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STRATEGIC SIGNALLING AT SEA: BRAHMOS AND THE INDIA-PHILIPPINES DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP



STRATEGIC SIGNALLING AT SEA: BRAHMOS AND THE INDIA-PHILIPPINES DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP

The synergy of India's Act East Policy and the Philippines' Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept fosters bilateral resilience and multilateral stability, offering a cooperative alternative to unilateral coercion in addressing Indo-Pacific maritime challenges and geopolitical uncertainties

A discernible progression between India and the Philippines is taking shape within the evolving strategic architecture of the Indo-Pacific, as the partnership moves beyond symbolic diplomatic engagement to encompass substantive defence cooperation, maritime coordination, and operational collaboration. Bilateral relations increasingly find convergence on shared views of threats and opportunities in an area characterised by escalating great-power competition, whereas historically they were characterised by political goodwill and development collaboration. This shift crystallised in 2025 when India and the Philippines elevated their ties to a Strategic Partnership (Roy Choudhury, 2025), expanding cooperation across trade, maritime security, and defence technology, while underscoring their commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

At the core of this deepening engagement lies efforts towards enhancing regional security, which is operationalised via military modernisation and defence capability enhancement. In this context, Manila's acquisition of India's

BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, with successive batches delivered beginning in 2024 under a USD 375 million contract (BrahMos Aerospace, 2024), stands as a tangible symbol of this transition from rhetoric to strategic depth. The country is also on track to integrate BrahMos systems into its coastal defence architecture, seeking credible deterrence amid China's persistent assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea (Reuters, 2025a; Esguerra, 2025). Concurrently, the two navies conducted their first joint maritime exercise in the South China Sea in August 2025, with Indian warships operating alongside Philippine frigates (Reuters, 2025b), a clear operational manifestation of bilateral maritime cooperation in contested waters.

These developments unfold against the backdrop of India's Act East Policy and its broader Indo-Pacific vision, which have transitioned from solely economic outreach to broader strategic engagement. New Delhi now prioritises Southeast Asian maritime partnerships as central to regional

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stability and as a balancing vector to China's expansive postures, particularly in and around key sea-lines of communication, including in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Likewise, Manila's strategic calculus has evolved and is now characterised by the diversification of defence partnerships beyond traditional alliances to build asymmetric capacity and operational interoperability with like-minded partners.

The India–Philippines connection, therefore, straddles overlapping imperatives, mutual deterrence, capability augmentation, and signalling to regional audiences and adversaries alike. This paper situates the expanding partnership within three analytical lenses – strategic effectiveness, deterrence outcomes, and regional signalling – to assess not only the current nature of bilateral cooperation, but what it stands to achieve in influencing regional security dynamics. Such an exploration is essential to determine whether this partnership is a sustainable contributor to Indo-Pacific stability or an episodic response to pressures.

THE AEP & CADC: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Two key policy directions have contributed to the convergence – India's Act East Policy (AEP) and the Philippines' Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept (CADC). While drawing parallels between the two, one must, however, begin by appreciating that the two frameworks are strategically distinct yet contextually interconnected frameworks. They emerge within different geographies, threat perceptions, and historical trajectories, but in the current Indo-Pacific context, they intersect in compelling ways.

At a foundational level, India's Act East Policy is a diplomatic and economic framework designed to deepen India's engagement with Southeast and East Asia across economic, strategic, cultural, and connectivity domains. An upgrade of the earlier Look East approach, the AEP explicitly prioritises strategic cooperation in addition to economic and cultural ties, while integrating ASEAN as a central

pillar of India's Indo-Pacific vision. It seeks proactive and pragmatic engagement across bilateral, regional and multilateral platforms, and like its earlier iteration, emphasises connectivity and capacity building as central tools of influence (Pant and Basu, 2024).

By contrast, the CADC of the Philippines is a defence planning paradigm born out of acute territorial and resource security imperatives in the West Philippine Sea. The CADC marks a decisive shift from decades of inward-oriented, internal security bias in Philippine military planning toward an external defence posture tailored to safeguard the archipelagic state's territory, its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and associated maritime resources. Central to CADC is the projection and defence of sovereign rights across a complex archipelagic geography, including through enhanced maritime situational awareness, area-denial capabilities, and coordinated joint operations across services and agencies (Sihwag, 2025; Torrecampo, 2024).

