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ENSURING THE FIRST-ISLAND-CHAIN'S LONG-TERM SECURITY:

CONNECTING THE
PHILIPPINES'
COMPREHENSIVE
ARCHIPELAGIC
DEFENSE CONCEPT
WITH TAIWAN'S
AND JAPAN'S
DEFENSE POSTURES

Okinawa
(Japan)

First
Island
Chain

Philippines

South
China
Sea

ENSURING THE FIRST-ISLAND-CHAIN'S LONG-TERM SECURITY: CONNECTING THE PHILIPPINES' COMPREHENSIVE ARCHIPELAGIC DEFENSE CONCEPT WITH TAIWAN'S AND JAPAN'S DEFENSE POSTURES

A In January 2024, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro announced a new defense concept known as the “Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept” (CADC).¹ Secretary Teodoro clarified, “CADC is about developing our [military capabilities] to protect and secure our entire territory and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in order to ensure that our people and all generations of Filipinos to come shall freely reap and enjoy the bounties of natural resources that are rightfully ours within our domain.”² This requires the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to create a credible defense posture to build the country’s deterrent capabilities in the Philippines’ archipelagic waters and EEZ.

The Marcos administration adopted the CADC, thereby accepting, as a matter of national policy, the long-drawn-out recognition within the national defense establishment and the AFP that China’s maritime expansion in the South China Sea poses an existential threat to Philippine national security. The CADC is the Philippines’ first comprehensive national strategy since the country became independent in 1946. The Marcos administration’s announcement of the CADC as the country’s first grand strategy, along with the AFP’s efforts to reconfigure Horizon 3 of its modernization program based on the strategy’s requirements, are the most evident indicators of the development of a more defiant and robust Philippine defense policy vis-à-vis China’s expansion.

By implication, this means the AFP is moving away from its old concept of defending the country’s long and rugged coastal areas. This required the Philippine military to anticipate an invading force moving toward the country’s shoreline before mounting any combat operation against this amphibious enemy.³ Instead, the AFP is formulating a new paradigm based on the need to bolster its anti-access and area denial capabilities within the Philippines’ archipelagic territories, including its EEZ. This required the AFP to develop defense capabilities and utilize resources to establish a credible deterrent posture or forward defense that covers the country’s EEZ.⁴ These capabilities are intended to prevent other militaries from operating or crossing the vast stretches of its archipelagic territory, with the stated goal of making its EEZ in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea a no-go zone for the Chinese maritime militia, China Coast Guard (CCG), and the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).⁵ More significantly, implementing the CADC would effectively enable the Philippines to fill the strategic vacuum in the southern flank of the First Island Chain.

This study examines the CADC and argues that the Philippines should align and link its grand strategy with those of Japan and Taiwan in a strategic response to China’s expansion in the first island chain. It addresses two main interrelated questions: What is the CADC? Why should the Philippines link the CADC with Japan and Taiwan’s defense postures in the first island chain? It answers the following corollary questions: (1) What is the First-Island-Chain? (2) How is China threatening the security of the First-Island-Chain? (3) What is the security relationship among the three countries constituting the First-Island-Chain? (4) How could the formation of a defense network linking the three countries ensure the security of the First-Island-Chain?

The Gap at the Southern Flank of the First Island Chain

The first-island chain is the geopolitical linear arrangement of three major island groups: Japan/the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the Philippine archipelago. This island chain, in turn, serves three strategic purposes, namely:⁶

1. As foreign or external power fortifications designed to contain Chinese force projection from its coast to the Western Pacific;
2. As facilitators for external or foreign force projection against China; and
3. From China's perspective, it is a milestone for its force projection to demarcate and measure China's ability to project its power further away from its coast to the Western or even Central Pacific.⁷

In recent times, however, Chinese maritime expansion has challenged the U.S.'s strategic position in the first island chain, extending from Japan to Taiwan and the Philippines. Projecting its growing comprehensive power westward, China seeks to break past the first island chain, namely Japan's Ryukyu Island chain, Taiwan, and the Philippines, into the open waters of the Western and Central Pacific.

The Philippines is strategically located at the geographic center of the Western Pacific rim. Its maritime territory contains three important chokepoints connecting the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, namely the San Bernardino Straits, the Surigao Straits, and the widest and most strategically significant, the Luzon Strait. Situated north of the Philippine main island of Luzon, the Luzon Strait includes the Bashi Channel,

a significant entry point into the South China Sea for external navies, such as the U.S. Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JSDF). Consequently, the Philippines is a natural and formidable archipelagic barrier against Chinese maritime expansion into the Western Pacific for the U.S. and its Indo-Pacific allies.

