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Recalibrating US Alliances: A Restraint Strategy with Japan and the Philippines

By David Dichoso

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Standing as the southern and eastern anchors of the United States' deterrence-by-denial strategy in the Indo-Pacific, the Philippines and Japan are strengthening their ties and expanding their own bilateral military cooperation, including enhancing their defensive capabilities of key geography within their territories that serve to deny Beijing's access to and from during a conflict. While both states have pursued military and policy reforms that respond to Beijing's military provocations and gray-zone coercion in the region, they are also driven by their shared pursuit of strengthening their own territorial and archipelagic defenses while building partnerships to support their strategic efforts. Yet, these actions can also risk escalating tensions beyond the control of diplomacy, pushing Beijing to respond resolutely through either more coercion or even the use of force.

With Washington's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy emphasizing the need for greater burden sharing by its allies, the United States has increasingly expected its allies to take on more responsibility in strengthening their own defenses. Resoundingly, Manila and Tokyo have followed suit; both countries have increased their defense spending and pursued modernized conventional capabilities that can hold target China's mainland, particularly areas along China's eastern coasts. These developments to strengthen their own forces combined with heads of state who are not shying away from their own China challenge are running the risk of provoking an arms race in Indo-Pacific region.

Thus, against this backdrop of a potential great-power conflict between the United States and China, it is urgent

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that Washington alongside Tokyo and Manila seek to de-escalate tensions efforts with Beijing while mainlining credible as a multi-national force coalition capable of balancing against China's power. Although Washington must maintain its credibility as a regional leader to shape and guide Tokyo and Manila militarily, it is equally important for Washington to manage a strategic competition responsibly while avoiding any unnecessary escalation from Beijing.

This paper argues for a practical way forward, specifically for responsible burden-sharing that requires a more calibrated U.S. forward-deployed military presence in Japan and the Philippines. Failing to effectively manage alliances with these nations can undermine crisis stability by heightening Beijing's perception of encirclement can embolden it to undertake actions that threaten to destabilize the entire region and can expose both countries to economic and energy vulnerabilities. It proposes that a restraint-based, U.S.-led deterrence-by-denial strategy grounded in defense realism can preserve deterrence while reducing escalation risks. This approach allows Tokyo and Manila to strengthen their national defense while maintaining the flexibility to manage domestic and economic pressures during periods of crisis, offering a more sustainable balance between deterrence and resilience in the Indo-Pacific.

The Emerging US–Japan–Philippines Security Alignment and Regional Stability

For decades, Washington has balanced its alliances with Japan and the Philippines with steady military support, gradually improving interoperability for pursuing protecting regional interests. However, this growing domestic appetite for a firmer rebalancing against China did not emerge in a vacuum. It reflects the convergence of pragmatic leadership from all three capitals who are applying realist logic, increasing their shared power through deliberate deepening of security ties against China's along the First Island Chain.

Since the dawn of the twenty first century, China's rapid military buildup has significantly altered the regional balance of power and is increasing the vulnerability of forward-deployed U.S. forces in the theatre. Capable of projecting power and targeting U.S assets, The People's Liberation Army (PLA) can

match the U.S more equally and pressure a weaker Tokyo and Manila by targeting alliance infrastructure such as air bases, ports, and carrier strike groups. Its long-range strike arsenal through systems such as the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile too present a dangerous consideration, as it is capable of targeting striking Guam.¹ For Japan's case specifically, Heginbotham and Samuels estimate that about 150-500 of the PLA's ballistic missiles can strike targets in Japan (of which between 50 and 140 could strike anywhere in Japan), and, combined with cruise missiles, the total could reach upwards of 1,400 missiles.² Across both Japan and the Philippines, these dynamics have shaped public sentiment and policy direction alike, reinforcing a shift toward a more robust security posture that is driving the current trajectory of alliance alignment.

As Japan's first female prime minister and ultra-conservative 'Iron Lady,' Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi made major headlines when she stated that a Taiwan contingency scenario involving warships and the use of force would constitute a "survival-threatening situation," allowing Japan to exercise its collective self-defense laws under its constitution's Article 9 peace clause, which authorizes defensive counterstrikes against threats that fall in line with its "Use of Force" authorities.³ Her pragmatic approach in addressing one of Japan's largest national security concerns was not a sudden pivot of Japan's foreign policy, but instead an extension of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to revise Japan's domestic laws and policies, where his efforts ultimately enabled Japan to become a proactive regional player in preserving peace and security in the Indo-Pacific.