Convergences between AEP and CADC are both strategic and symbolic. First, while both frameworks have their own specific contributions, they are also responses to an environment of contested maritime claims and intensifying strategic competition, particularly from China. India's AEP has increasingly incorporated maritime security cooperation as a pillar, emphasising freedom of navigation and a rules-based order as essential for regional stability, and pushing India to deepen maritime engagement with ASEAN partners. CADC, for its part, operationalises such principles by explicitly orienting the Armed Forces of the Philippines toward defending its EEZ and territorial integrity, advocating for greater interoperability with allied and partner forces (Sihwag, 2025).

Second, there is an institutional convergence in how both strategies are enabling external defence and security networks. The AEP's strategic approach encourages defence dialogues, joint exercises, and capacity building with ASEAN states, which has gradually translated into deeper military ties between India and the Philippines (among other Southeast Asian countries), paving the way for deeper maritime

cooperation and technology exchanges. Given its imperative to fortify Philippine maritime defence, CADC implicitly places value on such external security partnerships, as evidenced by Manila's expanded defence cooperation not just with the United States, but also with India and other like-minded states (The Hawk, 2025).

Yet important divergences remain. The most fundamental is scope and intent: while AEP is a comprehensive foreign policy approach with economic, cultural, and connectivity dimensions, CADC is a military defence doctrine. AEP's objectives are broad and long-term, encompassing everything from defence cooperation, trade integration and digital cooperation to people-to-people ties; it is not premised on confronting a specific adversary but on shaping a resilient regional order. In contrast, the CADC is primarily reactive to tangible threats; it is a framework driven by Manila's imperative to defend its sea lines of communication, resource space, and territorial integrity, and is only incidentally connected to broader economic and cultural engagements (Sihwag, 2025).

Another divergence lies in institutional capacity and military aspirations. India's AEP operates through a range of ministries, including external affairs, commerce, culture, transportation, and defence, and is calibrated to expand India's influence and expand the nature and scope of its partnerships. The CADC, by design, is a force modernisation and doctrinal shift for the Philippines' military, with immediate operational implications such as enhancing maritime domain awareness and developing area-denial capabilities within its EEZ (Walia, 2025).

Lastly, the security architectures they anchor diverge. AEP places heavy emphasis on ASEAN centrality and multilateral frameworks such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, emphasising cooperative security and regional architecture building. CADC is inherently bilateral or multilateral in a defence-specific sense, with a stronger reliance on direct military linkages and coalition interoperability rather than broader political–economic regional integration.

Thus, the AEP and CADC represent two sides of the same challenge: the uncertainties posed by the Indo-Pacific's strategic flux. One is a strategic outreach, leveraging economic and diplomatic instruments, while the other is a defence adaptation, recalibrating hard power to meet immediate territorial security demands. Their convergence, particularly in defence cooperation, reflects a pragmatic cohesion in regional strategy: strategic partnerships must serve both diplomatic engagement and robust territorial defence. On the other hand, their divergences underscore the enduring reality of geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific – policies crafted from broad visions and forged in the crucible of threat perception will rarely align perfectly, but when they intersect intelligently, they can produce enduring geopolitical value.

STRATEGIC EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

In assessing the strategic effectiveness of the deepening India–Philippines partnership, the central question is not simply whether ties are expanding, but whether that expansion translates into meaningful operational realities which, in turn, constructively impact the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. On this front, the qualitative trajectory of cooperation, from defence exports to joint maritime activity and industrial collaboration, suggests incremental but tangible shifts in capability, posture, and regional engagement.

At the core of this partnership is the landmark sale of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, a USD 375 million deal signed in 2022 that made the Philippines the first foreign customer for this system. The delivery of multiple shore-based batteries is more than symbolic. It equips Manila with a strike range approaching 290 km, a capability that materially enhances its coastal defence posture in contested waters such as the West Philippine Sea. Philippine officials have publicly characterised the acquisition as a “milestone” in their defence modernisation and a provider of “credible deterrence” against coercive actions in contested maritime zones (Peri, 2024).