From China's perspective, this makes the Philippines an attractive, appealing, and easy secondary objective for its irredentist claims next to Taiwan. This is because Chinese analysts and strategic thinkers deemed the Philippines a tail, a liability, and a vulnerability in the island chain.⁸ Chinese defense analysts and strategic thinkers disparaged the Philippines as the weakest link in the first island chain and a fair and easy target for its maritime expansion. For them, China must neutralize the Philippines as a necessary and significant step toward achieving sea control over the South China Sea and advancing beyond the first island chain.⁹ If given the opportunity, Beijing prefers Washington to abandon Manila as a treaty ally, thereby effectively undermining American credibility among its more militarily capable Indo-Pacific allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan.¹⁰

Chinese strategic observation of and aspirations for the Philippine archipelago are sensible and valid because the Philippine government's defense spending have not kept pace with modern warfare technology, primarily due to its focus on counterinsurgency.¹¹ The AFP is considered underfunded, while Washington cannot significantly expand its strategic presence in Philippine territory due to the declining U.S. defense budget.¹² For more than seven decades, the AFP has been waging an almost never-ending counterinsurgency campaign against the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), and various separatist Islamic militant movements such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front. It engaged terrorist groups like al-Qaida and ISIS in sustained combat operations. The government's single-minded focus on internal security (ISO) compelled the Philippine Department of National Defense (DND) and the AFP to divert the defense community's logistics, resources, materiel, and equipment to counterinsurgency operations, relegating any efforts for external/territorial defense to the sidelines.¹³ From the AFP's perspective, these internal security threats and challenges were existential, so most of the government's efforts and resources were geared toward addressing them.¹⁴

The decades-long focus on internal security, an army-force structure, and a long-delayed force modernization program resulted in the three AFP armed services having their capability for conventional warfare reduced or lost due to outdated technologies or a lack of modern military assets.¹⁵ This became apparent during the eight-month battle of Marawi City, when the PA and the Philippine Corps' lack of indirect and direct firepower in the form of tanks, anti-tank weapons, and even light artillery demonstrated the Philippine military's inability to wage a conventional war in an urban setting. The AFP could only generate a modest deterrence posture and power-

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projection capabilities without meaningful and credible conventional military capability. This has significantly constrained the Philippines' ability to shape and control its strategic environment within the first island chain.

The Marcos Administration's Legacy: The Philippines' First Grand Strategy

The Philippines has been faced with China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea since 2011. In the face of this dire situation, the Philippines is pursuing a hard balancing policy against this emergent and expansionist regional power. Since 2011, Philippine policy has been typically characterized by arms build-up, alliance formation, lawfare, and even appeasement. However, the Marcos administration's policy is bolder and more forthcoming than its predecessors. This is because it has formulated and implemented a grand strategy to address this quintessential security threat to an archipelagic state, the CADC. This adoption of a grand strategy presents a major effort to transform the Philippine military and national security paradigm.

In January 2024, DND Secretary Gilberto Teodoro announced the CADC. He explained the geographic basis of the Philippines' first grand strategy. He pointed out that the CADC aims to broaden the depth and scope of defending the Philippines from attacks across domains. This defense concept is based on a geographic reality: as an archipelago, the Philippines' landmass is limited, while the population grows and the demand for resources increases exponentially.¹⁶ Secretary Teodoro elucidated:

...this is fundamentally important for a small archipelagic country like the Philippines, because we have limited resources, we need international trade routes, we need the resources in our 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone to guarantee our food and energy security, to guarantee our country's resilience and infrastructure, and processes to fuel the process not only now but for future generations.¹⁷

The CADC's long-term goal is to ensure that the nation and generations of Filipinos can reap and enjoy the bounties of natural resources within the country's maritime domain. Upon the DND's and AFP's recommendation, President Marcos refocused the AFP's defensive operations from internal security to territorial defense through this defense concept.¹⁸

The CADC aims to rectify the Philippines' strategic vulnerabilities and enhance the AFP's capability to protect national interests through long-term plans.¹⁹ Secretary Teodoro admitted that the AFP's main limitation was its focus on internal security, which made it a primarily land-based military.²⁰ He pointed out that the CADC reorients the AFP from a land-centric defensive concept to one focusing on deterrence, including in the Philippines' EEZ.²¹ He explained this change in Philippine defense policy:

*Our traditional defense concepts have been, shall we say, passive defense contingency plans, which do not adequately factor in sufficient deterrence. Secondly, they have been land-based. Moreover, only recently have we become aware that we must take a more active role in protecting our Exclusive Economic Zone.*²²

The CADC transferred the Philippine military's attention and efforts away from internal security to territorial defense. This required the AFP to project deterrence capabilities throughout its EEZ to deter unwanted behavior from irresponsible actors.²³ Furthermore, the AFP must develop capabilities that enable it to be more responsive, agile, and capable of addressing the evolving, increasingly dangerous Indo-Pacific region, which will primarily be maritime. This could only be made possible through the full and effective implementation of its 15-year force modernization program.

Secretary Teodoro declared that the "CADC will allow the Philippines to address its ongoing maritime security challenges and enable the AFP to address contemporary threats to Philippine territorial integrity and sovereign rights."²⁴ He explained this paradigm shift in Philippine national security policy: "There is a new defense strategy already. We have the CADC, which is not a land-centric defensive concept; however, we must focus on deterrence, including areas within the EEZ. So it is a change from internal security to territorial defense of the Armed Forces of the Philippines."²⁵ His announcement of the CADC as the country's new defense strategy and the AFP's decision to reconfigure Horizon 3 of the AFP modernization program based on an archipelagic defense requirements are the most visible evidences of the emergence of a new, more defiant, and robust Philippine defense policy—one that is geared more

toward defending the country from external threats than addressing the internal insurgencies that have plagued the country since its independence in 1946.