Best known for his work in his second administration, Abe began his with staunch security reforms that rewired the scope of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF). His National Defense Program Outline in 2013 formalized the evolution of the JSDF into a "Dynamic Joint Defense Force" capable of responding to both conventional and hybrid threats in localized conflicts.⁴ In addition to recalibrating the SDF's role, he established a U.S.-style National Security Council (NSC) as a "control tower" to improve the cabinet's intelligence-gathering capabilities and streamline coordination for national security issues. Furthermore,

Abe and his cabinet controversially reinterpreted Article 9 in July 2014 and passed security-related bills in September 2015, which permitted Japan to participate in collective self-defense efforts, permitted the SDF to provide rear-area support to countries from zones where “combat is not currently happening” and use weapons to aid geographically distant units or personnel under attack during UN peacekeeping operations (*kaketsuke keigo*).⁵ This, together with the amendment to the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation in April 2015, marked Japan’s emergence as a globally engaged defense actor.

Manila, too, saw a rebalancing under its current President, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., shifting the country toward a firm counterbalancing stance against Beijing following former President Duterte’s years of a softer diplomatic approach to its neighbor. He oversaw the implementation of all the “Joint Vision Statement for a 21st Century U.S.-Philippines Partnership,” originally signed in Washington at the end of 2022. His leadership in galvanizing national efforts enabled Manila to achieve the five efforts the vision sought to modernize the alliance, which included: strengthening Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) modernization, expanding the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, launching a maritime security dialogue, developing mutual defense guidelines, and pursuing a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).⁶

Much to Beijing’s displeasure, his 2022 EDCA-updated expansion provides U.S. forces with a strategic vantage point from which they could mount rapid military operations in the event of an armed confrontation with Beijing over Taiwan. The U.S. Department of Defense regarded the EDCA agreement as a “pillar of the US-Philippines alliance,” which will improve bilateral military interoperability and will accelerate the modernization of their alliance.⁷ These renewed alliance security commitments were followed by Manila’s own ‘Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept’ (CADC) strategy, introduced to explicitly shift Manila’s security focus toward an archipelagic defense that leverages geographic advantages to Alongside legislation expanding the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ role beyond its coasts to defend its exclusive economic zone.

In addition, the Marcos Jr. administration has aligned key maritime laws, including the Philippine Maritime Zones Act (RA 12064) and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act (RA 12065), with UNCLOS, reinforcing Manila’s legal claims. It has also submitted a claim to extend its rights in the West Palawan region. Together, these steps strengthen the Philippines’ legal position and directly counter Chinese assertiveness, signaling a shift toward exposing Beijing’s disregard for international norms while paralleling Washington’s broader security approach.⁸

For both Tokyo and Manila, these developments, pursued through a *realpolitik* approach to security policy, reflect the belief that strengthening external deterrence against Beijing requires a show of force that, if backed by Washington, would deter its ambitious pursuits to dominate contested areas within the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. However, it is the very broadening of a jointly integrated military coalition along a U.S.-drawn FIC that conversely weakening both countries’ own bargaining positions vis-à-vis China. Viewed as a containment wall against Beijing, Tokyo and Manila are choosing to narrow their diplomatic flexibility and for a firm security guarantee, where both countries are increasing the risk of miscalculation. With military integration continuing to deepen and domestic policies remaining in favor of strong ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ alliance, both countries will continue to undermine the crisis stability that can prevent war against China.

Current US Security Approach for the SCS and Taiwan Strait

As the two central potential flashpoints in Asia, the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait have become manifestations of a broader security dilemma driven by mutual threat perceptions rather than purely unilateral expansionist intent. While Beijing’s gray-zone tactics, maritime coercion, and military modernization are often framed as revisionist, they are also shaped by its perception of a U.S.-led encirclement through alliances and partnerships that threaten to erode its second-strike capability within an increasingly robust Anti-Access / Area Denial (A2/AD) environment, where mainland targets could be held at risk. At the same time, Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea are tied to its asserted historical

rights within the nine-dash line, while Taiwan is viewed in a fundamentally different light, with reunification with the island as central to national rejuvenation and the restoration of integrity for the Chinese national identity.