However, strategic effectiveness should not be equated with the acquisition of hardware alone. While training, logistics, and sustainment cooperation have begun, a more comprehensive integration into joint planning and execution cycles remains an ongoing process. In the future, therefore, effectiveness will depend on the speed and depth of this integration, not just deliveries. From a capability development standpoint, this is a critical distinction: platforms without doctrinal alignment and logistical endurance provide limited strategic leverage.

A second significant marker of effectiveness is naval interoperability and presence. In August 2025, the two navies conducted their first bilateral maritime cooperative activity in the South China Sea, deploying Indian Navy vessels alongside Philippine frigates. The exercise, described by both sides as successful and deliberately planned within Manila's EEZ, sends a practical signal that Indian maritime reach can operate in contested spaces traditionally dominated by China's regional presence, and geographically distant from New Delhi's shores (Reuters, 2025b). This operational choreography demonstrates that the partnership is not restricted to port calls or ceremonial gestures but has begun testing the boundaries of joint manoeuvrability in real strategic theatres.

Yet strategic effectiveness must also be evaluated against adversarial reactions. China's criticism of these exercises illustrates Beijing's sensitivity to external military actors in the South China Sea. However, its response, shadowing and diplomatic pushback rather than escalation, suggests that the partnership has not yet provoked destabilising countermoves.

Beyond equipment and drills, the strategic industrial dimension strengthens the partnership's effectiveness over time. Initiatives for cooperative defence production, like the SMPP-ADFC joint venture in the Philippines to produce military hardware and protection systems, indicate a move away from buyer-seller deals and toward ongoing industrial cooperation (Milipol, 2025). This is significant because embedding Indian technology and manufacturing within

Philippine defence ecosystems ensures the sustenance of capability development for the partnership that can outlive individual contracts or political cycles. It also aligns with Manila's Self-Reliant Defence Posture objectives (Engelbrecht, 2025), reducing long-term dependency on traditional suppliers and diversifying its strategic supply chain.

Hence, the strategic effectiveness of the India–Philippines relationship lies in its multidimensional progression, from hardware delivery to operational engagement and industrial collaboration. Although each component on its own might be limited in impact, together they hold the potential to incrementally build a more resilient, interconnected defence posture. The real challenge lies in determining how these layers will effectively translate into credible deterrence and sustained cooperative actions when confronted with future strategic shocks.

DETERRENCE OUTCOMES OF THE INDIA–PHILIPPINES PARTNERSHIP

In strategic parlance, deterrence is not simply about possessing weapons; it is about shaping an adversary's calculus so that the costs of coercion outweigh the benefits. Therefore, the evolving India–Philippines partnership, anchored by defence exports like the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile and nascent operational cooperation, is beginning to exert a palpable impact on the deterrence landscape of the South China Sea, even though a holistic framework of deterrence is far from consolidated.

The key element of deterrence currently is the BrahMos, which complicates potential adversary operations by sharply increasing the risks associated with maritime coercion near Philippine sovereign waters. Defence analysts in both India and the Philippines have described the introduction of BrahMos as a “significant game-changer” that materially bolsters coastal defence and denial capabilities against larger naval forces. For Beijing, which claims expansive maritime rights across the South China Sea, this missile system is a credible threat to surface vessels operating near

contested features and supply approaches, compelling greater operational caution (Kumar, 2025). However, this is a kinetic threat, and Beijing understands that this option would be a last resort for countries in the region.

Importantly, deterrence in this context is not abstract rhetoric; it has signal value. The area denial capability that Manila obtained from the BrahMos batteries offers it the option of positioning them within striking distance of key contested features like Scarborough Shoal, demonstrating a direct indication of resolve to Beijing (Lariosa, 2025). Such deployments convey that Manila is intent on denying unfettered PLA Navy or Coast Guard incursions into zones where Philippine sovereign rights are asserted. This extends beyond mere hardware: it reflects a psychological dimension of deterrence where the visible capacity and willingness to use it stand to condition adversary behaviour at sea.

China's response to these developments has been telling, if measured. Unsurprisingly, Beijing's public critique of India–Philippines defence cooperation, emphasising that such ties “should not harm the interests of third parties or regional stability,” is an implicit acknowledgement that the partnership has material consequences for its strategic calculations (The Economic Times, 2024).

