



The Evolution of the Japan-U.S.-Australia- Philippines “Squad”

Reconsidering the Concept of Like-Minded Partners

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Chapter 3

Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines defense
ministers' meeting held in Singapore
(Photo: Kyodo News)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

This chapter examines the formation of the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines “Squad” over the past fifteen years. Such small-group, or minilateral, frameworks are often described as U.S.-led. This chapter demonstrates, however, that shifts in the policies and perceptions of Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, together with the interactions among them, have played a more crucial role in the Squad’s emergence and development than the minilateral literature acknowledges.

In the course of this analysis, the chapter reconsiders the concept of “like-minded countries” or “like-mindedness,” terms frequently invoked in discussions of minilateral frameworks without their definitions and content being explicitly explored. In reality, like-mindedness among Japan, the Philippines, and Australia was neither self-evident from the outset nor static, and there have been differences in perceptions and positions on various security issues among them. The chapter shows that one of the key factors behind the emergence and development of the Squad was the gradual process of the materialization of like-mindedness among these three countries, not just U.S. strategic calculus and policies, even as they still recognized differences in each other’s positions.

Introduction

The framework of security collaborations among Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines, commonly known as the “Squad,” has advanced markedly in recent years. A meeting of the four countries’ defense ministers was held in Singapore in May 2025. The joint statement outlined initiatives that included Japan’s transfer of air surveillance radars to the Philippines, the construction of an air-domain sensor network by the United States, and Australia’s investment in defense-related infrastructure. It also set out a policy of strengthening information-sharing and “joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities” among the four countries.¹ The significance of such cooperation was highlighted by the inclusion of language responding to not only expanding activities by China in the South China Sea, an area of particular concern to the Philippines, but more broadly “China’s destabilizing actions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea and any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion.” According to an analytical report by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, the air surveillance radars in question will support situational awareness not only in the South China Sea but also in airspace north of the Philippines facing the country’s northern sea, which connects to the East China Sea. This is consistent with the language in successive joint statements, which reference both the South China Sea and the East China Sea.² The Squad is in fact developing a “combined hub” to support “information-sharing,” and in recent years, Japan has increasingly emphasized the significance of cooperation with the Philippines, which faces the Bashi Channel.³

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- 1) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “Joint Statement on the Meeting of Defense Ministers From Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States May 31, 2025 – Singapore,” May 31, 2025 <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2025/05/c94ae977ac3b4be604af03f98a9e579ec83fcc50.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 2) Takei Tomohisa, “3000 kairi no koku jokyo haaku: Firipin ni keikai kansei reda o kyoyo suru igi” [Air Situational Awareness Across 3,000 Nautical Miles: The Significance of Providing Air Surveillance Radars to the Philippines], *International Information Network Analysis IINA*, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, August 15, 2024 https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/tomohisa_takei_01.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 3) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2025*, 382-383.

The emergence and development of the Squad is an excellent case through which to analyze recent changes in the various forms of minilateralism (small-group cooperation typically among three to five countries) that Japan is a part of. The recent examples of such minilateralism include Japan-U.S.-Australia, Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan-U.S.-Philippines, and the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4; Japan, the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand) framework, which entails cooperation with European countries. Among these various frameworks, the Squad is giving concrete form to the linkage between two particular minilateral frameworks, i.e., the Japan-U.S.-Australia and Japan-U.S.-Philippines arrangements. Moreover, as discussed later, overlapping interfaces are appearing in the areas of cooperation of the Squad and the Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral framework. Similarly, interfaces are also emerging between the Squad and cooperation frameworks involving European and other Southeast Asian states. The Squad, which is the focus of this chapter's analysis, is thus useful for exploring the emergence of inter-minilateral linkages among various frameworks which no longer operate in isolation.

In the context of Japan's various initiatives, the literature often emphasizes that U.S. strategy is the main driving force.⁴ Given the scale of U.S. material strength, its bilateral treaty network, and its broader military presence, this understanding seems almost self-evident and does align with the record of U.S. initiatives, including efforts to improve Japan-ROK relations and promote Europe-Asia cooperation.

