

MARCH 2026

U.S.-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Cooperation

The Bedrock of a New U.S. Indo-Pacific Deterrence Strategy

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Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the many officials and experts—both in the United States and elsewhere—who shared their perspectives over the course of this project and helped to inform the views expressed in this paper. The authors are particularly indebted to Chris Johnstone, Henrietta Levin, Jacob Stokes, Emma Swislow, and Maura McCarthy for their expert

reviews of this paper. Finally, this paper would not have been possible without assistance from a host of CNAS colleagues, including Melody Cook, Allison Francis, Ethan Steel, and Caroline Steel. The views presented here do not represent those of CNAS or any other organization, and the authors are solely responsible for any errors in fact, analysis, or omission. This report was made possible with the generous support of the Government of Japan.

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Executive Summary

Growing challenges from the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) massive military modernization, rapid technological advancement, and coercive military activity throughout the Indo-Pacific require a more integrated and cohesive deterrence strategy from the United States and its alliance partners. Trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the Philippines is becoming increasingly important to shore up deterrence around Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas.

Months of trilateral meetings at the national security advisor-level and foreign minister-level culminated in the first-ever leader-level U.S.-Japan-Philippines summit hosted in Washington, D.C., in April 2024, marking the start of a “new trilateral chapter.”¹ Since President Donald Trump assumed office in January 2025, his administration has sustained the high operational tempo for trilateral military exercises that President Joe Biden’s administration started. In April 2025, the Philippines welcomed Japan’s participation in Exercise Balikatan, and Japan Air Self-Defense Force observers joined the annual joint U.S.-Philippines combat-realistic air force exercise Cope Thunder.²

The United States and Japan are already among the Philippines’ top trading partners, but there are opportunities to enhance trade and investment ties in energy, infrastructure, telecommunications, and critical minerals. On July 10, 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with his counterparts, Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Maria Theresa Lazaro and then-Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and advanced plans to develop the Luzon Economic Corridor, an initiative that was launched in 2024.³ The Luzon Economic Corridor is aimed at enhancing connectivity and port and infrastructure development across Luzon, which is only about 160 miles from Taiwan and is the largest and most populated island of the Philippine archipelago.

At their July 2025 meeting, the three foreign ministers also highlighted critical minerals as a key area for future cooperation. The Philippines has substantial critical mineral reserves and could play a role in helping to reduce global dependence on China. However, at present the PRC dominates the Philippine nickel supply chain. It will take time for the Philippines to shift its reliance on PRC supply chains that access its nickel reserves and for Manila to attract Western private sector investment into extracting and processing its critical minerals.⁴

While the Trump administration has so far demonstrated interest in deepening U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral cooperation, Trump’s unpredictable approach

to foreign policy—especially regarding U.S. relations with China—leaves doubt about his continued support for a trilateral platform that China views as threatening to its own security interests. Trump could, for example, agree to back away from the trilateral partnership if he thinks doing so might bring PRC concessions on trade issues.

However, given the Trump administration’s goal, as laid out in the 2026 National Defense Strategy, to deal effectively with the increasing security challenges in the First Island Chain, particularly China’s military aggression against Taiwan and gray zone activity in the South and East China Seas, the United States should continue to invest in trilateral cooperation with Japan and the Philippines.⁵ Enhancing trilateral diplomatic, military, and economic collaboration will demonstrate that the three countries are united in their opposition to PRC acts of coercion and intimidation. Furthermore, the three nations’ increased coordination on military training, maritime patrolling, intelligence sharing, infrastructure development, and logistics will better prepare them for a potential military contingency in the region. Finally, the U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral partnership can lay the foundation for an expanded semi-formal network of security relationships that enhances U.S. deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific. Pursuing the following policy recommendations will help the three nations achieve these goals.

Summary of Recommendations

Security and Defense Cooperation

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should deepen and institutionalize their trilateral cooperation to strengthen deterrence against PRC threats to Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas. The three countries should hold regular leader-level summits and establish a dedicated senior officials’ process to streamline strategic planning, synchronize investments, and minimize bureaucratic friction and establish a military-to-military mechanism to strengthen joint operational planning, improve information sharing, and coordinate joint training exercises.⁶

Japan and the Philippines should conclude a bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) as soon as possible to allow the three countries to share information and improve trilateral interoperability. Tokyo and Manila should build on the momentum of having recently signed two other military agreements—a Reciprocal Access Agreement and an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement—to expeditiously conclude a GSOMIA.

The United States should rapidly appropriate and deploy greater resources to improve the development of infrastructure at U.S. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites in the Philippines. Increased U.S. spending to support EDCA site construction is necessary to ensure operational effectiveness and sustained Philippine domestic support for a robust U.S. forward posture in the First Island Chain.

Japan should focus a portion of its increased military aid to the Philippines on supporting the development of infrastructure at U.S. EDCA sites in the Philippines. While so far Japan has used its Official Security Assistance (OSA) to the Philippines to fund radar systems, patrol boats, training aircraft, and most recently naval infrastructure, it should use OSA and consider reforms to allow for the provision of Official Development Assistance to fund infrastructure projects at EDCA sites, which would assist in trilateral humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should integrate their foreign national evacuation plans to enhance regional preparedness for a Taiwan contingency. Building upon each nation's independent initiatives, trilateral cooperation should leverage existing capabilities to operationally and logistically prepare for such a crisis. If willing, Taiwan should be included in these discussions as much as possible.

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should initiate a dedicated trilateral effort to significantly enhance naval maintenance, repair, and overhaul capabilities at Subic Bay, transforming it into a resilient regional hub. This cooperation would enable rapid repairs, maintenance, and surge capacity during crises, reducing dependence on distant U.S. and Japanese shipyards and improving regional stability.

