



**NEW STRATEGIC HORIZONS FOR THE  
GROWING PHILIPPINES-INDIA  
MULTI-FACETED PARTNERSHIP**

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The Philippines and India have witnessed upward trajectory in their bilateral partnership amid growing uncertainty over Indo-Pacific security architecture brought by China's expansionism. While the Philippines' security alliance with the United States remains, there is [an ongoing push](#) in Manila for a more multi-aligned foreign policy preparing for unexpected shifts. The Philippines' growing strategic cooperation with India demonstrates this multi-alignment, and more robust bilateral ties would complement US interests in preserving the regional rules-based order.

### Tracing the growth

The Philippines-India partnership is becoming a strategically significant relationship grounded in democratic values, shared security concerns, and converging visions for a free and open Indo-Pacific. This evolution reflects a deliberate recalibration in both countries' foreign policies. For the Philippines,

increasingly wary of China's maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea, the search for reliable security partners has intensified. For India, committed to its Act East Policy and a more proactive Indo-Pacific role, strengthening ties with ASEAN states is both timely and essential.

Maturity in bilateral ties began in 2016 under former President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022), when Manila sought to veer away from its US alliance to [appease](#) China and gain economic concessions. Additionally, by downplaying the [2016 Arbitral Award](#), Duterte hoped to forge more stable relations with Beijing in the South China Sea. However, such efforts [did not yield](#) significant economic benefits; they [emboldened](#) China's expansionist ambitions in the West Philippine Sea—as Manila calls the part of the South China Sea encompassing its 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone. To address this strategic mismanagement, Manila decided to work with non-traditional, like-minded partners that can play a role in Philippines' security.

This diversification policy [allowed](#) the Philippines and India to recognize the utility of their like-minded partnership. Notable developments that took place included the [Philippines' purchase](#) of BrahMos supersonic missiles, more reciprocal high-level visits, and increased maritime activity such as joint exercises and goodwill visits. In Manila, there was apparent willingness to [include](#) India in its security calculations. This complemented India's intent to become a more noticeable player in emerging strategic dynamics in Southeast Asia.

Trade and investment between the two nations, while still modest (around \$3 billion in 2024), is slowly gathering momentum. India's strengths in pharmaceuticals, information technology, and fintech align well with the Philippines' development needs. The digital economy and renewable energy sectors especially offer promising avenues for collaboration. Yet, this economic partnership remains under-leveraged—something both governments are keen to change

### Institutionalizing the partnership

When President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took office in 2022, he [expressed](#) intent to not only maintain positive momentum for the Manila-New Delhi partnership but strengthen it further to better adapt to the changing strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, the Philippines and India have pursued a more multifaceted, institutionalized bilateral partnership. The most visible area of cooperation centers on maritime security and defense cooperation. This reflected the Marcos Jr administration's [prioritization](#) of security of its sovereignty and sovereign rights as China intensifies belligerent maneuvers in the West Philippine Sea. India likewise intends to bolster its strategic presence in Southeast Asia amid the search for alternative sources of economic and security cooperation, hedging against the uncertainties caused by US-China competition. Additionally, since 2018 India has become more vocal about how China's maritime unilateralism directly challenges the principles of international law.

Consequently, since 2022 there have been [increased](#) Manila-New Delhi maritime security-related activities aimed at deepening and institutionalizing their partnership. First developments included signing a memorandum of understanding for cooperation between the Philippine and Indian coast guards in August 2023. An elevation in defense dialogue followed; the fifth meeting of the India-Philippines Joint Defense Cooperation Committee in September 2024 was for the first time co-chaired by the defense secretaries. Additionally, both nations held their first track 1 maritime security dialogue in December 2024. Moreover, as both nations aim to improve joint preparedness and interoperability, the role of capacity-building is also gaining ground; Manila is currently [negotiating](#) with India to purchase the Akash surface-to-air weapon system. Diplomatic engagement has kept pace. High-level visits, regular dialogues under the Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation, and collaboration in ASEAN-led platforms point to a maturing relationship. Importantly, both countries emphasize a rules-based international order and the sanctity of international law—principles increasingly tested in today's contested maritime spaces.

The Philippines and India are also exploring more ways to broaden the bilateral partnership. When President Marcos Jr. met Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita in January, he expressed openness to [elevating](#) bilateral ties, indicating Manila's growing importance to the Philippines-India partnership. Manila has also shared plans to pursue cooperation with New Delhi on critical minerals like [nickel](#), given their overreliance on the Chinese market as an export destination. This opens more opportunities for India to become more involved in Southeast Asia while enhancing its partnership with the Philippines.

The human connection is growing, too. Filipino students studying in India under government scholarships, the popularity of yoga and Indian culture in the Philippines, and a small but vibrant Indian diaspora all contribute to a more organic, people-centric partnership. These soft power linkages provide a durable foundation for bilateral goodwill beyond the corridors of power.

### Why it matters to Washington

Under the Trump administration, there are two interrelated themes taking center stage in Washington's foreign policy calculations. First, the future of US security interests lies in the evolving dynamics of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Second, China is the most critical challenge to Washington's pursuit of strategic objectives in the region and the broader international system. In the Indo-Pacific China not only enjoys a geographic advantage but also continues to consolidate comprehensive power to revise the US-led rules-based order in accordance to its expansionist ambitions in the region.

Despite efforts to manage China's adventurism, Beijing is unwilling to alter its behaviour. In fact, China continues provoking the regional security architecture, particularly in the Western Pacific. Consequently, the Trump administration's approach towards China is based on peace through strength and deterrence. Therefore, it is only practical for the US to invest in its alliances in the region to check China's coercion. Among its vital allies is the Philippines, strategically positioned in the First Island Chain,

making it a direct party to any military conflict in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Under Marcos Jr. the Philippines-US alliance enters its [highest level](#) with both nations expanding the nature of their defense partnership. Moreover, with the Trump administration in power, the alliance continues to [deepen and broaden](#) with novel dimensions. While the US is the Philippines' sole and traditional ally, Washington also [encourages](#) Manila to work with other like-minded regional players to provide the Philippines with more capacity-building, preparedness, and interoperability opportunities. This creates opportunities for the Philippines to integrate itself within the traditional hub-and-spokes system by forging robust security ties with Japan, Australia, and South Korea.

While India is not a treaty ally of the US, both democracies have steadily elevated the status of their defense partnership. This close relationship is evident in India's designation as Major Defense Partner in 2016, US provision of weapons, military equipment, and technology transfer, and the operationalization of major logistics agreements. India openly [supports and integrates](#) its major power interests within the US-led rules-based order through its active participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") and other minilaterals in the region and beyond. India is also the only major Indo-Pacific democracy with the material capability and first-hand experience of [pushing back](#) against China's aggression.

Therefore, amid regional geopolitical uncertainty, Washington is more likely to encourage India's active involvement as security partner and provider in the region, giving the Philippines more opportunities and options to enhance resilience, while also complementing US interests in preserving the rules-based order.

## Conclusion

In an era where middle powers increasingly shape regional security architecture, the India-Philippines relationship is no longer a diplomatic footnote—it is fast becoming a strategic necessity. As tensions simmer in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific

faces an uncertain future, New Delhi and Manila can not only strengthen their bilateral ties but also contribute meaningfully to regional peace and stability. This partnership would not only benefit both nations but also converge with the overarching network of like-minded nations seeking to strengthen the established US-led order.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*