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Minilateralism in Philippine Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics

By Jose Miguelito Enriquez and Justin Baquisal

SYNOPSIS

The 11 April US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Leaders' Summit reflects President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's turn to minilateralism to advance his foreign policy agenda. However, his actions to defend the country's national interests could be undermined by domestic politics and may possibly unnerve ASEAN.

COMMENTARY

When President Ferdinand Marcos Jr met with US President Joe Biden and Japanese Premier Kishida Fumio in Washington for a [Trilateral Leaders' Summit](#) on 11 April 2024, it marked the first time that the three countries formalised trilateral coordination. It was also the latest step in the Philippines' turn to minilateralism to advance its national interests.

Although the Philippines is not new to minilateralism – it put in place a [Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement](#) with Malaysia and Indonesia to combat terrorism in 2017 – Marcos has relied more heavily in partnerships with “like-minded countries” amid its territorial disputes with China. Hence, it was not a surprise when Marcos, Biden, and Kishida committed to maintaining “peace and security” in the Indo-Pacific, notably against “attempts by (China) to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea and the East China Sea” in their [Joint Vision Statement](#).

The three leaders also pledged to build up economic resilience – lessening supply chain dependency on China – and support the Philippines' defence modernisation priorities. As a counterweight to Chinese investments, the US and Japan will develop an [Economic Corridor in Luzon](#) – the Philippines' most populous island – as the first G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) in the Indo-Pacific.

China has [criticised](#) the emerging “minilateral groupings”, interpreting them as a bloc meant to contain China.

Domestic Politics and Philippine Foreign Policy

The Philippines’ deepening ties with Japan and the US is not without controversy domestically. One camp has criticised Marcos for [risking Philippine involvement in a US-China military conflict](#), while another has lambasted former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, and his daughter Sara Duterte – the current Vice President – [for their rapprochement with China](#).

The trilateral talks have brought contesting viewpoints to the fore and inflamed tensions between Duterte and Marcos. Signs of a rift have been evident since July 2023, when the elder Duterte [flew to Beijing](#) to visit Chinese President Xi Jinping – a move seen as a rebuke to Marcos, who was then seeking to expand American access to Philippine military bases. Duterte also chose to sideline the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration award favouring the Philippines’ maritime claims in the South China Sea, whereas Marcos affirmed its centrality in many of his presidential engagements.

Duterte has strongly criticised the trilateral alliance [stating that it is not in the Philippines’ interest](#). He also defended himself from reports that he struck a [secret deal](#) with China over control of the Second Thomas Shoal, a disputed islet that has recently become a hotspot of tensions between China and the Philippines, amid calls for a congressional inquiry.

Marcos’ rift with the Dutertes is not expected to impair his ability to steer his foreign policy strategy yet. However, with [recent opinion polls](#) revealing sliding approval ratings, Marcos might not have a long runway to implement more ambitious components of its trilateral partnership. This could be the case for the proposed [Reciprocal Access Agreement](#) (RAA) between Manila and Tokyo, which aims to provide their respective armed forces with long-term access to each other’s military bases and more frequent joint training.

Once the fine print is finalised, the RAA will require the concurrence of the Philippine Senate, which has become the centre of a power struggle between Marcos and Duterte allies. Pro-Duterte senators [theoretically have enough votes](#) already to block the two-thirds majority vote required to approve the proposal, and Marcos’ sliding popularity could mean their numbers will increase after the upcoming 2025 midterm election.

Implications for ASEAN

In early April this year, Japan, the Philippines, US, and Australia began what has now become a routine “[Maritime Cooperative Activity](#)” involving military exercises in the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), part of which falls within China’s nine-dash line claim. Thus, the region could potentially see a surge in foreign forces, which may be a cause of worry for the Philippines’ ASEAN neighbours. However, the Philippines has been careful to limit the scale of foreign presence in its territory and went as far as to [rule out](#) participation in a Taiwan contingency.

However, for Manila, minilateralism with the US and Japan is but an extension of pre-existing cooperation and marks policy continuity. After all, Japan has been supporting [Philippine Coast Guard Modernisation](#) since 2015, while the US-Philippine alliance is the bedrock of the Philippines' defence planning. In fact, nothing in the recent trilateral vision statement is a 180 degree turn for Manila, as it has historically welcomed US and Japanese economic investments.

The Philippines' longstanding closeness to Japan and the US has also co-existed with its support of ASEAN – and Marcos has not shown any signs of breaking that tradition. In his keynote address at the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue, Marcos [reaffirmed](#) ASEAN's centrality in preserving regional stability while upholding the country's other bilateral and trilateral partnerships.

In pursuing a “dual pillar” foreign policy strategy, Manila is able to engage extra-regional security allies without having to repudiate ASEAN's primary role in regional security – making each pillar complementary rather than antithetical. This minimises the potential of backlash from its ASEAN neighbours, who have refrained from publicly criticising the Philippines' strategy, even as countries [like Malaysia](#) have pursued a more dovish approach with China. In turn, Manila has been steadfast in maintaining its commitment to [the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific \(AOIP\)](#).

For Marcos, engagement with both ASEAN and the Philippines' other partners are borne out of his principled stance in preserving the rules-based international order. Yet, there are also pragmatic considerations at play: ASEAN is not the sole mechanism to resolve the laundry list of the Philippines' disputes with China, which is ultimately a problem of regional balance-of-power for which the US and Japan will be of use. Arguably, the Philippines' history of seeking bilateral and minilateral relationships have also served as a safety valve for ASEAN since Manila can undertake concrete measures to safeguard its sovereign interests.

Conclusion

While the US-Japan-Philippines triad has accelerated the political feud between past and present presidents, it does not signify any meaningful departure in the foreign policy strategy of the Philippines. Moreover, the country's minilateral strategy should not be taken as a sign that its ASEAN neighbours are now irrelevant.

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