The United States, the Philippines, and Japan should shift from episodic exercises to a persistent, trilateral sea denial posture across the Luzon Strait. The United States should permanently deploy a mix of ground-based medium- and long-range precision fires at EDCA sites in northern Luzon and in Batanes, subject to Philippine government approval. These deployments, paired with Japan's build-out of coastal missiles, radars, ammunition sites, and electronic warfare across the Ryukyu and Kyushu Islands, would enable the partners to hold at risk People's Liberation Army assets operating north and south of Taiwan.⁷

Economic and Diplomatic Cooperation

The United States and Japan should work together to leverage the Philippines' potential in critical minerals and rare-earth elements to reduce dependency on China. This would require conducting feasibility studies and providing incentives to the private sector to invest in the exploration, extraction, and development of these valuable resources.

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should pool resources and coordinate investments to diversify subsea cable infrastructure and improve maritime monitoring. Together, they should lease cable repair ships, streamline regulatory processes to accelerate subsea cable deployments, and diversify cable landing station locations on the Philippines' eastern coast away from contentious areas, as well as establish joint real-time maritime monitoring mechanisms and compile a shared database documenting cable-cutting incidents to enhance regional responses.

Introduction

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines face significant security challenges from the People's Republic of China (PRC), whose aggressive military expansion and coercive maritime tactics have significantly heightened tensions throughout the Pacific. Beijing's revisionist designs—from the Senkakus to the South China Sea—pose a clear and present danger to the safety and security of two core American allies, Japan and the Philippines.

In 2025, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a record 163 operations in the South China Sea, including 55 live-fire drills, and doubled its presence around Scarborough Shoal.⁸ PLA vessels conducted 111 voyages in Japanese waters in 2025, including operations with its aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers, and ordered 17 transits of the Osumi Strait near the new Japan Air Self-Defense Force base on Mageshima Island.⁹ These increased incursions, as well as collisions with Philippine coast guard vessels and radar lock-ons targeting Japanese fighter planes, underscore the urgency for a stronger, more integrated and comprehensive trilateral approach to effectively deter PRC aggression across the First Island Chain.¹⁰

Although the United States has historically maintained robust relationships through its bilateral alliances with Japan and the Philippines, PRC provocations have made trilateral cooperation more urgent. The first-ever leader-level U.S.-Japan-Philippines summit in April 2024 marked a new strategic consensus among the three countries—demonstrating a shared commitment to collective defense, economic engagement, and humanitarian cooperation.

The year 2026 marks a significant milestone year for U.S.-Japan-Philippines relations: 80 years of U.S.-Philippines diplomatic ties, the 75th anniversary of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty and the signing of the original U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, 70 years of Japan-Philippines diplomatic ties, and the 10th anniversary of the landmark UN Convention on the Law of the Sea ruling affirming Philippine maritime claims.¹¹ In this milestone year, this report assesses the recent achievements and the current trajectory of trilateral cooperation and identifies areas requiring further collaboration.

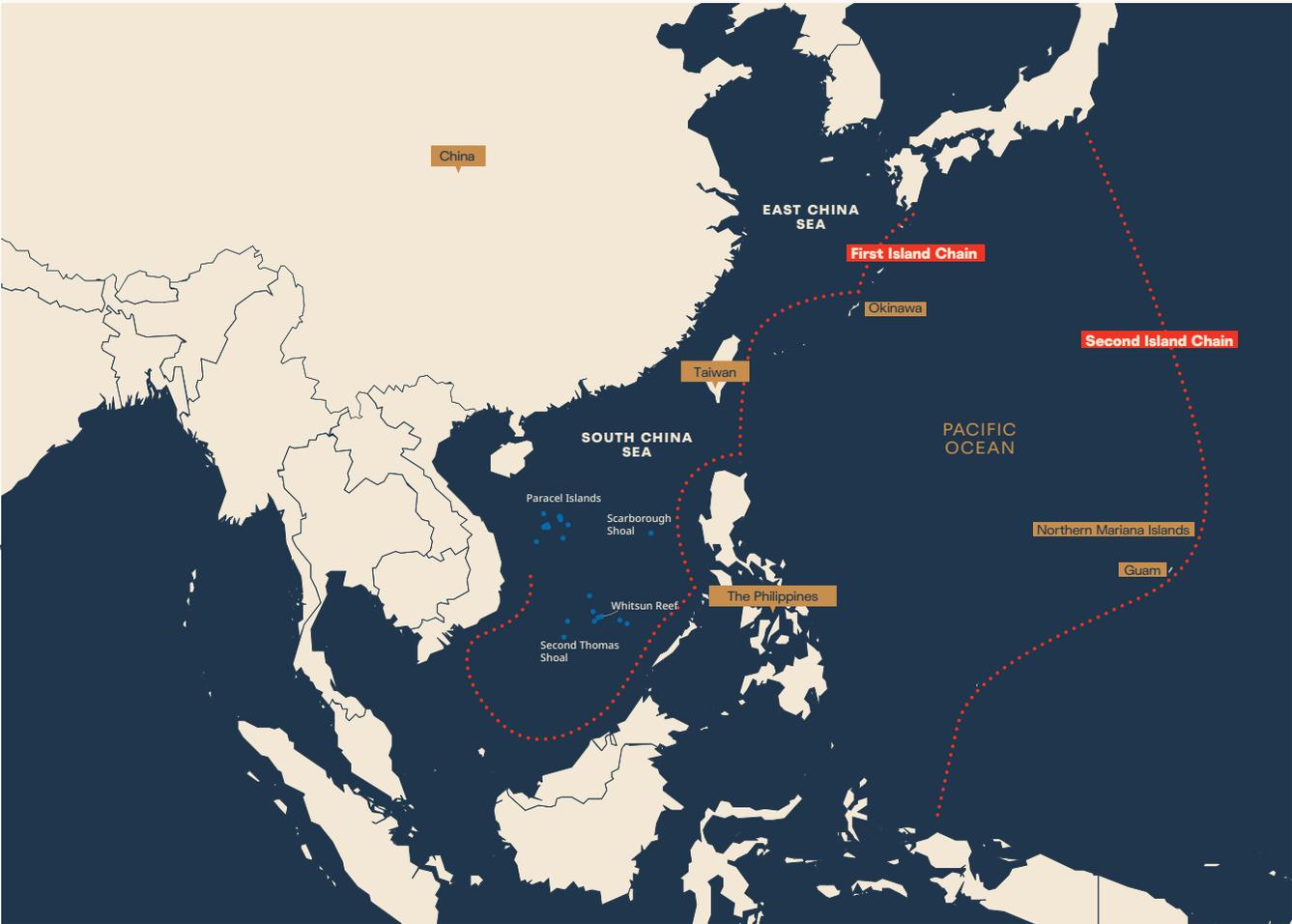
The report begins by outlining the shared strategic rationale driving closer trilateral engagement, highlighting common security interests among the three nations. Subsequent sections detail recent advancements in defense and economic cooperation, emphasizing key developments such as Japan's enhanced military assistance to the Philippines, the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the implementation of