In contrast, there are regional experts who pay closer attention to the United States' Indo-Pacific allies' thinking and practices as variables behind

4) Lucas Myers, "The Squad and the Quad," Asia Dispatches, Wilson Center, May 14, 2024; Kai He, "Rethinking East Asian Peace: The Perils of Over-deterrence and Minilateralism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 2 (2025): 300.

the emergence and development of minilateralism.⁵ Such analyses include studies focused on the strategic shift Japan undertook under the first and second Abe administrations, studies that consider domestic politics and society in the ROK and the Philippines, and a growing body of literature on recent changes in Australia’s security strategy.⁶ These efforts help fill the analytical gaps left by perspectives that focus solely on U.S. leadership.

The aim of this chapter is to extend research grounded in the latter perspective, with a focus on Japan’s engagement with the Squad. As noted above, such studies analyze the evolving circumstances of individual U.S. allies and thereby empirically supplement accounts that emphasize U.S. leadership. The present chapter likewise analyzes such concrete developments, while also focusing on the evolution of concepts that are useful for analyzing U.S. allies’ changes and their consequences.

Specifically, the chapter reconsiders the concept of “like-minded countries” or “like-mindedness,” terms commonly used to characterize

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- 5) See, for example, Takagi Yusuke, “Shinko-koku Firipin no gaiko: Tai-Bei kankei no kyoka, chiiki gaiko no shinka to kokusai shugi gaiko no tenkai” [The Diplomacy of the Philippines, an Emerging Power: The Strengthening of Relations with the United States, the Evolution of Regional Diplomacy, and the Development of Internationalist Diplomacy], *Kokusai Mondai* [International Affairs] 714 (August 2023): 6-16; “Tahomen de seido-ka no susumu Nichi-Firipin kyoryoku: Anpo dake de naku keizai, shakai kaiatsu bumon de mo chakujitsu na seika” [The Institutionalization of Japan-Philippines Cooperation across Multiple Fronts: Steady Progress Not Only in Security but in the Economic and Social Development Sectors], *Nippon.com*, January 23, 2024; Sakata Yasuyo, “Kankoku no Indo-Taiheiyo pibotto: ‘Indo-Taiheiyo 2.0’ ni okeru Nichi-Kan, Nichi-Bei-Kan no senryakuteki renkei” [The ROK’s Indo-Pacific Pivot: Strategic Coordination of Japan-ROK and Japan-U.S.-ROK in the “Indo-Pacific 2.0”], “Kankoku Kanren” Kenkyukai [Study Group on South Korea] FY2023-5, Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 31, 2024 <https://www.jiia.or.jp/jpn/report/2024/03/research-report/korea-fy2023-05.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Michael Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan’s Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Nishino Junya, “Seize the Opportunity to Improve Japan-South Korea Relations,” *AJISS-Commentary*, September 16, 2022; Shoji Tomotaka, “Nichi-Bei-Hi shuno kaigo no kaisai: Sangokukan anzen hosho kyoryoku no yukue” [The Japan-U.S.-Philippines Summit and the Future of Trilateral Security Cooperation], *NIDS Commentary*, April 16, 2024; Satake Tomohiko, “‘Indo-Taiheiyo 2.0’ no riso to genjitsu: Goshu no shiten” [The Ideal and Reality of “Indo-Pacific 2.0”: The Australian Perspective], *CFIEC Contribution Series*, March 28, 2024.

- 6) Ibid.

participants in minilateral frameworks.⁷ The subjects of this chapter, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, are self-identified democracies that participate in the U.S.-centered bilateral alliance network, the so-called “hub-and-spokes” system, and have shared security concerns regarding China. In these regards, characterizing them as “like-minded” would seem to pose no analytical problems. In reality, however, these so-called like-minded countries are not uniformly aligned on all important issues. Geographically distant from one another, they have distinct perspectives and historical experiences that determine which regions they prioritize for security. Given these differences, how the four countries could cooperate as like-minded partners was by no means self-evident at the outset. Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines linkages emerged as part of a long process spanning the end of the Cold War to the present. A look back at this process shows that it involved bridging differences in position and perception, while identifying feasible areas of cooperation, which resulted in the gradual materialization of mutual like-mindedness. Given the fluctuating nature of these interactions, like-mindedness can be conceptualized not as something fixed but as something dynamic that is explored, discovered, constructed and reconstructed through interaction. From such a social perspective, this chapter looks back on the various initiatives undertaken from the end of the Cold War to the present, paying particular attention to how changes in Japan, Australia, and the Philippines have shaped the development of the Squad.