Cooperation in operational terms adds another layer of deterrence. The first bilateral maritime cooperative activity conducted by Indian and Philippine naval units in the South China Sea in August 2025 was tracked by external military assets, reaffirming that increased naval interaction alters the perception of risk for any actor contemplating coercive action. These joint sails, even when limited to manoeuvres within the Philippine EEZ, underscore that Manila is no longer acting in isolation but in coordination with a strategic partner possessing extended maritime reach.

Enhancing deterrence is an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome. The BrahMos batteries currently enhance localised anti-



BRP Miguel Malvar sailing alongside the Indian Navy's guided-missile destroyer INS Delhi, fleet tanker INS Shakti, and anti-submarine warfare corvette INS Kiltan in the West Philippine Sea

access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, but broader deterrence across the contested maritime domain requires sustained and integrated situational awareness, resilient command-and-control networks, and interoperability with Manila's allies like the United States and Japan. New Delhi and Manila have taken steps toward institutionalising cooperation through joint defence committees and defence industry partnerships that signal long-term commitment, but these structures are still maturing (Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2024).

Moreover, there are limitations and vulnerabilities to consider. The efficacy of BrahMos as a deterrent is contingent on robust sensor networks and real-time targeting data, both of which are domains where the Philippines still seeks improved capacity (Dash, 2024). There is also the inherent complexity of deterring a nuclear-armed, regionally dominant power like China, whose strategic patience and asymmetric options extend well beyond conventional force postures.

The deterrent value of this bilateral partnership lies less in immediate force projection and more in strategic signalling and risk amplification. It communicates that Manila is enhancing its capacity to contest maritime coercion and that India is willing to support these efforts in substantive ways to prevent revisionist attempts at changing the regional status quo. This deterrence architecture may grow more resilient as new capabilities are added and collaborative frameworks are strengthened, moving from discrete capability improvements to a credible posture.

REGIONAL SIGNALLING

In the theatre of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, regional signalling matters as much as capability or deterrence. India's partnership with the Philippines is not merely a bilateral recalibration; it is a deliberate strategic message about shifting power dynamics, normative alignment, and the emergence of diversified security architectures. This signalling operates on multiple levels: normative, operational, and geopolitical, each carrying implications for how states perceive

interests, risks, and alignment in the region.

At the summit where the two governments declared a Strategic Partnership in August 2025, both sides explicitly reiterated their support for a “free, open, transparent, rules-based, inclusive, prosperous, and resilient Indo-Pacific” anchored in international law — including support for ASEAN centrality in regional processes. This declaration is as much a diplomatic assertion as it is a policy anchor, reinforcing that their cooperation is rooted in norms that challenge unilateral coercive behaviours, particularly in maritime dispute contexts (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025).

Operationally, the first bilateral naval activities and exercises between Indian and Philippine naval forces in the South China Sea served as a highly visible signal of evolving maritime cooperation. Indian warships sailing alongside Philippine frigates within Manila's EEZ was not a routine port call; it was a deliberate display of maritime partnership proximal to contested waters where China's expansive territorial claims have repeatedly drawn regional concern. That these activities were “shadowed” by Chinese vessels underscores precisely why they matter: they demonstrate that India is willing to normalise presence and operations in strategic waterways beyond its traditional area of influence, and Manila is willing to reciprocate. This signals to other ASEAN states that diversified maritime cooperation is both viable and politically significant.

While Manila remains treaty-bound with the United States, its outreach to New Delhi sends a clear message to Beijing and to other regional capitals that it seeks multiple vectors of cooperation that reinforce its strategic autonomy. Philippine Foreign Secretary Ma. Theresa P. Lazaro emphasised that India's role as a defence supplier and security partner contributes to building a secure and rules-based Indo-Pacific framework, a statement that resonates beyond the bilateral axis, indicating to ASEAN members the value of broadened engagement with extra-regional partners on shared security concerns (The Tribune, 2025). This perceptual shift matters because it elevates bilateral defence engagements into regional narratives of capability building and shared security interests.

Strategic signalling here is also multifaceted in its audience. To Southeast Asian states like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, all of which are navigating their own concerns over coercive behaviour in adjacent maritime spaces, the India–Philippines partnership suggests that Southeast Asia's security architecture can integrate like-minded external powers in ways that reinforce regional stability. To countries such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, the partnership signals India's readiness to contribute substantively to collective security frameworks, aligning New Delhi with broader efforts to ensure freedom of navigation and uphold international law in the Indo-Pacific (Pant and Basu 2026).