the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), significant U.S. infrastructure investments at strategic locations such as Subic Bay, and the establishment of the Luzon Economic Corridor. The report also addresses potential obstacles to trilateral cooperation, including President Donald Trump’s transactional approach to alliances, his efforts to gain trade concessions from China, and domestic political constraints within the Philippines in the lead-up to the Philippine presidential election in 2028.

Finally, the report proposes recommendations for policymakers designed to deepen trilateral cooperation by enhancing military interoperability, improving

infrastructure resilience, and strengthening economic security. Through proactive coordination and strategic investments, the United States, Japan, and the Philippines can collectively reinforce regional stability. The strategic geography of Japan and the Philippines as part of the First Island Chain positions these nations as essential partners for the United States in maintaining a credible deterrence posture around Taiwan and within the contested waters of the South and East China Seas. Thus, this trilateral partnership forms the foundation of a comprehensive Indo-Pacific deterrence strategy.

Figure 1 | Map of the First and Second Island Chains¹²



The First Island Chain is the first set of major archipelagos off the East Asian continental coast, comprised of the Kuril Islands, Japan, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the northern Philippines, and Borneo. The Island Chain Strategy, first conceived by American diplomat John Foster Dulles during the Korean War, aims to project American force throughout the western Pacific through U.S. naval bases.

Strategic Rationale for Trilateral Cooperation

The five bilateral treaty allies of the United States in Asia (Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand) form the bedrock for U.S. security and strategy in the region. However, growing challenges from the PRC’s massive military modernization, rapid technological advancement, and coercive military activity throughout the Indo-Pacific require a more integrated and cohesive deterrence strategy from the United States and its alliance partners. Trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the Philippines is becoming increasingly important to shore up deterrence around Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas due to the two countries’ proximity to Taiwan and China’s increasing military aggression in the region.

In the event of a Taiwan contingency, U.S. cooperation with Japan and the Philippines will be crucial for allowing rapid response, basing, surveillance, evacuation, and logistical support. Japan’s southwest islands extend just 68 miles from Taiwan, while the northernmost island of the Philippines sits just 61 miles from Taiwan.¹³ Former Philippine Military Chief General Emmanuel Bautista told a reporter earlier this year, referring to the PRC, “You can’t invade Taiwan if you don’t control the northern Philippines.”¹⁴ Since former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s declaration in 2021 that a “Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency”—reinforced by then-Prime Minister Kishida Fumio’s statement in June 2022 that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow,” and the subsequent August 2022 Taiwan Strait Crisis—Japanese leaders have increasingly focused on the risks to Japan of a conflict over Taiwan.¹⁵ More recently, Japan’s new hawkish prime minister, Takaichi Sanae, prompted a harsh PRC response when she indicated that an attempt by the PRC to unify Taiwan to mainland China through force could trigger a military response from Japan.¹⁶

In addition to their mutual concern about China’s increasing military aggression toward Taiwan, the three countries have shared threat perceptions regarding China’s maritime bullying in the South and East China Seas and its revisionist policies throughout the region more broadly. In the last few years, China has increased its gray zone activities in the South China Sea against the Philippines, while at the same time repeatedly intruding into Japanese territorial waters and increasing the number of coast guard patrols around the disputed Senkaku Islands.¹⁷ Since 2022, the Philippines has lodged 245 diplomatic protests against China over its incursions in the South China Sea.¹⁸

Due to their proximity to Taiwan and vulnerability to increasing PRC maritime coercion, Japan and the Philippines have been strengthening security ties in recent years. Four years ago, in a significant policy shift, Japan started providing security assistance to like-minded countries, and since then the Philippines has received the largest amount of Japanese military aid. In 2023, Japan equipped the Philippine navy with a coastal radar system, and in 2024, the two sides concluded a deal worth \$507 million in which Japan will fund the construction of five naval patrol vessels along with a logistics support package for the Philippines.¹⁹ In September of last year, the RAA between the two countries took effect, allowing their militaries to train within each other’s territories.²⁰ This growing bilateral relationship is contributing to a stronger deterrence network in the region that will benefit the United States.

Building up trilateral military and defense cooperation among Washington, Tokyo, and Manila will help the United States create a semiformal networked security architecture that can present a united front against China’s campaign of coercion and intimidation in the First Island Chain. It will also ensure the three countries approach maritime security in a comprehensive way that views Chinese gray zone activities in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and East China Sea through the same lens and develops a common operating picture of the maritime space. This in turn will enable the three nations to adopt a unified and coordinated approach to deal with Chinese maritime aggression wherever it is occurring.²¹

“You can’t invade Taiwan if you don’t control the northern Philippines.”

—Former Philippine Military Chief General Emmanuel Bautista, referring to China’s potential plans to invade Taiwan.

Progress on Bilateral and Trilateral Defense and Security Cooperation

Throughout the Biden and second Trump administrations, Washington has demonstrated a bipartisan U.S. commitment to bilateral and trilateral security cooperation with Japan and the Philippines through sustained military exercises, expansions in U.S. defense posture, and strategic investments in critical facilities, such as Subic Bay.