Despite the large distance separating the United States from these conflict areas, Washington has remained committed to bolstering its deterrence with its allies in Indo-Pacific. Without defining its grand strategy along solid lines, Washington's focus has been to prevent a rising China from becoming a regional hegemon in Asia. Its underlying logic has remained the same throughout the 20th century, where the United States consistently worked—sometimes reluctantly—to prevent any single power from dominating Europe or Asia in the way the United States dominated the Western Hemisphere. By keeping Eurasia divided, Washington reduced the chances that another state could surpass its economic and military strength. This approach also ensured that the major powers remained focused on competing with one another rather than directly challenging the United States. If a single state were to dominate its region, it would gain security at home and the ability to project power globally, potentially even into the Western Hemisphere. Preventing this outcome was a major reason for the United States to enter both World Wars and to pursue a containment strategy during the Cold War.⁹

For the SCS, U.S. interests hinge on preserving access and stability and maintaining freedom of navigation beyond coastal territorial waters, ensuring the flow of over \$5 trillion in annual trade while enabling U.S. military power projection across the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ By attempting to signal its commitment to the open seas through expensive and risky U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) patrols, Washington has only exacerbated the perception gap over maritime rights and responsibilities with Beijing, which in turn gives Beijing a pretext to hedge and validate its own claims while militarizing its disputed areas.¹¹

In the case of maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait, it is no secret that the intentionally unsatisfactory U.S. policy for island democracy has continued to give Washington flexibility and leverage when dealing with both Beijing and Taipei,

all while ensuring Taiwan can effectively defend itself. The original 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) continues to enable robust arms sales, making Taiwan into a “porcupine” to deter any Chinese attempt to seize it. Though this cost-imposition element of the strategy remains crucial to its legitimacy, it has been accompanied by increased allied force projection and U.S. troop deployments, signaling a clearer stance on the island's security and, in turn, escalating cross-Strait tensions.

Japan and the Philippines on the Frontlines of Strategic Competition with China

Keening in on the more prominent roles Japan and the Philippines are taking to deterring potential contingencies against Beijing's threat against their territorial sovereignty and national interest in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, both capitals have taken domestic measures to accelerate military modernization efforts aimed at strengthening deterrence against Beijing. Though individually militarily inferior to China militarily, Tokyo and Manila increasingly view deeper alliance integration with Washington as necessary for defending their sovereignty and sustaining long-term deterrence. Thus far, both countries are unequivocally aligning themselves with this trajectory.

Tokyo's own domestic defense modernization efforts under Takaichi's rebalancing efforts against Beijing are just a continuation of Japan's efforts to enhance its domestic defense capabilities and to expand its military across its Southwestern regions and Nansei islands. This has included the deployment of medium-range surface-to-air and surface-to-ship missile systems (Type-03 chu-SAM and Type-12) and refurbished Izumo-Class Destroyers, such as the JS Kaga, that support STOVL F-35A/B operations, expanding the JMSDF and JASDF's power projection capabilities without relying strictly on U.S. operating systems and airbases. Fielding these systems within the U.S.-Japan alliance command highlights Japan's growing capacity for offensive operations beyond its postwar pacifist identity.

Similarly, Manila has uniquely mirrored Japan's modernization and build-up efforts, focusing on

defense procurements that bolster its credibility in defending its territorial and archipelagic defenses. Recent arms acquisitions include systems from multiple countries, such as S-70i Black Hawks and the BrahMos (India) and Spyder (Israel) missile systems, providing the AFP with equipment that sharpens its readiness to address emerging security challenges and protect its sovereignty in the South China Sea. These pieces of equipment, along with more procurements of more Japanese coastal radar systems and a potential sale of U.S.-approved F-16 fighters, demonstrate the country's continued reliance on foreign military sales (FMS) for achieving its ideal defense posture. Therefore, Manila's modernization efforts rely heavily on its diplomatic partnerships with states that have an interest or stake in the security of the Philippines.

These modernization efforts are also backed by both governments and their clear assessments of the growing threat posed by Beijing in the region, as both countries increasingly signal a recalibration of their security postures against China and shed visibility regarding Taiwan. In Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy explicitly identifies China as "the greatest strategic challenge" and refers to Taiwan as a "precious friend," providing the doctrinal justification for its expanded defense posture and willingness to engage more directly in a Taiwan contingency.¹² In contrast, Manila's 2023 National Security Strategy maintains a more cautious tone, recognizing that "sharpening strategic competition between the United States and China are realities permeating the global landscape," while avoiding directly naming China as the sole adversary in the South China Sea. However, this neutrality is qualified. The document emphasizes that the "West Philippine Sea issue remains a primary national interest," and acknowledges that a Taiwan conflict "would inevitably affect the Philippines given the geographic proximity of Taiwan... and the presence of over 150,000 Filipinos in Taiwan."¹³

Is the Pentagon's Deterrence-by-Denial Strategy Flawed?