Finally, India's positive signalling through this partnership reinforces its Act East Policy and Mahasagar strategies, positioning New Delhi as a strategic interlocutor not just in the Indian Ocean but across the Indo-Pacific. Through substantive cooperation, from maritime domain awareness initiatives like the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region to discussions on defence industry linkages and trade frameworks, India is signalling an expansive, persistent presence that contests narratives of regional security shaped solely by great-power competition (Basu, 2026).

In sum, the India–Philippines partnership is a strategic signal articulated through statements, deployments, technology transfers, and institutional commitments. Its value today lies less in confrontational geopolitics and more in strategic reassurance, conveying that diversified cooperation is both legitimate and desirable, and that small and middle powers alike can shape the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

THE WAY FORWARD: NAVIGATING CONTEMPORARY MARITIME CHALLENGES THROUGH CONVERGENT INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIES

The convergence of the Philippines' Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept (CADC) and India's Act East Policy (AEP) reveals a

strategic interaction with significant regional utility as the Indo-Pacific region enters a period of increased geopolitical and geoeconomic turmoil. This partnership is important because both states are dealing with more complex, multi-vector, and interconnected maritime domain challenges. Despite having different imperatives, their responses are increasingly overlapping in ways that can help create a more resilient regional order.

At the heart of contemporary maritime instability is the South China Sea territorial issue, where overlapping claims and assertive postures, especially by China, have escalated friction and eroded predictability. China's expansive claims under the so-called "nine-dash line" continue to clash with internationally recognised maritime zones of Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines, despite a 2016 arbitral ruling that invalidated much of Beijing's claims. Manila has repeatedly accused Chinese naval units of provocative actions (Cruz and Lema, 2023) and provocative manoeuvres within its contested waters, particularly around features like Scarborough Shoal. These incidents underscore the persistent volatility in an area that hosts the bulk of annual maritime trade and remains central to global supply chains (Sangtam, 2025).

The convergence of the two strategies, India's outward engagement and the Philippines' defence modernisation, generates amplified strategic signalling and operational linkages. Deeper interoperability and shared maritime domain awareness can be sparked by the recent bilateral elevation to a Strategic Partnership, which is anchored by the 2025–29 Plan of Action and institutionalizes maritime discussion, cooperative procedures, and joint planning (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025). Joint naval cooperative activities and exercises in the vicinity of the South China Sea serve not only operational objectives but also act as symbols of collective will among like-minded states to support peace, security, and the rule of law.

Importantly, this convergence has geoeconomic reverberations. Southeast Asia's strategic waters are corridors for energy flows

and commerce that link the global economy. Uncertainty in these routes, if left unchecked, would have cascading impacts on markets and supply networks far beyond regional boundaries. India's engagement, including dialogues on maritime safety, hydrographic cooperation, digital connectivity, and economic partnerships, complements Manila's defence focus with broader economic resilience measures that anchor trust and interdependence (Pant and Basu, 2025).

Looking forward, this partnership should prioritise several forward-leaning pathways:

- Institutionalising operational linkages through regular joint exercises and coordinated patrols that enhance readiness without triggering escalation
- Expanding maritime domain awareness architectures, including real-time information sharing and collaborative sensor networks, to mitigate risks from both kinetic and non-kinetic threats
- Deepening defence industrial collaboration beyond singular platforms towards co-development of maritime technologies, from unmanned systems to coastal surveillance, that enhance self-reliance and strategic autonomy for both states
- Integrating geoeconomic strategies that reinforce secure sea lanes while fostering sustainable maritime economies, particularly for coastal communities vulnerable to geopolitical flux

Ultimately, the convergence of AEP and CADC, when operationalised through practice and policy, can contribute not just to bilateral resilience but to a multilateral architecture of stability. It offers a constructive alternative to unilateral coercion, underpinned by cooperation, capability enhancement, and collective agency. In an era where maritime risks are defined as much by contested claims as by technological disruption and supply chain dependencies, such a partnership is not just useful; it is strategically essential.

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