From January 2021 to January 2025, President Joe Biden's administration made significant strides in revitalizing the U.S.-Philippines alliance—following strained relations between Washington and Manila during the first Trump administration. While then-President Rodrigo Duterte had pursued a policy of placating China for the first few years of his administration, by 2021 he was growing increasingly frustrated with China's aggressive maritime activities around the Philippines. In March 2021, the Philippines announced that 220 Chinese vessels were located near Whitsun Reef in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.²² Another irritant was the PRC's encirclement of the Philippines' Thitu Island, the largest of the Philippines' Spratly Islands.²³

With the growing tensions between China and the Philippines surrounding the Whitsun Reef, the Biden administration saw an opportunity to repair U.S.-Philippines relations and ensure that Duterte restored the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which has been in place since 1999 and provides for smooth access to the Philippines for visiting U.S. troops. Duterte had initiated the termination process for the VFA in 2020 due to his anger over the cancellation of his former police chief's U.S. visa by Trump's first administration.²⁴

In addition to Duterte's frustration with China over the Whitsun Reef episode, relations between the United States and the Philippines further improved during the Biden administration due to timely U.S. assistance in the form of 3.2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines.²⁵ This led Duterte to publicly thank Biden and the American people and enabled Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin's visit to Manila in July 2021 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the two countries' Mutual Defense Treaty. During Austin's visit, Duterte canceled his abrogation of the VFA, and Manila agreed to resume participation in strategic dialogues with Washington.²⁶ By the time Duterte left office in 2022, U.S.-Philippines relations were on an upswing.

The bilateral relationship experienced a marked acceleration in strategic cooperation under President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Romualdez Marcos Jr., who was elected in May 2022. Driven by shared concerns over China's assertiveness

and a mutual commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, Marcos closely aligned with Washington.

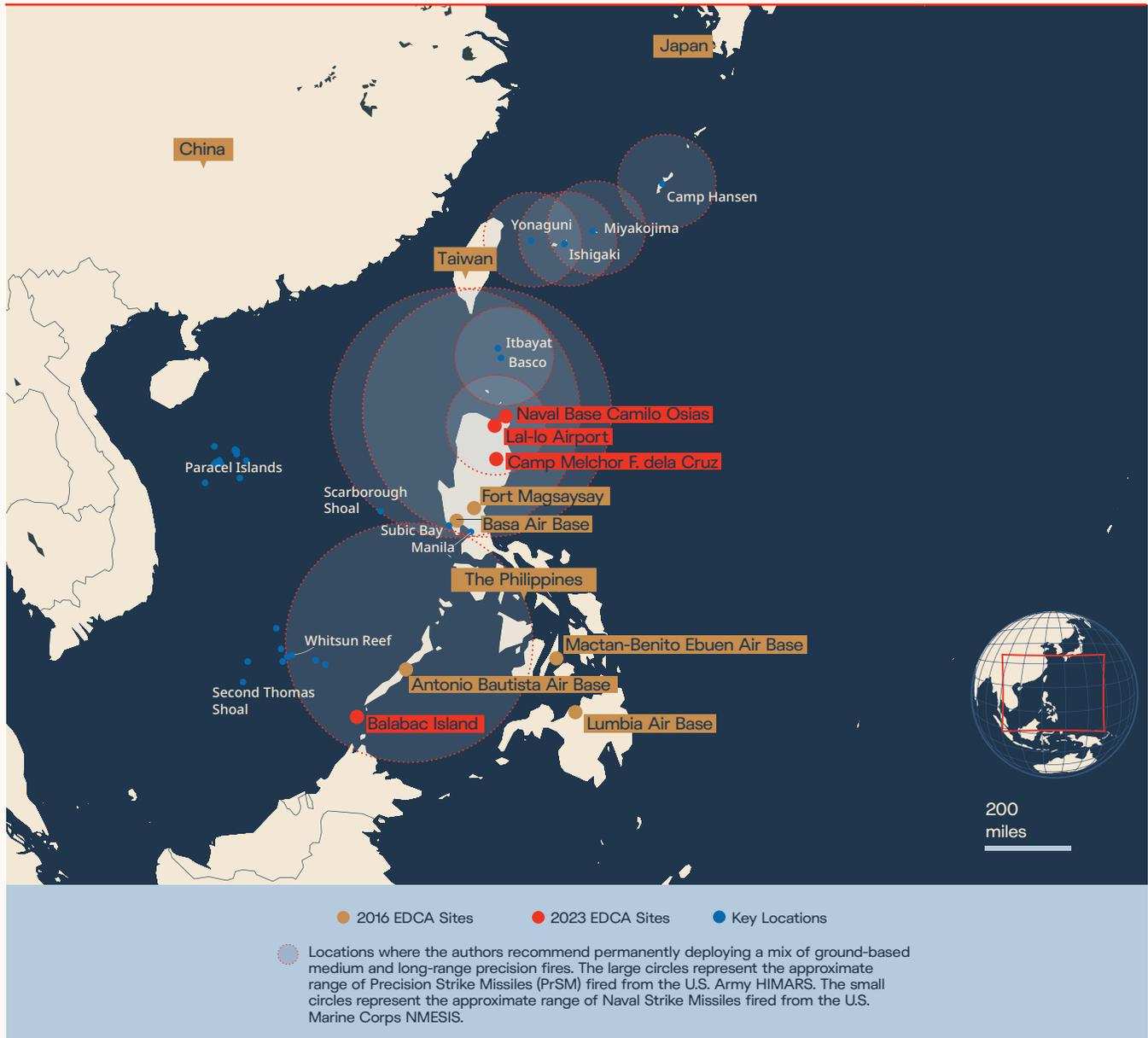
In 2023, the United States and the Philippines expanded their Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which allows U.S. forces access to designated Philippine military bases. They selected four new sites where U.S. forces will have rotational access to enhance infrastructure, joint military activities, and Philippine defense capabilities. Notably, three of these facilities—Naval Base Camilo Osias, Lal-lo Airport, and Camp Melchor F. dela Cruz—are situated in northern Luzon, the Philippines' northernmost major island near Taiwan, substantially boosting rapid-response capabilities across the crucial Luzon Strait.²⁷ The fourth is on Balabac Island, Palawan, directly facing the South China Sea. To improve infrastructure at these sites, Washington allocated over \$82 million to upgrade runways, training facilities, and logistical storage.²⁸