The release of this year's U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) outlined Washington's approach for its security interests across the globe, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a coalition of allies and partners necessary to balance against China.

Under its outlined deterrence-by-denial framework, the United States increasingly expects allies such as Japan and the Philippines to strengthen their own defense capabilities and assume greater responsibility for regional security. However, the strategy remains ambiguous about the specific capabilities required to establish an effective denial posture and the extent to which allies are expected to support U.S. operations in a Taiwan contingency.

This ambiguity presents a fundamental flaw in the strategy's adoption. In the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis, Tokyo and Manila are likely to respond militarily only if their sovereignty, national security, or citizens are directly threatened. If the United States intervenes militarily to defend Taiwan absent a direct attack on either ally, both governments could legally or politically delay participation, creating alliance friction and undermining deterrence credibility. As a result, deterrence by denial depends not only on military capability but also on sustained political willingness among allies to bear the risks of escalation in support of Washington's broader regional strategy.

To strengthen its denial posture, the Trump administration has emphasized developing the Golden Dome missile defense initiative, envisioned as a future network integrating space-based sensors, interceptors, and hypersonic defense systems. However, the project faces significant financial, political, and institutional hurdles that make rapid implementation unlikely. While the administration has proposed major increases in defense spending to support such initiatives, long-term political support and constraints on industrial capacity may limit the pace at which these capabilities can be operationalized.¹⁴

Japan and the Philippines Bilateral and Multilateral Defense Alignment

In their efforts to rebalance their security postures to credibly counter Beijing's rising military presence and coercion in the region, Tokyo and Manila have also promoted coalition-building through multilateralism, particularly by expanding their own bilateral defense ties. For example, the two countries conducted their first-ever bilateral Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) military exercise, called Doshin-Bayanihan, late last year, exercising their newly

implemented Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). This cooperation progressed further during the forty-first iteration of the U.S.-Philippine alliance's Balikatan exercise this past April, which included Japan as a full participant rather than just an observer. Notably, this the first time Japanese combat troops deployed to the Philippines for the first time since World War II.

Cooperation on the operational level is just one aspect of the countries' growing diplomatic cooperation in security affairs. This past May, both Tokyo's Defense Minister Koizumi and Manila's Defense Minister Teodoro agreed on measures to enhance their partnership, including the rapid establishment of bilateral institutional mechanisms for information sharing and new initiatives to strengthen regional deterrence. Moreover, they reaffirmed cooperation over defense equipment under Japan's revised Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. Resoundingly, both sides also committed to expanding multilateral defense coordination through frameworks that include the United States and other like-minded partners such as Australia and ASEAN states, all in pursuit of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).¹⁵

Not overshadowed by the early success of these increasingly operationalized military exercises, the two capitals have also signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement and established a working group between their defense ministries to facilitate Tokyo's early overseas transfer of defense equipment. This follows Tokyo's loosening of its arms export restrictions to allow the sale of lethal weapons to the countries with which it has defense agreements, where rules restricting outbound shipments to only five categories, such as rescue and transportation, have been abolished.¹⁶ This warming of security ties demonstrates a resounding resolve among partners seeking to buttress their positions in a security environment marked by intensifying geopolitical tensions against Beijing. The signing of a bilateral memorandum on defense equipment and technology cooperation further highlights the increasingly strong strategic alignment between Tokyo and Manila.

Reinforcing a Security Dilemma with China in the Indo-Pacific

As the prominent realist scholar Robert Jervis argued, Robert Jervis argued that a security dilemma arises when "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others," and that "it is insoluble when each state fears that many others, far from coming to its aid, are likely to join in any attack." He referred to a dynamic in which even defensive actions can unintentionally provoke fear, competition, and escalation among states.¹⁷ This dynamic is clearly visible within the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Philippines alliances, as both Tokyo and Manila have increasingly aligned their threat perceptions of Beijing with those of Washington. As a result, escalation dynamics against Beijing have intensified, and growing U.S. demands for burden-sharing amid great-power competition have been matched by Tokyo and Manila's own commitments to assume greater responsibility for their defense, let alone regional commitment to pursue peace and stability. This, in turn, has led to growing recognition of Taiwan-related contingencies as legitimate regional security concerns that require greater strategic coordination among multiple countries to deter conflict.