Section 1 analyzes the evolution of the Japan-Philippines security relationship from the start of the second Abe administration onward, showing how the two countries, despite differing security perceptions regarding the East China Sea and the South China Sea, have steadily worked to identify points of convergence, i.e., like-mindedness. Section 2 analyzes the development of Japan-Australia security cooperation in the same period, examining how the South China Sea and the Philippines

7) Japan’s use of the concept of “like-minded countries” in the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific context can be observed from the early period of the second Abe administration. Diet records show that the foreign minister used this concept most frequently, but during that administration, the prime minister and the defense minister also began to use it. For the most comprehensive and up-to-date theoretical study of minilateralism, see Hanada Ryosuke, “Minilateralism: A New Page for Indo-Pacific IR Lexicon,” *Pacific Review*, September 2025, 1-26. For a cross-cutting analysis of trends in minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, see *Kokusai Anzenhoshō* [Journal of International Security] (Special Issue: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific) 53, no. 2 (September 2025).

emerged as important points of convergence for cooperation between two countries with differing geographic outlooks and historical experiences. Together, Sections 1 and 2 show how Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, despite their differences, have gradually broadened their cooperation as like-minded partners, which culminated in the realization of the Squad. Section 3 analyzes the four countries’ efforts to reach out to states beyond the Squad framework and shows how a measure of like-mindedness has been discovered with these states as well. It considers expanded coordination with France, the ROK, and other Southeast Asian countries as the illustrative examples of this on-going trend. The conclusion summarizes the analytical implications for this book’s broader theme of pluralization and offers points of consideration for reconsidering the concept of minilateralism and Japan’s minilateral strategy.

1. The Development of Japan-Philippines and Japan-U.S.-Philippines Cooperation

(1) The Aquino Administration: The Emergence of the Japan-Philippines Security Relationship

The years from 2011 to 2015, spanning the latter half of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government and the early part of the second Abe administration under a Liberal Democratic Party–Komeito coalition, marked a turning point in Japan’s policy toward the Philippines.⁸ This shift manifested clearly in two ways. First, under the Noda administration’s policy of “strategic” use of Official Development Assistance (ODA), Japan explored new capacity-building initiatives for the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG).⁹ After the launch of the second Abe administration, this eventually led to the 2013 decision to provide patrol vessels to the PCG through ODA. Under that program, Japan transferred ten 44-meter multi-role patrol vessels

8) Aoi Yoshie, “Nihon no shogaikoku ni tai suru kaijo hoshikko noryoku kochiku shien: Junshisen-tei oyobi Jieitai no sobihin to no kyoyo o chushin ni” [Japan’s Capacity-Building Support for Foreign Maritime Law-Enforcement: With a Focus on the Provision of Patrol Vessels and SDF Equipment], *Reference*, no. 831 (April 2020).

9) “Firipin ni junshisen kyoyo: Seifu, Chugoku o kensei” [Patrol Vessels to Be Provided to the Philippines: The Government Keeps China in Check], *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, March 22, 2012; Policy Speech by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to the 180th Session of the Diet, January 24, 2012, Database “World and Japan” <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/pm/20120124.SWE.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

(the Parola class) to the PCG between December 2013 and January 2018, with low-interest, long-term yen loans extended to support enhancements to the vessels' principal equipment.¹⁰ In parallel, Japan initiated and completed the installation of PCG communication facilities and radar sites along the South China Sea coast (2014–2018).¹¹

