring to build up an extensive network of security partnerships so that it is no longer as dependent on America as in the past, and Japan is in the process of positioning itself as a pillar of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. The prospect of a possible second term in office for Donald Trump, which could end up being even more disruptive and transactional than the first, is a further important incentive for the countries in the region to work together more strategically.

At the beginning of the year, US President Joe Biden, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met in Washington for the first ever trilateral summit between the three countries. At their meeting in the White House, which was accompanied by solemn words, the three heads of government invoked the common goal of ensuring that 'a free and open international order based on international law remains in place in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond' through long-term strategic cooperation 'for decades to come'. President Joe Biden reaffirmed that his country is 'firmly committed' to its Asian allies - especially in view of the escalating tensions in the South China Sea. The American president warned China that any armed attack on Philippine troops or civilian ships and aircraft would trigger the mutual assistance pact between the Philippines and the US.

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Meanwhile, the US Congress pushed for a new bilateral defence agreement that would more than quadruple the annual support for Manila under the US *Foreign Military Financing* with a volume of USD 2.5 billion. Recognising the importance of economic security and resilient supply chains, Biden and Kishida also offered the Philippines a new package of strategic investments, primarily for the development of critical infrastructure.

The tripartite summit was preceded by a series of high-level meetings between the three countries, notably a meeting between US Vice President Kamala Harris, Marcos Jr. and Kishida, as well as trilateral talks between the respective national security advisors. Last year, the coast guards of the three countries conducted a joint exercise for the first time.

Philippine President Marcos Jr. personally played a key role in the creation of the 'JAPHUS' (Japan-Philippines-US) trilateral grouping: before his inaugural visit to Tokyo, he had publicly advocated this alliance, having previously decided to grant the Pentagon access to additional military facilities in the north of the Philippines as part of the *Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement* .

The JAPHUS trilateral partnership is part of a larger package of 'minilateral' initiatives led by the US. The best known are the AUKUS group (Australia-UK-US), the Japan-US-South Korea tripartite alliance and the quadrilateral security partnership 'Squad' between the US, Australia, Japan and the Philippines. These initiatives all follow the same organisational principle: they are intended to consolidate a strategy of 'integrated deterrence' against a newly strengthening China. The US aims to use its extensive network of alliances to contain China's ambitions in the region.

No interest in being a proxy

Both the Philippines and Japan realise that America plays an indispensable role in maintaining the status quo in the region. On the other hand, they are determined to strengthen their own strategic capacity to act. But there is also uncertainty about how America's involvement in the region will continue. The consequences of a second term in office for Donald Trump would include fierce internal power struggles in Washington, a complete restructuring of the security policy establishment there in favour of actors loyal to the administration, as well as an unabashedly unilateralist and brutally transactional foreign policy that would be at the expense of allies in Asia.

In addition, Japan and the Philippines both want to maintain stable channels of communication with China, which is not only their direct neighbour but also a very important trading partner. Regional states such as the Philippines do not want to act as a proxy for the US against a strengthening China, but want to pursue a more 'independent' foreign policy. Marcos Jr. has repeatedly made it clear that he has no intention of positioning himself alongside a superpower against another superpower, calling the deepening of the security partnership with traditional allies simply a defensive response to what is happening in the South China Sea, and 'the aggressive actions we are facing'.

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The Philippines has even rejected the proposal by the US to directly support it in the face of ongoing Chinese harassment of its supply and patrol operations in the South China Sea.

region as part of its doctrine of 'diplomatic realism'.

Instead, the South-East Asian state is focusing on modernising its own capabilities in the area of maritime security and wants to acquire sophisticated weapons systems for this purpose over the next ten years. Above all, however, the Philippines wants to diversify its security partnerships beyond the US. This is precisely where the now even more intensive security cooperation between the Philippines and Japan comes in. The country enjoys broad support from both the strategic elites of the Philippines and its population and is the most important partner for both development aid and investments.

Japan, for its part, is increasingly taking on a proactive security policy role in the region as part of its doctrine of 'diplomatic realism'. Building on the work of assassinated Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who single-handedly redefined Japan's post-war foreign policy in the 2010s, Fumio Kishida's government has set the goal of doubling Japan's defence spending over the next five years, working with key partners to develop new weapons systems and - most centrally - directly supporting like-minded states in the area of maritime security as part of the newly launched *Official Security Assistance* programme.

Effective coordination and broad-based cooperation between the two Asian allies is important when it comes to deterrence and determining the ultimate outcome of key conflicts in Asia.

The recently signed defence pact, which should soon be ratified in both countries, is intended to accelerate defence assistance and the export of increasingly sophisticated weapons systems to the Philippines. Japan, which has already equipped the Philippine Navy with multi-purpose boats and radar systems, will thus assume an even more central role in the country's maritime security capacity development in the context of the escalating disputes in the South China Sea.

The new agreement will also make it easier to hold bilateral military exercises more regularly and on a larger scale. This will dramatically improve interoperability between Japanese and Philippine forces, which is particularly important given concerns about a possible war in nearby Taiwan. Geography plays a crucial role in this context, as both Japan and the Philippines have military facilities (on the Okinawa Islands and in Batanes) that are not far from the Taiwanese coast. Accordingly, effective coordination and broad-based cooperation between the two Asian allies

is important when it comes to deterrence and determining the ultimate outcome of key conflicts in Asia. Notwithstanding their alliance with Washington, the Philippines and Japan are determined to strengthen their own defence capabilities so that they can respond effectively to geopolitical uncertainties and crisis situations in the region.



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