As previously mentioned, Japan's Prime Minister Takaichi's comment about using collective self-defense measures against Beijing in the event of a Taiwan contingency reveals Tokyo's desire to strengthen its role in regional security affairs. This means that, according to Japan's 2019 Defense of Japan report, Tokyo can invoke its "use of force" laws under international law, a basis on the right of collective self-defense, including armed attacks "occurring against a foreign country" as it is "permitted under the Constitution only as a measure for self-defense which is inevitable for defending Japan."¹⁸ Tokyo displayed this renewed resolve during the U.S.-Japan alliance's 2024 Keen Edge exercise, where both forces simulated bilateral defense operations to protect Yonaguni Island from a Chinese invasion. The training saw SDF forces simulate ASM strikes in the Miyako Strait and reinforce the land defenses of Yonaguni against a Chinese landing, all conducted under the United States' operational umbrella.¹⁹ This exercise revealed, for the first time, how collective self-defense can be operationalized

through counterstrikes against PLAN naval forces, even without a direct attack on Japan.

Tokyo thus considers the preservation of Taiwan's security necessary for Japan's survival, offering a clarifying stance that directly challenges Beijing's position on the island, which it views as its own lost territory and strictly as an internal affair necessary for the national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Despite its adherence to its original 1972 One-China policy, which recognizes the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legitimate government of China, Tokyo's growing perception of Beijing as a persistent destabilizing actor within its neighborhood has caused it to reinterpret its post-war pacific posture and gain credible self-defense capabilities to counter it.

Manila's own estrangement with China stems not only from its national security and territorial interests in the South China Sea, but also from diplomatic shifts in its foreign policy regarding Taiwan, a deeply contested issue viewed as interference that undermines Sino-Philippine relations. Firstly, Manila under Marcos Jr. has signaled a growing interest in strengthening its unofficial ties to Taiwan, where, last April, his government issued Memorandum Circular No. 82, easing longstanding restrictions on travel and engagement with Taiwanese officials for economic and trade purposes.²⁰ This policy partially reversed Executive Order No. 313 (1987), which institutionalized the Philippines' One China policy by strictly limiting official engagement with Taiwan.²¹ Despite its limitations, not including diplomatic and security interactions, it represents a clear shift in emphasis on increasing economic cooperation and engagement with Taiwan.

Despite maintaining a One-China policy that "fully understands and respects" Beijing's claim over Taiwan, Manila's gradual shift towards a more assertive balancing strategy against China suggests growing concern over contingencies extending beyond the South China Sea. Taiwan's proximity to the Philippines, located roughly 155 miles from the Philippines' northernmost territory, has increasingly shaped Manila's strategic calculations regarding archipelagic defense and regional stability. As a result, Philippine military modernization efforts increasingly

reflect preparations for potential Taiwan-related contingencies, even if officials remain cautious about stating this explicitly. In 2024, AFP Rear Admiral Roy Vincent Trinidad confirmed for the first time that discussions are underway on potential military-to-military engagements with Taiwan, even hinting at more formal joint activities in the Taiwan Strait.²² This was followed by President Marcos Jr.'s remark that the Philippines would be drawn "kicking and screaming" into a Taiwan conflict. These statements suggest that Manila increasingly views engagement with Taiwanese authorities as necessary for safeguarding Philippine interests tied to regional stability and archipelagic defense.

The Strategic Costs of Over-Alignment with Washington

As Japan and the Philippines deepen their alignment with the United States, the strategic benefits of deterrence are increasingly offset by unintended costs. What is often framed as necessary burden-sharing has narrowed the diplomatic flexibility of both countries and has positioned them solely vulnerable to external shocks from U.S.-China competition in the region. By embedding themselves more firmly within Washington's security architecture that seeks to contain Beijing's coercive regional behavior, Tokyo and Manila increasingly risk reduced diplomatic flexibility and greater exposure to strategic retaliation from Beijing.

For Japan, interoperability with U.S. forces remains a core principle for ensuring the defense of its sovereignty and broader national security. Yet, this partnership is not without domestic political complications. The concentration of U.S. military bases in Okinawa, which hosts the majority of American forces that are stationed in Japan, has historically generated friction between Okinawan local authorities and Tokyo. This dynamic presents Japan with what Robert Putnam famously describes as a "two-level game," in which Tokyo must balance alliance commitments and its own deterrence requirements with domestic political pressures stemming from longstanding grievances surrounding the U.S. military presence in Okinawa.