The CADC is designed to enable the AFP to project its capabilities into maritime areas of the country that require protection and preservation.²⁶ The Philippine military must boost its maritime situational awareness, connectivity, intelligence capabilities (C41STAR), and area-denial and deterrence capabilities in maritime and aerial domains.²⁷ The AFP must adopt a new strategic paradigm, driven by the urgency to develop its anti-access and area denial capabilities. This requires the AFP to develop strategic bases around the fringes of the Philippine archipelago. These measures are designed to prevent other militaries from operating or crossing the vast stretches of its archipelagic territory, with the stated goal of making its EEZ in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea a no-go zone of the Chinese maritime militia, CCG, and PLAN.²⁸

Elements of the CADC

The CADC's key components are based on the armed services' level-modernization initiatives, like the Philippine Marine Corps (PMC) 2021 Archipelagic Coastal Defense (ACD). The ACD advocated joint, interagency, and combined operations to secure key maritime terrain and coastal areas.²⁹ Like the Philippine Navy's (PN) 2020 Sail Plan and the Philippine Air Force's (PAF) Flight Plan 2028, this service-level initiative, which promotes capability development, joint/combined operations, and an outward-looking orientation, has influenced the civilian authorities' national security policy.³⁰ Under its 2020 Sail Plan, the PN implemented an Active Archipelagic Defense Plan (AADC), which established maritime domain awareness centers, enhanced littoral observation capabilities, and increased naval and air assets to effectively fulfill its force mandate. Through its Flight Plan 2028, the PAF aspired to develop an Integrated Air Operation Concept (IAOC) to enhance its role as an AFP force provider effectively.³¹ These three service-level force modernization initiatives play a specific role as a force multiplier for the AFP, either through the Navy or the Air Force. Furthermore, they provide an externally oriented strategic approach that requires the AFP to undertake joint archipelagic combat operations, thereby denying the PLA the ability to operate within the first island chain.

The CADC incorporates all the separate archipelagic defense programs of these armed services. It emphasizes the necessity of jointness among the three-armed services, which will facilitate the integration of land, air, and naval capabilities.³² This is crucial as the AFP embarks on the important but arduous and expensive task of shifting its defense paradigm from internal security to defending the country's vast archipelagic territory from external aggression.

Developing the Anti-Access Area-Denial Capabilities

The AFP urgently needs to develop its Maritime and Air Defense (MAD) capabilities, which focus on the maritime and air domains, where the country has sovereign rights to explore, extract, and preserve its marine environment, as accorded by international law.³³ A sufficient and credible MAD aims to secure natural resources against foreign intrusion and to enforce its domestic laws against transnational crimes committed within the country's 200 nautical miles EEZ and 350 nautical miles continental shelf.

Without joint operations through support from ground forces, such as the PA and the PMC, the PN's limited and isolated naval capabilities would be significantly reduced.³⁴ The PA and the PMC must help enhance the PN's limited sea-denial capabilities so that Philippine maritime forces can help shape and control the strategic environment within and outside the country's archipelagic domain. The PA's ground forces are essential to support the PN and PAF in their efforts to deny China the ability to control the air and sea around the archipelago. Ground forces complement existing air and naval forces. Army and Marine Corps units could be equipped with highly mobile and relatively simple short-range land-based interceptor missiles to counter Chinese forces' air and sea operations. These units could be armed with mobile launchers and anti-cruise missiles to thwart Chinese ships, advanced bombers, and fighter planes. Ground forces can use rocket-based torpedoes to neutralize submarines operating along the coast and within archipelagic waters. Philippine ground forces could be deployed in naval mine warfare. They could lay mines along vital Philippine straits that connect the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. By assuming greater responsibility for denying the PLAN and the PLAFAF air and sea control, the ground troops could free the PN and PAF and enable them to conduct naval interdictions and air strikes against targets at sea.

In early 2024, the PMC received the first delivery of the Brahmos missile coastal defense system from India. The Indian government delivered three batteries of the Brahmos missiles in April 2024, although the Philippine government did not officially admit the delivery of the weapon system.³⁵ The Brahmos is the world's fastest supersonic missile system with a range of 290 kilometers. This ground-launched missile system is a cost-effective measure of deterring the PLAN from operating in Philippine waters, thereby enhancing the AFP's ability to defend the Philippines' coastal area.³⁶

In the same month, prior to the holding of the joint annual Philippine-U.S. Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder) joint military exercises, and upon the PA's invitation, the U.S. Army deployed the newly developed Medium-Range-Capability or Typhon System.³⁷ Considered a historic first in terms of deploying a strategic weapons system in the Philippines, the missile system can fire Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM) and the Standard Missile-6 (SM-6), which has a range of 1,000 miles.³⁸ Defense analysts point out that the U.S. Army can spread the Typhon sensors and missile systems at several Enhanced

Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites scattered all over the Philippine archipelago, employ long-range and unmanned systems, and use resilient communication links to maintain coordination and adaptability in a contested or combat environment. The Typhon system's deployment in the Philippines provides the U.S. Army with the opportunity to modernize its combat operations in the Indo-Pacific through a multidomain task force (MDTF) concept that emphasizes the need for dispersal, mobility, and speed across the domain of land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace.³⁹

In a Taiwan contingency between China and the U.S., the Philippines-based Typhon MRC system will enable the U.S. Army to hit the Chinese mainland, PLAN ships operating in the near seas, and militarized artificial islands in the South China Sea, which are threatening American naval assets operating in the Western Pacific. The U.S. Army's new capability to provide a Philippine-based long-range fire capability fulfills the MDTF stand-off force requirements of developing an integrated air and missile defense system outside U.S. territory and west of Hawaii.⁴⁰

Developing Strategic Depth

Adopting the CADC as its strategic guide, the AFP's main challenge is expanding its military presence and operations to cover two million square kilometers of the Philippines' maritime domain. This entailed several adjustments and a significant realignment of resources necessary for constructing infrastructure and developing and enhancing strategic bases to protect the Philippines' archipelagic baselines and the areas where future economic activities will be undertaken. Defense Secretary Teodoro observed that, as an archipelagic country, access and connectivity to every island are issues. He observed a lack of naval stations and air bases that could provide adequate



defense infrastructure for the armed forces. He emphasized the need for the AFP to develop its strategic basing program since connectivity is an issue not only on the commercial side but on the military side as well.⁴¹ He further stressed establishing more strategic bases for the AFP to project its capabilities into the EEZ and other areas within the Philippine archipelago that can be protected, allowing Filipinos to pursue their economic activities without threat or disturbance.⁴² According to him, the CADC requires a strategic basing initiative, where, rather than a land-based post-invasion scenario, the Philippines' contingency plans are now based on a deterrence scenario with active patrolling, active presence, and active domain awareness, which necessitate facilities and structures.⁴³

Overall, the CADC aims to project the AFP's capabilities up to the Philippines' EEZ and deepen the country's defense of its archipelagic territory.⁴⁴ Secretary Teodoro said, "We are evolving into a defense concept which projects our (military) power into our areas (maritime) where we must protect and preserve resources."⁴⁵ This remark was made after China militarized its reclaimed land features and established a strong naval presence in the contested area. It implied a more comprehensive and defiant strategy against Chinese maritime expansion.

By implication, the AFP is veering away from its old concept of defending the country's baseline. Historically, the AFP relied on waiting for an enemy threat to approach its shoreline before mounting any combat operation against it as its primary strategic concept.⁴⁶ In changing its strategy, the Philippines will no longer confront threats with a layered "territorial

defense in depth” but with a proactive and outward projection of a defensive posture similar to the U.S.’s “Forward Defense Strategy,” where threats are neutralized as far away from its territory as possible.⁴⁷ Hence, the AFP needs to move its focus, forces, and resources away from the Philippine baselines or coastal areas to the country’s EEZ, the Philippine-held land features in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea, the Philippine Sea, and the Philippine (Benham) Rise in the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁸ In adopting this new defense paradigm, the AFP must bolster its anti-access and area-denial capabilities and prevent foreign forces from operating within or crossing the vast stretches of its archipelagic territory. This is designed to make its EEZ in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea a no-go zone for the Chinese maritime militia, CCG, and PLAN.⁴⁹

The Importance of Alliance and Security Partnerships

The CADC requires the AFP to interoperate with other like-minded countries for the Philippines’ own reliance and for every joint exercise or activity that increases the capacity of Filipino armed service personnel to operate in a multi-domain environment.⁵⁰ For this reason, the PN and the PCG hold periodic Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activities (MMCA) with American, Japanese, and Australian naval forces to establish a defense posture securing the country’s maritime territories, particularly the EEZ.⁵¹ Finally, in the event of an armed conflict in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea, the Philippines can invoke the 1951 Philippine-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and expect both countries’ armed forces to deploy the

updated Mutual Defense Concept (MD CONPLA) to synchronize joint defensive and offensive military operations.⁵²

In the aftermath of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the second Trump administration indicated that it would engage China in a renewed and more intense strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. The Trump administration’s plan to renew and reinvigorate the U.S.’s strategic competition against China became evident when newly appointed U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin released an internal Department of Defense (DOD) guidance memorandum. Described as the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, the document provides detailed and explicit descriptions of the Trump administration’s plan to prepare for and win a possible armed conflict with China.⁵³ This internal memo instructs the U.S. armed services to focus their attention and resources on preventing China’s armed invasion of Taiwan through deterrence. The document states that “China is the Department’s sole pacing threat, and the denial of a Chinese fait accompli seizure of Taiwan, while simultaneously defending the U.S. Homeland,” is the Pentagon’s sole pacing scenario.⁵⁴ The documents advised the DOD to build and resource the U.S. armed services to consider the perceived threats of engaging China in a major armed conflict.