After the adoption of the May 2023 U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines—which laid out the foundation for renewed defense cooperation—bilateral joint training and strategic planning expanded.²⁹ In 2023, Balikatan, the largest annual bilateral U.S.-Philippines military exercise, expanded to more than 17,600 participants, including a small Australian contingent, making it the largest iteration to date.³⁰ During the 2024 iteration of Balikatan, U.S. and Philippine forces put newly designated EDCA sites into operational use, including Balabac in Palawan and Lal-lo Airport and Naval Base Camilo Osias in Cagayan. Lal-lo and nearby facilities supported high mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) rapid infiltration training, and U.S. aircraft helped move forces and fuel to Basco in the Batanes province, which lies less than 125 miles from Taiwan.³¹

In April and May 2025, U.S. Marines twice deployed their Navy Marine expeditionary ship interdiction system (NMESIS)—a small, stealthy, and easily transportable ground-based antiship missile launcher capable of striking vessels across the 155-mile-wide Bashi Channel—to Batanes during joint drills with Philippine forces.³² These exercises simulated blocking this strategically vital maritime corridor, which separates the Philippines from Taiwan and provides critical access from the South China Sea to the Philippine Sea. Notably, Japan observed heightened Chinese naval activity near its waters during the U.S.-Philippines exercises, underscoring the channel's strategic importance to the United States, Philippines, and Japan. After the NMESIS battery was used in U.S.-Philippine drills, it arrived in Japan in July 2025 and was used for training in Okinawa for the first time.³³

In late 2025, Washington and Manila announced the formation of the U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD's) Task Force Philippines, designed to enhance crisis response

Figure 2 | Map of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement Sites³⁴



In 2016, under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the Philippines agreed to provide the United States access to five designated facilities, including Antonio Bautista Air Base, Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay, Lumbia Air Base, and Mactan-Benito Ebuena Air Base. In 2023, the agreement was expanded to include four additional sites: Naval Base Camilo Osias and Lal-lo Airport in northern Luzon and Camp Melchor F. dela Cruz in Isabela—all located near Taiwan—and Balabac Island in Palawan—strategically positioned near the South China Sea. U.S. forces have rotational access to EDCA sites to enhance infrastructure, joint military activities, and Philippine defense capabilities.

capabilities and deterrence against China in the South China Sea.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Philippine coast guard announced it would participate in Exercise Rim of the Pacific 2026, the world’s largest international maritime exercise, hosted by the United States.³⁶ After completing 500 joint military activities annually over the past three years, the U.S. and Philippine forces are scheduled to hold yet another 500 military-to-military engagements throughout 2026.³⁷

The Biden administration also pursued significant bilateral initiatives with Japan aimed at better operationalizing the alliance, including a formal agreement to enhance maritime security collaboration and joint strategic investments, including in partnership with the Philippines. Central to defense cooperation was the proposal to convert U.S. Forces Japan into a joint force headquarters, providing a standing, forward-deployed command capable

of effectively coordinating day-to-day operational activities with the Japanese Self-Defense Force's newly formed Joint Operations Command (JJOC).³⁸ The JJOC, announced in December 2022, oversees Japan's Ground, Maritime and Air Self-Defense Forces and reflects Tokyo's efforts to improve interservice and international cooperation in rapidly responding to crises, contingencies, and natural disasters.³⁹

With Manila, Tokyo signed a defense equipment transfer agreement with the Philippines, agreed to pursue a Reciprocal Access Agreement, deployed military observers to Exercise Balikatan 2024, and, along with South Korean marines, observed the U.S.-Philippines amphibious drill KAMANDAG.⁴⁰

Months of trilateral meetings at the national security advisor-level and foreign minister-level culminated in the first-ever leader-level U.S.-Japan-Philippines summit, hosted in Washington in April 2024, marking the start of a "new trilateral chapter."⁴¹ The Biden administration's key achievements in strengthening U.S.-Japan-Philippines security cooperation were in its expanded force posture, increased exercises and maritime monitoring, and a deeper integration of bilateral alliances.

Since Trump assumed office in January 2025, he has sustained the Biden administration's high operational tempo for trilateral military exercises. Despite some initial concerns over America's continued commitment to the region, within the first month of Trump's second term all three countries

and Australia participated in joint naval activities in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, highlighting swift operational momentum.⁴² In April, the Philippines welcomed Japan's participation in Exercise Balikatan and Japan Air Self-Defense Force observers to the annual joint U.S.-Philippines combat-realistic air force exercise Cope Thunder.⁴³

In July, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with his counterparts, Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Maria Theresa Lazaro and then-Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi, to discuss strengthening security cooperation and safeguarding the South China Sea.⁴⁴ September saw another trilateral military exercise within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.⁴⁵ Further progress was achieved in November 2025, when the defense ministers from the United States, Japan, and the Philippines, along with Australia, formally endorsed the establishment of an Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Cooperation Council to improve minister-level coordination.⁴⁶

However, the clearest throughline across the first Trump, Biden, and second Trump administrations has been strategic U.S. investment in the Philippines—with Subic Bay as the most consequential achievement. During the Cold War, Subic Bay and Clark Air Base formed the backbone of the U.S. military presence in Asia. In 1992, the United States was forced to withdraw from Subic—its largest naval base in Asia—due to domestic political shifts in the Philippines that