Since Japan's rebalancing against China's rise has

involved diplomatic and legislative changes that enable Tokyo to play a more proactive role in regional security affairs, it has also weakened stable channels of engagement with Beijing and invited retaliatory measures in return. For example, Beijing's economic retaliation following Takaichi's comments regarding a Taiwan contingency included export restrictions on rare earths and dual-use materials critical to Japan's industrial supply chains. These measures further exposed Japan's economic vulnerabilities given its continued reliance on China for around 63% of its rare earth imports despite ongoing diversification efforts. Due to the structure of Japan's procurement and manufacturing networks, much of its supply-chain interdependence still passes through China for processing and magnet production, reinforcing Tokyo's continued need for stable economic engagement with Beijing.²³

In addition to rare earths, Beijing also employed broader economic and political pressure in retaliation against Tokyo, including a sharp decline in Chinese tourism and media narratives portraying Japan's expanding defense posture as a revival of militarism. Although these efforts generated limited domestic backlash within Japan, they further constrain Tokyo's ability to hedge diplomatically in scenarios where engagement with Beijing could be more dependable than with Washington.

In Manila's case, its growing openness to deeper integration into the U.S.-led deterrence-by-denial posture carries risks vis-à-vis engagement with Beijing. By authorizing expanded rotational access for U.S. forces and fortifying EDCA sites, Manila is pursuing a more land-based integration of U.S. capabilities, extending deterrence operations beyond its archipelago and the South China Sea. During Balikatan 2026, U.S. forces deployed the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) to Itbayat in Batanes, roughly 155 kilometers from Taiwan and the Philippines' northernmost territory. Although the deployment was limited to operational rehearsal and simulation support, it demonstrated the strategic utility of northern Philippine territory in potential Taiwan-related contingencies.²⁴

Much like Washington's earlier deployment of the

Typhon missile system to the Philippines in 2024, these long-range strike systems possess capabilities that could hold China's coastal provinces at risk and potentially impede PLA operations in a Taiwan conflict scenario. This escalates tensions with Beijing simply because it views the Taiwan issue as an internal matter, and if an external state, especially one closely tied to Washington, demonstrates the capability and credibility to deter it from pursuing its internal objective, then Beijing is enticed to project its military power back. While such deployments strengthen Manila's deterrence posture, they also carry escalatory implications and increase the Philippines' exposure as a potential U.S. forward-operating node in a Taiwan contingency. Although expanded U.S.-Philippine infrastructure under EDCA could support noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) during a regional crisis, the dual-use nature of these sites, including their role in supporting offensive projection capabilities, complicates Manila's ability to pursue rapprochement with Beijing.

However, such efforts to ease tensions are overshadowed by constitutional constraints and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Such maritime clashes have included Chinese Coast Guard forces using water cannons, collisions, and other forms of brinkmanship against the Philippines, which have resulted in injured personnel and the disruption of their own resupply mission. With its archipelagic defense strategy failing to address Beijing's gray-zone coercion, Manila has appeared largely reactive in managing escalation, lacking the coherent operational response needed to credibly deter Beijing at the theater-level over its claimed territories.²⁵ Furthermore, Manila's 1987 constitutional limitation, which mandates state control over natural resources, complicates any potential joint oil exploration with China in the South China Sea. Since Manila legally cannot compromise on sovereignty issues in energy cooperation with Beijing, its heavy dependence on energy imports will remain a vulnerability that Beijing can exploit in a time of crisis. Even with an incentive to cooperate diplomatically with Beijing amid increasing externally caused domestic economic pressure, its own legal constraints make mutually acceptable agreements with China extremely

difficult.²⁶

Firmly bolstering their diplomatic engagement and security alliances with the United States, becoming ‘model allies,’ any further actions by Tokyo and Manila that isolate or threatens Beijing for purposes other than exclusively defensive measures hurt any chances of rapprochement. Even as China’s revisionist activities increasingly challenge their national interests, undermine international law, and further deepen its efforts to reshape the regional order, Tokyo and Manila must maintain a pragmatic diplomatic relationship with Beijing that provides them flexibility in independent strategic decision-making that opens opportunities for cooperation with Beijing, a relationship that is pivotal for safeguarding their vital interests, crucial for their economies, a for maintaining peace and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

A Defensive Realist Framework for US Alliances with Japan and the Philippines

With Beijing’s revisionist expansion intensifying and the risk of a Taiwan contingency growing, the United States must recalibrate its alliance strategies with Japan and the Philippines toward a restraint-based approach grounded in defensive realism. Defensive realism views states as security-seeking actors that prioritize survival over domination. Although international anarchy incentivizes states to pursue power to ensure their security, defensive realism argues against excessive power maximization, since the process of maximizing power can intensify the security dilemma and provoke balancing coalitions against the state, reducing a state’s security.

