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No. 060/2024 dated 23 July 2024

Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement Strengthens Defence Links Across the First Island Chain

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SYNOPSIS

The recently signed Reciprocal Access Agreement between Japan and the Philippines reflects the growing geo-strategic alignment between the two nations. This will strengthen the self-defence capabilities of these key first island chain states. It is also likely to be a model for future defence cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.

COMMENTARY

On 8 July, the Philippines and Japan [signed an armed forces Reciprocal Access Agreement \(RAA\)](#) to streamline interactions between the two nations' defence forces. While the Japan-Philippines RAA had been in the works for over a decade, the negotiations were fast-tracked in the past year. The RAA solidifies unprecedented levels of convergence between Tokyo and Manila's defence priorities, geopolitical calculations, and strategic vision.

What Does (and Doesn't) the Japan-Philippines RAA Do?

Some commentators imagine that the RAA could be a precursor to the stationing of significant Japanese forces or the establishment of [Japanese defence facilities](#) in the Philippines. That remains highly unlikely. The agreement explicitly states: "Nothing in this agreement shall be construed as providing a basis for a Party to establish its military facilities in the territory of the other Party." An RAA, much like the "Visiting Forces Agreements" (VFAs), does not provide *carte blanche* access associated with the "Status of Forces Agreements" (SOFAs) the United States [maintains with Japan](#) and held with the [Philippines until the early 1990s](#). The RAA provides no mechanism

for the permanent stationing of forces, nor avenues to create overseas bases in either country.

The RAA is a diplomatic mechanism to streamline the burdensome bureaucratic procedures, paperwork, and clearance requirements currently required to move forces between countries for training, exercises, or exchanges. Rather than depending on cabinet-level coordination to approve such movements, the RAA enables lower-level officers to carry out simplified entry procedures. This reduction in red tape will shorten the lead time needed to plan combined events. It also [nullifies questions](#) regarding the legality of the Japanese deployments under the Philippine constitution.

Japan's recent deployments of ground or maritime forces to the Philippines for the participation in or observation of exercises like [Kamandag](#) and [Balikatan](#) required months of policy planning between Japanese and Philippine foreign, defence, and other security-relevant ministries. Considering that delays at any one ministry could set back or even cancel Japan's participation in these exercises, the organisational stakes were high. Tokyo and Manila would sometimes awkwardly nestle their planned activities into other already-approved engagements, such as the standing international exercise series, but this watered down the value of both the original activity and the additional events.



A sailor from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) waves the Philippine flag during a visit to Davao City in 2023. Image from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

What Led to the Japan-Philippines RAA?

Close defence relations between Japan and the Philippines are nothing new. For more than a decade, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) has frequently stopped at Subic Bay and Manila for supplies, crew rest, and exchanges during operations in the South China Sea. Each branch of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) also regularly train with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippine Coast Guard (PCG). Though these activities are usually piggybacked on the United States-Philippine [bilateral exercises](#) (in part to streamline the approvals process), bilateral Japan-Philippine activities have become increasingly frequent.

As the various branches of the JSDF became more frequent visitors to the Philippines, their AFP counterparts regularly advocated for a VFA-like document that would help to simplify planning future events. Australia, which signed a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA) with the Philippines in 2007, was often cited as experiencing such an advantage. Japan's strategic leaders saw the logic and the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs soon put the Philippines SOVFA/RAA project on its worklist. Philippine leaders were also generally open to the idea, but few considered it an urgent matter, while others recognised that an agreement would face domestic opposition from pro-communist and anti-military organisations.

Meanwhile, Japan began hosting more international military forces as it increasingly became a [hub for enforcing](#) United Nations sanctions against North Korea and promoting regional maritime security. Many of these forces visited Japan under the terms of the [United Nations Sending States Status of Forces Agreement](#), which required forces to be involved in activities directly related to security on the Korean Peninsula.

Australia and the United Kingdom were two nations particularly keen to gain the flexibility that could accompany signing an RAA with Japan. Japan, a nation in the midst of a [“security renaissance”](#) triggered by heightened concerns related to the threatening postures of China and North Korea, was itself eager to expand collaboration with other American allies and benefit from their high-end military capabilities. Japan was also eager to have greater access to Australian military training ranges, widely considered among the world’s finest. Japan finalised its RAA with [Australia in 2022](#) and the [UK in 2023](#).

During the 2016-2022 Philippine presidency of US-sceptic Rodrigo Duterte, Japanese forces continued to regularly visit the Philippines. While the period was not overly detrimental to the Tokyo-Manila defence relationship, uncertainty related to Duterte’s strategic outreach to China and his uncertain [commitment to the US-Philippines VFA](#) dampened Japan’s excitement for an RAA and further delayed these discussions.

After President Marcos came to office in a [landslide victory in 2022](#), he launched a vigorous strategy to expand national military capabilities, bolster the Philippine alliance with the United States, and build stronger relationships with additional security partners. Japan’s 2022 National Security Strategy laid out the same fundamental arch, indicating Tokyo’s eagerness to reciprocate. This is unsurprising considering the two nations share a common geography as key nations of the [“first island chain”](#) that lies between the East and South China Seas and the Philippine Sea. Tokyo and Manila also share a common understanding that Chinese aggression in the face of their efforts to find accommodation has revealed China as a hostile neighbour. Thus, the ability to move forces along that island chain is a force multiplier for training and readiness.

Under the leadership of Philippine president Marcos and Japanese prime minister Kishida, the RAA negotiations were easily thawed. Japan’s recent experience of completing two RAA negotiations also helped propel the process to a speedy conclusion.

What Does the Japan-Philippines RAA Mean for the Indo-Pacific?

First and foremost, the RAA will enable greater and more regular security interactions between Japan and the Philippines, strengthening the [“maritime wall”](#) being assembled to counter Chinese aggression along the first island chain. This matters deeply to leaders in Tokyo and Manila, who face near-daily intrusion by Chinese

maritime actions in internationally recognised territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. Were these violations of sovereignty to turn even more aggressive, [as China routinely threatens](#), the training enabled by the RAA will also better prepare both countries for their self-defence.

Beijing is bristling at news of the RAA, referring to it as another “[military bloc](#)” forming in the Indo-Pacific. Such a description is overblown, as the RAA contains no security guarantees or mutual defence clauses. While the slow [spread of “minilateral”](#) security arrangements among US allies may concern Beijing, the RAA is specifically designed to avoid ensnaring either Tokyo or Manila in each other’s potential security contingencies.

As for the rest of the region, the Japan-Philippines RAA is likely to be a model of future defence cooperation. Observers should expect both Japan and the Philippines to negotiate similar agreements with other partners soon.

The Philippines and New Zealand have confirmed their intent to conclude a SOFVA by the end of 2024, and Manila and Paris are [starting formal discussions](#) that will precede formal negotiations in that direction. Japan and France have already moved into that [formal negotiations stage](#), suggesting an agreement could be signed as early as 2025.

With many countries in the region eager for expanded defence partnerships, the Japan-Philippines RAA stands as an example of the potential of bilateral security arrangements between middle powers to face superpower competition.

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