A U.S. Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter transports U.S. Marines from the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment and Philippine Marines from Marine Battalion Landing Team 10 to the Batanes island chain in the Philippines during the annual Balikatan military exercise on April 24, 2025. The Batanes islands will be crucial to defending the Luzon Strait. (Malia Sparks/U.S. Marine Corps)

U.S. Investment in Subic Bay's Reemergence

After the 2019 bankruptcy of Hanjin Heavy Industries Philippines—the largest investor in Subic Bay—concerns quickly emerged that Chinese firms might acquire the strategically located facility.⁴⁸ However, with backing from the U.S. government, Cerberus Capital Management intervened, acquiring the 300 hectares for \$300 million in 2022.⁴⁹ Rebranded as “Agila Subic,” the shipyard welcomed subsea fiberoptic cable manufacturer SubCom in 2023, and HD Hyundai Heavy Industries inaugurated its shipyard there in September 2025, making Subic poised to become Southeast Asia’s largest shipbuilding facility.⁵⁰ Supported by significant U.S., Philippine, and South Korean investments, Subic is enhancing its shipbuilding and defense industrial capabilities.

In February 2025, the U.S. Marine Corps leased a 57,000-square-foot warehouse at Subic Bay Freeport Zone as a pre-positioning site—the first persistent American military presence there since 1992. The following month, the Trump administration swore in Stephen Feinberg, co-founder and former co-CEO of Cerberus, as deputy secretary of defense, underscoring the importance of such strategic investments to the administration.⁵¹ In July 2025, reports indicated that Cerberus would lease an additional 200 hectares at Subic, expanding its presence, while President Donald Trump, during President Marcos’s July 22, 2025, visit to the White House, praised a proposed ammunition manufacturing facility in Subic Bay to support the Philippines’ Self-Reliant

Defense Posture.⁵² In September 2025, the USS *Ohio* arrived at Subic for a port call, indicating its emerging role as a sustainment facility for U.S. naval assets.⁵³ Additionally, the U.S. Navy plans to lease a 270,000-square-foot climate-controlled storage facility and maintenance shop for vehicles and vehicle equipment—which would likely support an increased number of American training rotations and joint exercises.⁵⁴ These developments, nearly 35 years after the United States’ departure in 1992, mark Subic’s reemergence as a fully integrated military and commercial zone central to deepening U.S.-Philippine defense cooperation and regional security.⁵⁵

led to the expiration of the Military Bases Agreement in 1991. However, Subic has reemerged as a critical node in U.S. and Philippine defense strategy amid heightened tensions with China.⁴⁷

Subic’s deepwater harbor offers unparalleled operational and logistical capabilities, and its strategic position—located 300 nautical miles from the Luzon Strait and the Spratly Islands—has heightened its relevance as a potential staging ground capable of enabling a rapid naval response in the event of a crisis.

The clearest throughline across the first Trump, Biden, and second Trump administrations has been strategic U.S. investment in the Philippines—with Subic Bay as the most consequential achievement.

Opportunities for Trilateral Cooperation in Economics and Technology

Trilateral cooperation offers the United States and Japan an opportunity to work together to assist the Philippines with its trade and investment needs to help Manila reduce its economic dependency on Beijing, which, in turn, will reduce opportunities for China to employ economic coercion.⁵⁶ The United States and Japan are already among the Philippines’ top trading partners, but there are opportunities to enhance trade and investment ties in energy, infrastructure, telecommunications, and critical minerals.

The July 2025 trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting advanced plans to develop the Luzon Economic Corridor, an initiative that was introduced in 2024.⁵⁷ The Luzon Economic Corridor encourages connectivity and port and infrastructure development across the northern island, the largest and most populated of the Philippine archipelago.

The foreign ministers also agreed to cooperate on cyber-security. PRC breaches of Philippine computer networks tend to coincide with acts of maritime aggression against the Philippines in the South China Sea, demonstrating that China is seeking to intimidate Philippine leaders by applying a coordinated pressure campaign within the country.⁵⁸ Through trilateral cooperation to bolster Philippine



Japan's then-Foreign Minister Iwata Takeshi, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and Philippine Foreign Secretary Maria Theresa Lazaro hold a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 58th Association of Southeast Asian Nations Foreign Ministers' meeting in Kuala Lumpur on July 10, 2025. The three foreign ministers highlighted critical minerals as a key area for future cooperation. (Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images)

cybersecurity, the three nations can effectively counter PRC intimidation campaigns.

The Philippine telecommunications sector relies heavily on Chinese technology, thanks to decisions by Duterte during his presidency and despite warnings by U.S. officials at the time that doing so could jeopardize U.S. cooperation with the Philippines, including intelligence sharing and operational support in contested seaways.⁵⁹ With the backing of Japan and the United States, Marcos is seeking to reverse this trend.

Tokyo, Washington, and Manila are working together to encourage the adoption of Open Radio Access Network (ORAN) in Philippine 5G networks. ORAN allows different telecommunications vendors to supply mobile network components to operators so that they are not dependent on a single vendor for the operation of their 5G system.⁶⁰ In August 2025, the Open Radio Access Network Lab, funded by the United States and Japan, was donated to the University of the Philippines.⁶¹ The lab will promote ORAN and expand telecommunications opportunities in the Philippines by serving as a hub for ORAN training and local and global telecommunications partnerships.

At their July 2025 meeting, the three foreign ministers also highlighted critical minerals as a key area for future cooperation. The Philippines has substantial critical mineral reserves and could play a role in helping to reduce global dependence on China. The Philippines has the fourth-largest copper reserves, fifth-largest nickel deposits, and about \$1 trillion worth of unexploited gold, zinc, and silver

reserves.⁶² The Philippines also has significant reserves of unexploited rare earths, which are particularly difficult to extract but necessary for the production of high technology items such as smartphones, batteries, magnets, and defense equipment.

