

# INDIA AND JAPAN CONVERGE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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November 22, 2023 01:39 am | Updated 01:39 am IST

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Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (left) and Philippine Transportation Secretary Jaime Bautista in Manila on November 4, 2023. Mr. Bautista has noted that the Philippine government is willing to tap both India and Japan for development assistance. | Photo Credit: AFP

Upon [dropping](#) a series of Chinese-led infrastructure projects due to sustainability and geopolitical concerns, the Philippines is now redirecting its attention to Japan and India as alternative sources of development and security. Transportation Secretary Jaime Bautista reaffirmed this earlier this month when he [noted](#) that the Philippine government is willing to tap both countries for development assistance. This statement intersects with Manila's desire to deepen and broaden its security and economic partnerships with like-minded partners amidst Beijing's growing unwillingness to act and behave like a responsible neighbour.

Under the leadership of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has been steadfast in securing its sovereignty and sovereign rights in the West Philippine Sea against China's revisionist interests in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, at the heart of Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy lies the intent to work closely with like-minded traditional and non-traditional partners with similar goals, interests, and concerns in the region. Accordingly, Manila's attribution of both Tokyo and New Delhi as important traditional and non-traditional partners allows all three democracies to explore new opportunities for multi-faceted strategic cooperation. The past few months have also witnessed significant developments in this regard.

The Philippines and Japan share a close strategic partnership, with the former being Manila's major investor and its largest source of overseas development assistance (ODA). While the partnership traditionally functioned in the context of the United States hub-and-spokes system, bilateral ties are now displaying significant momentum as an independent force, with Tokyo seeking to play a more prominent security role amidst Manila's desire to bolster its defence network and maritime security capabilities in the region. The historic visit of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to the Philippines marked a turning point in the trajectory of bilateral ties. From being [the first recipient](#) of Japan's overseas security assistance (OSA) to formalising [negotiations](#) for a reciprocal access agreement (RAA), the meeting between Marcos Jr. and Kishida paved the way for a "[golden age](#)" in the Philippines-Japan strategic partnership, which has the makings of more regularised military-to-military engagements.

Similarly, the bilateral partnership between the Philippines and India has witnessed noteworthy advancements as Manila is now more willingly incorporating New Delhi in its strategic

calculations. The past few months witnessed essential milestones in the burgeoning bilateral relationship, encompassing the [visit](#) of Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo to New Delhi and the [signing](#) of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Philippine and Indian Coast Guards, which will allow both sides to improve their interoperability, intelligence sharing, and maritime domain awareness. More recently, India has also [offered](#) to supply the Philippine Coast Guard with seven indigenously manufactured helicopters based on a soft loan agreement with extended payment terms. This potential agreement also comes at the heels of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile delivery to the Southeast Asian country later this year.

Thus, Japan and India's bolstered engagements in Southeast Asia complement the interest of resident countries like the Philippines to lessen their susceptibility to China's expanding economic clout and deepening power projection capabilities. Forging robust ties with friendly regional powers is crucial to Southeast Asian countries' hedging strategies, especially as the U.S.-China competition continues to intensify. In fact, based on the authoritative [State of Southeast Asian Survey of 2023](#), Japan and India are the top two choices of Southeast Asian countries for alternative Indo-Pacific strategic partners. Therefore, the contemporary structural conditions serve as an opportunity for Japan and India to operationalise their shared vision for the Indo-Pacific, in general, and Southeast Asia, in particular.

The India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership is best defined through the robust ties both major Indo-Pacific democracies share. In terms of security, New Delhi and Tokyo constantly engage in varied platforms ranging from regular bilateral military exercises and two-plus-two meetings to multilateral frameworks such as the Quad and the G20. Moreover, both countries also share similar threat perceptions vis-à-vis an increasingly assertive and disruptive China. In fact, in its 2022 National Security Strategy, Tokyo [declared](#) China as an "unprecedented and greatest strategic challenge", while Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh also recently [highlighted](#) the need to counter Chinese aggression.

Beyond defence cooperation, New Delhi and Tokyo have also embarked on a third-country cooperation model in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. In 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his former counterpart Shinzo Abe welcomed collaborative efforts in establishing industrial growth and development networks across Asia and Africa, creating the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). While the project eventually slowed down due to geopolitical turbulence and the economic constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, both countries have recently explored new third-country cooperation models throughout the region. Among them are the emerging trilateral partnerships between India, Japan, and [Bangladesh](#) and a similar framework between India, Japan, and [Sri Lanka](#).

Accordingly, as India is significantly deepening and broadening its ties with Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, New Delhi should consider taking its third-country developmental model with Tokyo into the sub-region of the greater Indo-Pacific at a time when resident countries are looking for alternative sources of development and security amidst the polarising dynamics of the U.S.-China power competition.

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