The Trump administration’s urgency in deterring China’s irredentist ambitions against Taiwan and other parts of the Indo-Pacific region is reflected in Secretary Hegseth’s visit to the Philippines in late March. During their first meeting, Secretary Hegseth and

Secretary Teodoro reiterated their two countries’ commitment to the 1951 MDT. Later, in his meeting with Secretary Teodoro, he negotiated with his Filipino counterpart to formulate a robust agenda for the Philippine-U.S. alliance, aiming to reestablish strategic deterrence and achieve peace through Strength in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁵ During his visit, Secretary Hegseth observed that the Philippine-U.S. alliance reflects strength in the face of China’s aggression and demonstrates a commitment to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the aftermath of their meeting, the Philippines and the U.S. agreed to undertake the following initiatives aimed at developing deterrence in their alliance, namely:⁵⁶

- 1 Deployment of additional advanced and strategic American capabilities, including the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), into the Philippines;
- 2 Holding advanced bilateral Special Operations training in the most northern part of the Philippines near Taiwan, the Batanes Islands;
- 3 Publishing a bilateral defense industrial cooperation vision statement; and
- 4 Launching a bilateral cybersecurity campaign.

Filling Up the Southern Flank of the First Island Chain

The Philippines’ implementation of the CADC and its grave security concerns over Chinese expansion in the South China Sea and irredentist efforts

against Taiwan require Manila to link its defense with Taipei and Tokyo. This will lead to a revival of a 21st century version of the mid-20th century Cold War First Island Chain Strategy. Washington conceived the first island chain strategy during the Cold War to contain the Soviet Union and China. It provided for establishing American naval and air bases in the Western Pacific, from which to project American air and naval power and deny access to Soviet and Chinese expansion into the Central Pacific.⁵⁷

In the context of the 21st century, the strategy involves linking the defense postures of the Philippines, Taiwan, and Japan through security partnerships among the three countries. It is adequately supported by American naval and air power. Like its Cold War counterpart, this 21st century application of the island group defense will be an attritional cost-imposition strategy, linking the anti-access and area denial capabilities of the Philippines, Taiwan, and Japan, and backed by American air and naval power. This requires the three insular countries to increase their investments in advanced surface-to-surface, air-to-surface, and surface-to-air missile systems, acquire and lay naval mines, and deploy diesel submarines. The U.S. can station its nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range aircraft, and missile systems in the Philippines and Japan to contain China's growing naval power in the first island chain. The goal is to make China's expansion into and beyond the first island chain prohibitively expensive.

This line will run through Japan, the Ryukus, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Within this island group, Taiwan is the most important objective for the Philippines, Japan, and the U.S. The first step in creating this island chain defense network is for Manila to forge and strengthen its security partnerships with Tokyo and Taipei, with its growing but limited naval and air capabilities.

The Philippine-Japan Strategic Partnership: Linking the Northern and Southern Poles

Since the 1970s, the Philippines and Japan have developed and nurtured close economic and cultural relationships, marked by Tokyo consistently ranking among Manila's top Official Development Assistance (ODA) donors and trade partners. In the aftermath of the Scarborough Shoal standoff between the Philippines and China in 2012, however, Manila and Tokyo have begun to transform their primarily economic and diplomatic ties into ones with a more precise security dimension. Before 2012, neither country had considered forming a security relationship with the other as a priority. Both American treaty allies were wary that Beijing might misconstrue any security arrangement as an anti-Chinese alliance. This view, however, changed when they were confronted by China's expansion and coercion in the South and East China Seas in the early 21st century, and with the return to power of the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Japan's pressing objective was then to help the Philippines develop its maritime surveillance capabilities in countering Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea. Thus, it solidified its security relations with the Duterte administration by fostering periodic consultations between the two countries and buttressing the PN's and PCG's maritime domain awareness capabilities. Maintaining the partnership with the Philippines was deemed urgent and imperative because Japan has been the country's most important trading partner, its largest investor, and the home of several thousand overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), whose regular remittances significantly boost the Philippine economy. For Japan, the Philippines remains a key factor in preventing China's political and diplomatic stranglehold from spreading into the Western Pacific.⁵⁸

In recent times, Tokyo and Washington have expanded their alliance relationship, especially in the maritime security domain, by including a third party. The U.S. and Japan have enhanced their collective defense capabilities through consultations and involvement with other Indo-Pacific countries, including Australia, India, and South Korea. From 2023 to 2024, Tokyo and Washington decided to engage Manila strategically.

This led the Kishida administration to focus on enhancing Japan's strategic partnership with the Philippines. In February 2023, Prime Minister Kishida and President Marcos issued the "Japan-Philippines Joint Statement." The statement provides for the holding of the Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2), the Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue, and the JSDF's participation in several Philippine-U.S. military exercises, such as the Philippine-U.S. Marine Corps' *Kamandag*, and the Philippine-U.S. navies' *SAMA-SAMA*, as well as the provision of additional coast guard cutters to the PCG.⁵⁹

Furthermore, Japan and the Philippines intensified their trilateral cooperation with the U.S. They conducted the first-ever trilateral Coast Guard joint exercise in June 2023. They held a series of trilateral meetings, where the three countries shared their strategic perspectives on Indo-Pacific security issues, particularly the South China Sea dispute.