However, much work needs to be done to reduce Philippine reliance on PRC critical mineral supply chains and to attract Western private sector investment into extracting and processing the Philippines' unexploited minerals.⁶³ At present, Philippine nickel resources are integrated into PRC-dominated supply chains. In a meeting Rubio held with his Philippine counterpart last year, he stressed the need for the Philippines to diversify its critical mineral supply chains away from China.⁶⁴

Potential Obstacles to Trilateral Cooperation

While the Trump administration has so far demonstrated an openness to deepening U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral cooperation, Trump's unpredictable approach to foreign policy (especially regarding U.S. relations with China), his transactional treatment of allies, and domestic political constraints in the Philippines raise concerns about continued progress on trilateral cooperation.

Trump's mercurial foreign policy leaves doubt about his continued support for trilateral cooperation that China views as threatening to its own security interests. For example, Trump could agree to back away from trilateral cooperation if he thinks doing so might bring PRC concessions on trade issues. Particularly telling was his lack of support for Takaichi, the Japanese prime minister, when she came under fire from China for indicating that Japan could respond militarily to a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan.⁶⁵ Trump often views developments in the Indo-Pacific region narrowly through a tariffs prism, and his craving for a trade deal with Beijing means he may be more willing to back away from initiatives that raise China's ire, especially in the run-up to his planned meeting with Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping in April 2026.

A consistent diplomatic presence and reliable, proactive engagement are essential to advance U.S. regional strategy and safeguard U.S. alliances from the vulnerabilities inherent in Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy.⁶⁶ For instance, Trump's tariffs have caused strain in Washington's bilateral relationships with both Manila and Tokyo, further complicating trilateral cooperation. The Trump administration imposed a 19 percent tariff on the Philippines and a slightly lower, but still impactful, 15 percent tariff on Japan.

The other potential hurdle to strengthening trilateral cooperation could result if the United States is preoccupied by crises in other parts of the world. If U.S. attention is focused primarily on the Western Hemisphere, Middle East, or Europe, for example, there will be few diplomatic, economic, and/or military resources to strengthen the overall U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific—let alone for bolstering trilateral cooperation with Japan and the Philippines. In this scenario, Manila and Tokyo might instead be forced to carry the weight and focus on strengthening their bilateral ties in hopes that U.S. attention would eventually return to the Indo-Pacific.

Yet another possible obstacle to advancing trilateral cooperation is Marcos's weakening political position. The Philippine president's approval ratings have been dropping in recent months over his handling of a corruption scandal.⁶⁷ Last November saw large-scale protests in the streets of Manila against Marcos for his failure to indict several senior officials who allegedly siphoned money from government contracts related to flood control projects.⁶⁸ His sister, Imee Marcos, accused him at a rally of being a drug addict, and she has sided with his political opponent, Vice President Sara Duterte.⁶⁹

It is unlikely that President Marcos's successor would be as favorably disposed to the alliance with the United States or to the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

While the next national election is not scheduled until May 2028, it is possible that Marcos's political standing could further deteriorate, with calls for his impeachment and an election season fast approaching that will increasingly make him a lame duck leader.⁷⁰ Duterte—the daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, who pursued close ties with China and had threatened to allow the VFA to lapse—is currently favored in Philippine opinion polls to succeed Marcos, despite having survived two impeachment efforts and now facing a third.⁷¹ At a June 2025 rally in Australia, the vice president echoed the pro-China rhetoric of her father, stating that “[our problems with the] West Philippine Sea do not make up our entire relations with China so therefore, there is no reason for you to lean toward the U.S.”⁷² Given the volatility of Philippine politics, it is unlikely that President Marcos's successor would be as favorably disposed to the alliance with the United States or to the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and that person could revert to Rodrigo Duterte's decidedly softer approach

on China. This would not bode well for the future of trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the Philippines.

Policy Recommendations

The three countries have made tremendous progress in advancing trilateral cooperation over the last few years. The partners could deepen and build on this collaboration to further enhance deterrence and security in the First Island Chain of the Indo-Pacific through security and defense cooperation as well as economic and diplomatic cooperation.

Security and Defense Cooperation

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should deepen and institutionalize their trilateral cooperation to strengthen deterrence against PRC threats to Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas. The three countries should hold regular leader-level summits and establish a dedicated senior officials' process to streamline strategic planning, synchronize investments, and minimize bureaucratic friction. They should also establish a military-to-military mechanism to strengthen joint operational planning, improve information sharing, and coordinate joint training exercises.⁷³

Japan and the Philippines should conclude a bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) as soon as possible to allow the three countries to share information and improve trilateral interoperability. Tokyo and Manila should build on the momentum of having recently signed two other military agreements—the RAA and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement—to expeditiously conclude a GSOMIA. Given that Washington already has bilateral GSOMIAs with Japan and the Philippines, a Japan-Philippines commitment to military intelligence sharing will expand the overall intelligence picture of this vital region for all three nations and enhance interoperability among their forces.

The United States should rapidly appropriate and deploy greater resources to improve the development of infrastructure at U.S. EDCA sites in the Philippines. While Congress has authorized up to \$100 million in annual foreign military financing for the next five years to support the Philippines, increased U.S. spending to support EDCA site construction is necessary.⁷⁴ The Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act directed the executive branch to outline specific infrastructure plans, establish

clear timelines for EDCA site development, and detail necessary non-DoD support and pre-positioning requirements, but transparent, targeted appropriations are needed to guarantee that pre-positioned U.S. forces and their Philippine counterparts can effectively establish a robust forward posture in the First Island Chain. Infrastructure funding for EDCA sites is also critical for maintaining Philippine domestic support for a sustained U.S. rotational presence and continued security cooperation.

Japan should focus a portion of its increased military aid to the Philippines on supporting the development of infrastructure at U.S. EDCA sites in the Philippines.