As Stephen A. Walt highlights, defensive realism is seen as merely seeking survival, where the costs of expansion outweigh the benefits it would gain.²⁷ In reference to China’s rise, he later concludes that “Chinese leaders would be foolish to make a bid for regional hegemony” because such efforts would likely leave China “contained by a powerful coalition or defeated in a direct clash of arms.” He concludes that Washington should seek to maintain regional stability by strengthening balancing coalitions while avoiding unnecessary escalation. This would require combining military, economic, and diplomatic tools to pursue a

“managed strategic competition” that reduces the risk of war and preserves opportunities for cooperation.²⁸

Therefore, Washington should focus its efforts on several critical areas, most notably maintaining its position to prevent Taiwan invasion in the short term, effectively deterring Beijing, and enabling Tokyo and Manila to credibly assume greater responsibility for their own national defense. Achieving this will require Washington to sustain allied efforts not only to integrate Tokyo and Manila into the U.S. cross-domain military initiatives that deepen interoperability, but also to continue building trust among troops and cultivating domestic support for the alliances in both Japan and the Philippines. Equally important will be Washington’s sustained efforts to establish and maintain diplomatic dialogue with Beijing, as such channels can promote economic engagement and reduce strategic misperceptions between both sides. Although there are few signs that the ongoing arms race will subside anytime soon, sustained cost imposition and crisis-management mechanisms can still help delay the emergence of a Thucydides Trap scenario that could plunge the Indo-Pacific into war that benefits no one.

Policy Recommendations: A Trilateral Framework for Regional Stability

As Washington, Tokyo, and Manila have rebalanced their security and military objectives in response to China’s shifting of the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, they must now embrace trilateral approaches that deepen military integration and enhance operational interoperability. Such efforts are pivotal to establishing Washington’s deterrence-by-denial strategy, in which a “decent peace” is maintained through credible and coordinated trilateral deterrence efforts. At the same time, although Washington must remain committed to strengthening alliances and evolving a deterrence posture capable of countering Beijing, it must also continue seeking pathways for de-escalation and diplomatic engagement with China.

Washington should adopt the following recommendations to strengthen the deterrence-by-denial posture it seeks to establish alongside two of its most important regional allies. These recommendations will serve a crucial role in reaffirming U.S. credibility

in defending its allies and deterring Beijing from forcibly altering the status quo through conflict anywhere along FIC, especially in the Taiwan Strait.

Enhancing Infrastructure Resilience in Japan and the Philippines

U.S. bases and dual-use infrastructure across Japan and the Philippines must be resilient enough to withstand a first strike and adaptable enough to provide the flexibility trilateral partners will require to conduct multi-domain operations and counterstrikes against Beijing. Specifically, Washington should invest more heavily in regional basing infrastructure to improve survivability, support distributed operations, and harden existing facilities in ways that complicate adversary missile targeting, thereby reducing Japan's and the Philippines' vulnerability in a prolonged conflict.

Secondly, Washington, Tokyo, and Manila must maximize their expanded operational access throughout areas neighboring Taiwan by pre-positioning humanitarian assistance, logistics, fuel, medical, and evacuation infrastructure across Northern Luzon's EDCA sites and Japan's Self-Defense Force (JSDF) facilities throughout the Sakishima Islands. Since U.S. and Japanese combat forces can already access many of these facilities during operations, Washington should encourage Tokyo and Manila to mirror these preparations by investing in dual-use infrastructure that supports both military contingencies and HA/DR operations. Such infrastructure would not only strengthen deterrence-by-denial capabilities in the FIC but also improve regional crisis-response capacity while avoiding the political burden of permanently expanding large U.S. troop deployments.

Advancing Japan–Philippines Security Integration

It would benefit Washington if Tokyo and Manila continued developing bilateral military ties of their own accord. Such efforts signal to both Washington and Beijing that middle powers such as Japan and smaller powers such as the Philippines are serious about defending their sovereignty and building balancing coalitions that support a U.S.-led regional

strategy aimed at deterring Chinese military ambitions. For both capitals specifically, increased cooperation can improve their C4ISR capabilities to counter Beijing's gray-zone coercion and respond to early-phase aggression during a Taiwan contingency, while also strengthening their overall military combat power.