The provision of patrol vessels was an extension of various long-running Japanese initiatives to support the national strength of the Philippines, a maritime country.¹² For example, the development of a trunk highway known as the Philippine-Japan Friendship Highway was one of the major projects carried out using Japan's ODA to the Philippines, which began in the late 1960s. This project supported the development of transport infrastructure for the Philippines, as a maritime nation, not only connecting its land networks but also creating routes leading to ports and coastal areas.¹³ Japan also provided direct support for port development, supporting the construction of berthing facilities and a terminal at Batangas Port, the second principal port after Manila. Furthermore, when the PCG was reorganized in 1998 as a separate administrative organization from the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Japan began conducting field surveys and, since 2002, has supported the PCG's capacity-building.¹⁴ This support has included direct human resource development for law enforcement and ship operations and the development of training programs (the Philippine Coast Guard Human Resource Development Project), as well as the development of coastal radio

10) Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), "Jigyo jizen hyokahyo: Firipin engan keibitai kaijo anzen taio noryoku kyoka jigyo" [Ex-ante Project Evaluation: Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard], 2013 https://www2.jica.go.jp/ja/evaluation/pdf/2013_PH-P257_1_s.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

11) "Engan keibi tushin shisutemu kyoka keikaku" [The Project for Enhancement of Coastal Communications Systems], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/1361010/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

12) Yusuke Takagi, "Philippine-Japan Maritime Cooperation in the Quest for a Rules-based International Order," in *Philippines-Japan Relations in the Twenty-First Century: Change and Direction*, ed. Dennis D. Trinidad and Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua (London: Routledge, 2025), 67-74.

13) The Philippines-Japan Friendship Highway itself is, of course, a land infrastructure project, but it was developed as part of the Pan-Philippine Highway, which connects the ports and coastal areas to the inland regions of the Philippines, a maritime nation composed of numerous islands, and links the country's main islands by crossing several straits. Subsequently, Japan has also implemented development assistance contributing to the enhancement of the Philippines' maritime transport routes.

14) "Engan keibitai o kyoka shite tomo ni anzen na umi o tsukuru (Firipin)" [Strengthening the Coast Guard and Building a Safer Sea Together (Philippines)], *JICA Magazine*, June 2023 https://jicamagazine.jica.go.jp/article/?id=202306_8f.

facilities, lighthouses, and the provision of buoy tender vessels (the Maritime Safety Improvement Project).¹⁵ The 2013 decision to provide patrol vessels can be viewed as a further expansion of this multifaceted, long-standing support to the Philippines.

Japan’s long-running initiatives proceeded in parallel with U.S. support to the Philippines. In particular, following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States expanded its support to the Philippines as part of the global war on terror.¹⁶ One element was direct support for improving inspection capacities at Philippine ports. The United States has also provided training and advisory support to various Philippine government agencies, including the PCG, with a view to improving response capacity for oil spills and disasters. Such U.S. efforts grew markedly under the Aquino administration (2010–2016). In particular, the United States provided direct financial (USD 20 million) and technical support for the development and operation of the Philippines’ National Coast Watch System, which became operational in 2015.¹⁷ These initiatives advanced in parallel with U.S. support to the PCG through vessel maintenance assistance, training, and information-sharing, amounting to a comprehensive expansion of support for the Philippines as a maritime nation. In this sense, Japan and the United States are notable for having supported the Philippines from an early stage

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- 15) “Kaijo hoan jinzai ikusei purojekuto” [Philippine Coast Guard Human Resource Development], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/0600798/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); “Kaijo anzen seibi jigyo (2)” [Maritime Safety Improvement Project-B], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/PH-P159/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 16) Yamamoto Nobuto, “Dai-ni sensen toshite no Tonan Ajia: Tai-tero senso no Tonan Ajia-ka” [Southeast Asia as the Second Front: The Southeast Asianization of the War on Terror], *Hogaku Kenkyu* [Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology] 89, no. 3 (March 2016): 57-61; Fukuda Tamotsu, “Dai 10 sho: Tonan Ajia ni okeru Beikoku domei: Bei-Hi domei o chushin ni” [Chapter 10: U.S. Alliances in Southeast Asia: With a Focus on the U.S.-Philippines Alliance], *Amerika gaiko ni totte no domei* [Alliances in U.S. foreign policy], 2010 https://www2.jia.or.jp/pdf/resarch/h22_nichibei_kankei/12_Chapter1-10.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 17) “US Ambassador Helps Open National Coast Watch Center to Enhance Philippine Maritime Domain Awareness,” News, U.S. INDOPACOM, April 30, 2015 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/Article/587080/us-ambassador-helps-open-national-coast-watch-center-to-enhance-philippine-mari/> (accessed on January 31, 2026); “U.S. and Philippines: Building Partner Capacity for Maritime Domain Awareness,” News, U.S. INDOPACOM, June 9, 2015 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/article/599922/us-and-philippines-building-partner-capacity-for-maritime-domain-awareness/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