On April 11, 2024, Presidents Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Joe Biden of the U.S., along with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan, convened in Washington, D.C. to meet for the first summit of the Japan-Philippine-U.S. (JAPHUS) Trilateral Security Partnership. In their joint vision statement, the three leaders expressed severe concerns over Chinese coercive and expansionist behavior in the South and East China Seas. The three leaders expressed satisfaction with their newfound cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific, as well as their shared commitment to deepen their cooperation further.

In their joint vision statement, the three leaders expressed severe concerns over Chinese coercive and expansionist behavior in the South and East China Seas. They emphasized the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, calling for a peaceful resolution of cross-strait relations. The mention of Taiwan in the statement is significant, as it could formalize their regional cooperation in the event of a Taiwan contingency, despite Chinese pressure on the three countries to stay away from any involvement in a Taiwan contingency.

With Japan and the U.S. strengthening their respective security relations with

the Philippines, the three countries have worked to bring each other closer to deep and comprehensive trilateral security cooperation, building up what can be considered a collective capacity to address common regional security concerns. Prime Minister Kishida described the tripartite arrangement as a multilayered cooperation essential to bolstering a rules-based and open international order. President Marcos described the trilateral security arrangement as a partnership, borne not out of convenience nor expediency but as a natural progression of deep relations and robust cooperation amongst three nations linked by profound respect for democracy, good governance, and the rule of law.” For his part, former President Biden considered the trilateral arrangement a means to reduce redundancies and coordination challenges in the bilateral security arrangements apparent in the hub-and-spokes system of the alliances the U.S. formed separately with the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan at the onset of the Cold War in the early 1950s.

Japan, the Philippines, and the U.S. are intensifying their security partnership through the JAPHUS de facto defense network. This security network is formed by a strengthened alliance between Tokyo and Washington, with both allies strengthening the foundations of their strategic partnerships with Manila. Consequently, JAPHIS’s informal and de facto trilateral security network is intact and active, generating appreciable results after its formation in April 2024.⁶⁰ These benefits include:

1 Through JAPHUS, the U.S. and Japanese security assistance and guarantee to the Philippines has

strengthened its resolve to confront Chinese gray zone operations in the South China Sea.⁶¹

2 Through Japan’s participation in the trilateral security partnership, Tokyo has extended security assistance to the AFP modernization program by providing radar and other non-lethal military hardware.⁶²

3 Through this trilateral security arrangement, Japan and the U.S. have synchronized their security assistance to the Philippines by aligning their efforts to support the Philippines’ defense priorities in implementing the CADC. For example, the installation of Japanese-made air-surveillance systems at Wallace Air Station, and the U.S. continued development and integration of the Philippine Air Force (PAF) air domain sensors at the Basa Air Base Command and Control Fusion Center, have collectively helped develop the AFP’s air and sea domain-awareness capabilities in its archipelagic waters.⁶³

4 Through JAPHUS, the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF), the AFP, and the U.S. Armed Forces have enhanced operational coordination and interoperability by periodically conducting multilateral maritime cooperative activities in the South and East China Seas. Through these activities, the AFP, the JSDF, and the U.S. Armed Forces have agreed to explore joint planning for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities to enhance interoperability and coordination in effective maritime and air domain awareness in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and surrounding waters.⁶⁴

The Missing Central Link in the First Island Chain: A Philippine-Taiwan Security Partnership?

The Philippines and Taiwan are geographically close, and the two neighbors face a common threat in China's expansion into the first island chain. Unfortunately, their vibrant and substantive bilateral ties are bereft of any direct security/defense relationship, even at the informal level.⁶⁵ In the past, there were attempts to jump-start a security relationship between Manila and Taipei, such as the failed attempt for Taiwan to transfer several F-5E fighter planes to Manila during the Arroyo administration; the two governments' joint investigation, arrest, and conviction of Filipino coast guard personnel implicated in the murder of a Taiwanese fisherman at the Balintang Channel during the Aquino administration; and the meeting between Philippine National Security Adviser (NSA) Hermogenes Esperon and Taiwanese Foreign Affairs Minister Joseph Wu to discuss law enforcement cooperation and the holding of joint trainings among certain civilian agencies.⁶⁶ The lack of security cooperation between Taiwan and the Philippines is attributed to:⁶⁷ a) the two countries' dispute in the South China Sea; b) the Philippines' highly legalistic and rigid One-China Policy; and c) the swings and vagaries in the conduct of Philippine foreign policy. It has been observed that the stark differences in Manila's and Taipei's priorities, policies, and viewpoints on critical security and diplomatic issues prevent any substantive unofficial and informal security relationship between the two neighbors from developing further.⁶⁸

However, this state of affairs is slowly changing as Manila develops its military

capabilities and expands its strategic horizon from the West Philippines/South China Sea to Northern Luzon, Luzon Straits, and Taiwan. From Manila's perspective, geography links the Taiwan contingency and the South China Sea dispute together. The two regional flashpoints are located within the first island chain, thus encompassing the two bodies of water within this island group, the East and South China Seas. Currently, the Philippines faces Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea. In the foreseeable future, a major U.S.-China armed conflict over Taiwan means that the Philippines will lose control of the Batanes island, the Luzon Straits, and even Northern Luzon. A two-front armed conflict in the South China Sea and Taiwan would seriously test the AFP's limited but growing conventional military capabilities, gravely undermine the Philippines' territorial integrity and security, and complicate the U.S.-Philippines' ability to respond to any contingency.