This cooperation has already produced substantial results. In addition to increased bilateral military cooperation, both countries have concluded an agreement establishing a working group for the potential transfer of Abukuma-class destroyer escorts to the Philippine Navy. If consummated, this would mark the first export of finished lethal military equipment in Japan's postwar history.

As a potential next step, both countries should agree to and sign a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) that can capitalize on Tokyo's recent defense transfers to Manila. Since Japan has already provided the Philippines with FPS-3ME and TPS-P14ME air surveillance radar systems, a GSOMIA enabling cross-domain intelligence sharing and early-warning integration would strengthen Japan's defensive posture and crisis-response mechanisms, broaden Manila's operational awareness, and preserve U.S. freedom of action and flexibility during a regional crisis. Sasakawa Peace Foundation analyst Tomohisa Takei argues for that linking these radar systems would eliminate Japan's surveillance blind spot over the Bashi Channel, enabling earlier detection of Chinese aircraft and improving allied responsiveness during a Taiwan contingency.²⁹

De-escalation and Preserving the Status Quo in the Taiwan Strait

As an external balancer and the security guarantor for both Japan and the Philippines, it is important that Washington maintains its deterrence credibility to prevent Beijing from triggering a cross-Strait crisis by continuing to prioritize practical, immediate deterrence measures over costly, symbolic, or long-term strategies that fail to address present risks. Therefore, as a great power, Washington must engage Beijing and incorporate the Taiwan Strait issue into the broader Sino-U.S. negotiation agenda, including pursuing a fourth Joint Communiqué to restore effective guardrails and reduce misperception amid the growing

clarity demonstrated by Japan and the Philippines in preparation for a Taiwan contingency.

A fourth Joint Communiqué would aim to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, building on the existing framework that guides U.S. policy, including the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the three U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqués (1972, 1979, 1982), and the Six Assurances (1982). If instituted, the communiqué should explicitly reaffirm three points: (1) U.S. commitment to its One-China policy and the principles outlined in the three Joint Communiqués; (2) opposition to any unilateral attempt by either side to change the status quo; and (3) U.S. non-support for any formal declaration of Taiwan independence. A new communiqué would not resolve sovereignty disputes but would instead serve as a crisis-management tool, reaffirming shared commitments and stabilizing expectations among all parties. This framework would “restore a ceiling of disciplined ambiguity” and help prevent allied signaling from driving unintended escalation.³⁰

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific theatre today is increasingly shaped by great-power competition between the United States and China, while Japan and the Philippines are adjusting to face the looming threat of war head-on. China’s growing military capabilities and increasingly assertive regional behavior have undoubtedly altered the regional balance of power, compelling both Tokyo and Manila to strengthen their defense postures and deepen cooperation with Washington. Together, the United States, Japan, and the Philippines face the difficult challenge of maintaining credible deterrence against Beijing while avoiding escalation dynamics that could trigger the very conflict they seek to prevent. Yet as this paper has argued, deterrence cannot rely solely on expanding military integration, force projection, and balancing without also considering the strategic risks such actions create.

A sustainable U.S.-led deterrence-by-denial strategy in the Indo-Pacific must therefore be grounded not in efforts to maximize power through greater force projection, but in restraint-based burden-sharing, calibrated alliance integration, and credible crisis-management mechanisms that reinforce trilateral

engagement. Maintaining deterrence does not require abandoning alliances or retrenching from Asia. Rather, it requires Washington to pursue a more balanced approach that strengthens allied resilience and interoperability while preserving diplomatic flexibility and opportunities for de-escalation with Beijing. By hardening allied infrastructure, advancing Japan–Philippines security integration, and reaffirming guardrails surrounding the Taiwan Strait through renewed diplomatic engagement, Washington can better preserve regional stability while reducing the risks of miscalculation and uncontrolled escalation.

Ultimately, preserving peace in the Indo-Pacific will depend not only on military strength but also on strategic discipline through Washington’s leadership. If Washington, Tokyo, and Manila fail to balance deterrence with restraint, the region risks sliding further into a security dilemma that benefits no state and increases the likelihood of a catastrophic great-power conflict. A calibrated trilateral strategy that combines credible deterrence with pragmatic diplomacy offers the most sustainable pathway for maintaining stability and preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and broader Indo-Pacific region.

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