While so far Japan has used its Official Security Assistance (OSA) to the Philippines to fund radar systems, patrol boats, training aircraft, and most recently naval infrastructure, it should consider using OSA and initiating reforms that would allow for the provision of Official Development Assistance to help fund infrastructure projects at EDCA sites—enabling U.S., Japanese, and Philippine forces to coordinate on and quickly provide trilateral humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Such facilities would also enable trilateral cooperation on staging operations and managing logistics for any potential contingency in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait. Japanese financing of dual-use infrastructure at EDCA locations would facilitate rotational deployments of Japanese Self-Defense Forces in support of humanitarian and disaster relief operations.

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should integrate their foreign national evacuation plans to

enhance regional preparedness for a Taiwan contingency.

Infrastructure in the Philippines' northernmost island of Batanes can support only 20,000 residents. However, over one million foreign nationals—including approximately 200,000 Filipinos, 13,000 Japanese, and 10,000 Americans—currently reside in Taiwan, which means close trilateral coordination on evacuations from Taiwan is critical.⁷⁵ Japan's existing plans focus primarily on evacuating 150,000 citizens from the Sakishima Islands northward. Building upon these independent national initiatives, trilateral cooperation should leverage existing capabilities to operationally and logistically prepare for a crisis. Efforts should include establishing internationally recognized maritime humanitarian corridors and expanding EDCA sites to Batanes and in northern Luzon to improve evacuation capacity. Regular exercises, such as Balikatan, should incorporate these scenarios to improve readiness. The trilateral group should proactively engage Taiwan to discuss enhancing on-island evacuation capabilities to support non-combatant evacuation operations. Such collaboration would also help Taipei garner crucial regional support in the event of a cross-Strait conflict.⁷⁶

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should initiate a dedicated trilateral effort to significantly enhance naval maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) capabilities at Subic Bay, transforming it into a resilient regional hub.

This cooperation would enable rapid repairs, maintenance, and surge capacity during crises, reducing dependence on distant U.S. shipyards and improving regional stability. To overcome regulatory hurdles and

workforce constraints, the trilateral initiative should align closely with existing U.S. policies, such as the Regional Sustainment Framework, which aims to optimize regional MRO, and the U.S.-Japan Defense Industrial Cooperation Forum, which also has a naval MRO work stream. Washington should ensure consistent use of the port to attract sustainable investment; Manila should simplify regulatory processes, enhance port infrastructure, and build a robust local workforce; and Tokyo should offer expertise in engineering, training, and quality assurance, as well as investment. The trilateral group should seek involvement from South Korean partners, leveraging their advanced



U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles, Japanese Minister of Defense Koizumi Shinjiro, and Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr. met on November 1, 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, marking the fifth such meeting of defense ministers from the four countries in three years.

capabilities and existing investments, such as HD Hyundai at Subic, to further deepen local supply chains. Overall, a coordinated trilateral approach at Subic Bay represents a strategic imperative, enhancing economic resilience, humanitarian response capability, and defense preparedness across the Indo-Pacific.

The United States, the Philippines, and Japan should shift from episodic exercises to a persistent, trilateral sea denial posture across the Luzon Strait. The United States should permanently deploy a mix of ground-based medium- and long-range precision fires at EDCA sites in northern Luzon and in Batanes, subject to Philippine government approval. Paired with Japan's build-out of coastal missiles, radars, ammunition sites, and electronic warfare across the Ryukyu and Kyushu Islands, these deployments would raise the cost for People's Liberation Army Navy movement.⁷⁷ Linking Philippine coastal radars with Japanese southwest-island coverage and U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance would provide a shared operating picture and enable coordinated fires. A sustained, rotational presence, of the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment and Japan Self-Defense Forces in Batanes—like the recent establishment of Army Rotational Force-Philippines—would help institutionalize this posture, protecting the northern Philippines and southern Taiwan while preserving U.S. and allied access to the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean.⁷⁸

Economic and Diplomatic Cooperation

The United States and Japan should work together to leverage the Philippines' potential in critical minerals and rare-earth elements to reduce dependency on China. This would require conducting feasibility studies and providing incentives to the private sector to invest in the exploration, extraction, and development of these valuable resources. They should also facilitate the development of the Philippines' mineral processing capabilities, which involves separating the minerals from the waste material. The International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) should take the lead in supporting this effort. Congress has recently appropriated \$983 million to the DFC for FY 2026, nearly 20 times the amount of its FY 2025 budget, which means the DFC will have plenty of resources to kickstart the development of the Philippines' critical minerals

and rare earths industry. The DFC and Japan's Bank for International Cooperation already have a memorandum of understanding in place, which allows them to work jointly on such projects.

The U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral should pool resources and coordinate investments to diversify subsea cable infrastructure and improve maritime monitoring. Together, the three countries should also jointly lease cable repair ships and leverage Japan's shipbuilding capabilities to build additional vessels if needed.⁷⁹ Trilateral countries should also streamline regulatory processes to accelerate subsea cable deployments and work to diversify cable landing station locations on the Philippines' eastern coast to avoid potentially contentious areas in the South China Sea and Luzon Strait. They should also establish joint mechanisms for real-time maritime monitoring using automatic identification system data and commercial satellite imagery, as well as explore distributed acoustic sensing and other fiber-optic sensing technologies, to promptly detect and respond to potential threats.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the United States should help compile and share a database documenting cable-cutting incidents, offering attribution of sabotage incidents to prevent deniability, and invite the Philippines and Japan to endorse findings to strengthen regional responses to such incidents.

Conclusion

To deal with the increasing security challenges in the First Island Chain, particularly China's military aggression against Taiwan and gray zone activity in the South and East China Seas, the United States should continue to invest in trilateral cooperation with Japan and the Philippines. Enhancing trilateral diplomatic, military, and economic collaboration will demonstrate that the three countries are united in their opposition to Chinese acts of coercion and intimidation. Furthermore, the three nations' increased coordination on such things as military training, maritime patrolling, intelligence sharing, infrastructure development, and logistics will better prepare them for a potential military contingency in the region. Finally, the U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral partnership can lay the foundation for an expanded semiformal network of security relationships that enhances U.S. deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific.

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