If China controls the South China Sea and Taiwan, Beijing can tilt the balance of power in its favor. In this situation, China will exercise effective sea control over the region's sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) and effectively prevent the U.S. 7th Fleet from operating within the waters of the first-island-chain. Hence, aside from ensuring that no single power controls and dominates the South China Sea, it is in Manila's interest to ensure that Taipei remains a strategic buffer against Beijing's goal to dominate the first island chain. This will ensure that the balance of power leans in favor of the Philippines, the U.S., and Japan. This would prevent a Greater China from achieving primacy and domination in the first island chain. Hence, the Philippines has strategic interests in preventing China's

conquest of the South China Sea and maintaining the status quo over Taiwan. This means that this island republic remains autonomous from China's political control and is democratically governed. Secretary Teodoro points out the importance of Taiwan in Philippine defense planning and the CADC: "For us, we will have to anticipate, naturally, reactions on both sides. Moreover, that probably is the convergence that the One Theater brings, that we can share contingency planning on both sides of Taiwan to secure our areas."

The AFP's growing defensive capabilities and deepening security relations with the U.S. and Japan have led to recognition in Manila that the three security partners need to see that the South and East China Seas constitute One Theater that requires them to share contingency planning on both sides of Taiwan to secure the Japanese and Philippines' territories.⁷⁰ Furthermore, these two developments are making it difficult for Manila to assume a position of neutrality in case of a Taiwan contingency, given the growing presence of American and Japanese forces and the deployment of U.S. strategic weapon systems in Philippine territory, and more significantly, the geographic reality that the Philippines and Taiwan are the closest neighbors facing a common security threat, China's maritime expansion in the first-island-chain.

Consequently, the Marcos administration has become more articulate about the need for the Philippines to prepare for a Taiwan contingency. In September 2023, a few months after the Philippines offered four additional Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites to the U.S. in April 2023, President

Marcos justified the need for Manila to cooperate with Washington in the event of an armed crisis over Taiwan, the Philippines' closest neighbor. From Manila's calculation, if an armed conflict between Beijing and Taipei erupts and expands from the Taiwan Strait to the Luzon Strait, the Philippines will inescapably confront its adverse consequences, such as massive refugee flows, the immediate repatriation of OFWs and refugees from Taiwan, and the possible spread of the conflict to the Luzon Strait and even northern Luzon.⁷¹

Philippine Ambassador to Washington, Jose Manuel "Babe" Romualdez, conjectured that the Philippines would cooperate with the U.S. militarily to deter any escalation of tension between China and Taiwan, not only because of the treaty alliance but to help prevent a major conflict.⁷² He added that "the Philippines would let U.S. forces use the Southeast Asian nation's military bases in the event of a Taiwan conflict only "if it is important for us, for our security."⁷³

In August 2025, during President Marcos' first official visit to India, he publicly mentioned what many defense officials, analysts, and military officers are discussing in several closed-door defense and security conferences in the Philippines: "If there is an all-out war, we will be drawn into it. We will have to go into Taiwan and bring our people home."⁷⁴ Firstpost Managing Editor Palki Sharma hosted this question during an interview about how the Philippines will respond in a Taiwan contingency. President Marcos added that his country "cannot stay out if a conflict breaks out between China and Taiwan," as the Philippines would be "drawn into it to protect its citizens working in Taiwan."⁷⁵ A few days later, after his return to Manila, he reiterated what he stated in Delhi: "To be practical about it, if there is confrontation over Taiwan between China and the United States, there is no way that the Philippines can stay out of it because of our geographical location."⁷⁶ President Marcos reiterated this statement in response to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's harsh and critical condemnation of his remarks regarding the Philippines' potential response in the event of a contingency involving Taiwan.⁷⁷

There is a growing but slow realization in Manila and Taiwan that China's expansion into the first island chain constitutes a clear and present danger to their respective countries. This requires the Philippines and Taiwan to initiate unilateral measures to mitigate the effects of the three major obstacles⁷⁸—the two countries' opposite positions in the South China Sea dispute, Manila's rigid and highly legalistic One China Policy, and the Philippines' changing foreign policy—adversely affecting the development of an informal but necessary security relationship between them. Specific to Manila, this requires the Philippines to review and modify its highly rigid One-China Policy. Manila should consider that, as Taiwan's nearest geographic neighbor, Washington would likely seek assistance in the event of a contingency involving Taiwan. This assistance will be in the form of the U.S. requesting access to the nine EDCA sites all over the Philippines. Manila should assume that there is no way that it could be insulated from a major armed conflict between the U.S. and China over Taiwan. Given that it is expected that

“
The Philippines, due to its proximity to Taiwan, acknowledges it cannot remain neutral in a China-Taiwan conflict. President Marcos emphasized cooperation with the U.S., repatriation of citizens, and revisiting its One-China Policy to address security challenges...”

“

The Philippines should pursue a security partnership with Taiwan and modernize its defense strategy under the CADC, countering China's South China Sea expansion while strengthening alliances with the U.S., Japan, and Australia to address regional flashpoints...

”

the Philippines will be dragged into a war between the U.S. and China over Taiwan, Manila should seek a security partnership with Taiwan despite its One China Policy.

This security relationship should start with a robust, informal, substantive, and sustained defense dialogue between the Taiwanese and Filipino defense officials, analysts, and armed service officers. They should discuss why and how the two countries can conduct a meaningful yet tacit security partnership, despite China's vehement opposition to such a relationship. The U.S., Japan, and Australia should facilitate this implicit but substantive security dialogue between the Philippines and Taiwan. Specifically, Washington, Japan, and Australia should initiate defense-related activities that provide opportunities for Filipinos and Taiwanese defense officials and military officers to meet and develop meaningful professional and personal relationships. However, third-party intervention cannot be a substitute for a direct bilateral dialogue between Filipino and Taiwanese defense officials and military officers.

Conclusion: Reviving a 21st Century First-Island-Chain Strategy

As a vital component of the Marcos administration's grand strategy, the CADC is a strategic response to China's expansion into the South China Sea, which is deemed an existential threat to 21st century Philippine national security. Its goal is to develop the AFP's capabilities for archipelagic defense by acquiring more ships, aircraft, missiles, and radar systems. It requires the military to emphasize transforming all Philippine-held islands and other land features in the West Philippine/South China Sea into habitable and defensible forward-operating bases. These measures require massive investments in strategic basing, creating a business case-focused defense-industrial base, and training AFP officers and personnel to achieve higher technological capabilities, all aimed at complementing the CADC.⁷⁹

The CADC requires earning and enhancing the support of the country's only treaty ally, the U.S., and other like-minded security partners, as well as engaging them in joint military exercises in the West Philippine Sea and other areas of its archipelagic domains. In implementing the CADC, the Marcos administration recognizes the urgency of upgrading and modernizing its alliance with the U.S. and strategic partnerships with other key security partners, including Japan, Australia, South Korea, and India, to develop an integrated deterrence system in the Indo-Pacific region. The CADC's long-term goal is to project the country's military power to its 200-nautical-mile EEZ. These moves aim to bolster the Philippines' diplomatic and strategic leverage against Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea. However, by adopting and implementing the CADC, the Philippines is preparing to address another potential flashpoint in its immediate northern neighbor: Taiwan.

The Philippines' implementation of the CADC, its growing wariness over

Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, and irredentist efforts against Taiwan enable Manila to align its archipelagic defense policy with those of Taipei and Tokyo. These three island republics can form a system of interlocking security partnerships to revive a 21st century version of the mid-20th century Cold War Island Chain Strategy. First conceived during the Cold War as a plan for containing the Soviet Union and China, the strategy provides for establishing American naval and air bases in the Western Pacific to project American air and naval power and deny access to Soviet and Chinese expansion into the Central Pacific.

In today's context, the strategy involves linking the defense postures of Manila, Taipei and Tokyo through security partnerships among the three countries and is adequately backed and supported by American naval and air power operating from the Philippines, Japan, and Guam. This 21st century version of island group defense will be an attritional cost-imposition strategy based on the idea of linking the anti-access and area denial capabilities of the Philippines, Taiwan, and Japan.

The first step in forming this island defense system is for the three countries to establish a security partnership among themselves. Japan and the Philippines have already linked their respective defense policies through the 2015 Philippine-Japan Strategic Partnership, known as JAPHUS, and more recently, the Philippine-Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) of 2025. The missing link is the Philippine-Taiwan security partnership. Unless Manila and Taipei find the willingness to form a necessary but implicit security relationship, a gap will always remain

open in the southern flank of the first island. China will inevitably expand its strategic presence in this direction, toward the Western Pacific. This will mean that an island defense group, comprising the countries in the first island chain, cooperating with one another against a common threat—China's expansionism—will remain a mere imagination.

To form this first-island chain defense group, Manila, Taipei, and Tokyo should consider the following measures:

1 Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines should view their respective long-term strategic interests as closely linked and inviolable.

2 Manila, Taipei, and Tokyo should hold several informal and track 2 dialogues regarding the inviolability of their security interests and the need to link their defense policies despite the Philippines and Japan's One-China Policies.

3 The Philippines and Japan should enhance their comprehensive security partnerships through joint military exercises and maritime cooperative activities, Subject Matter Exchanges (SME) exchanges, transfer of Japanese Excess Defense Articles to the Philippines, and mutual logistic arrangements.

4 Despite the Philippines' strict and highly legalistic One-China Policy, Manila and Taiwan should explore an informal defense cooperation through intelligence exchanges, security and defense dialogues between ranking AFP and Republic of China (ROC) Armed Forces, SME exchange, joint military exercises in third countries, and

maritime cooperative activities at the Luzon Straits and the Philippine Sea.

5 Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines should strengthen their respective security relations with their common security ally and partner, the United States.

6 The AFP, the JSDF, and the ROC armed forces should encourage the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) to host military exercises and command conferences at Guam and Hawaii, where units from the AFP, the ROC armed forces, and the JSDF can join and participate.

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