through concrete bilateral cooperation including funding and capability-building, and each country's contributions complemented the other's. While high-level frameworks such as Japan-U.S.-Philippines summit or ministerial meetings had not yet been launched in this period, a close examination of the substance of cooperation suggests that de facto Japan-U.S.-Philippines trilateral cooperation was beginning to take shape.

The second shift was in Japan's narrative regarding the meaning and purpose of its support for the Philippines. As articulated in the so-called "Fukuda Doctrine" of 1977, Japan's support for Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, had originally focused on enhancing the region's "resilience."¹⁸ "Resilience" represented the Southeast Asian aspiration to achieve comprehensive national development, covering not only military but also economic and social dimensions, and to promote such efforts regionwide so as to promote their autonomy and not be powerlessly beholden to the vagaries of great-power politics.¹⁹ The idea that the promotion of a country's internal social and economic strength contributes to the stability of individual countries and, by extension, the region as a whole (and vice versa) resonated with Japan's "comprehensive security" approach, at the time, of seeking to contribute to regional and global security through economic instruments, particularly ODA.²⁰ In the post-Cold War era, this framework evolved into more concrete recognition of "transboundary" security challenges across Southeast Asia. In the case of the Philippines, emphasis was placed on counter-piracy and on ensuring the safety of maritime transport in the face of natural disasters (later termed "non-traditional security challenges").

In contrast, the new narrative that emerged in the latter half of the DPJ government, particularly under the Noda administration, was far broader in scope and no longer fit within the conceptual confinements of comprehensive security or non-traditional security. Against the backdrop of rising tensions in waters around the Japanese archipelago at the time, Japan sought to cast the situations in the East China Sea and the South China Sea as representing common challenges to maritime rules and universal principles. Japan used various concepts to emphasize this linkage and criticized China's "assertive"

18) Ishihara Yusuke, "Japan and the Origin of ASEAN Centrality," *Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology* 94, no. 2 (February 2021): 471-496.

19) Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia: Domestic Priorities Define National Security," in *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 488.

20) Akaha Tsuneco, "Japan's Comprehensive Security Policy: A New East Asian Environment," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 4 (April 1991): 324-340.

and “unilateral” actions from the perspectives of maritime routes as “public goods” and “freedom of navigation.”²¹ The second Abe administration took what had been, under the Noda administration, a loosely composed narrative of various overlapping expressions and codified it into formal principles of maritime security. In particular, through the three principles of maritime security articulated in Prime Minister Abe’s 2014 keynote address at the IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue), Tokyo’s coherent messaging was established, opposing “unilateral changes to the status quo by force” and calling for the rule of law and peaceful resolution of disputes.²² This narrative emphasized that the maritime challenges Japan faced were part of a more universal problem affecting the region as a whole. In this context, the significance of tensions in the South China Sea and the importance of strengthening relations with the Philippines were increasingly emphasized.

In this period, Japan worked with the Aquino administration to convey this new narrative jointly and to substantiate like-mindedness between Tokyo and Manila, experiencing both successes and limitations. On the one hand, in major joint Japan-Philippines documents during this period, it became routine for the two countries to issue joint statements that contained the universal principles stressed by Japan: “freedom of navigation,” “peaceful resolution of disputes,” and opposition to “unilateral attempts to change the status quo.”²³ In this context, security in the South China Sea was emphasized as an issue of importance for the peace and stability of the wider region and the world.

On the other hand, opportunities for the two countries to jointly refer to maritime issues beyond the South China Sea were lacking, and to the author’s knowledge, no joint document explicitly addressed the East China Sea, an area of particular importance to Japan. The closest such document is a joint declaration on a Strategic Partnership issued by Prime Minister

21) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Speech by Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba at the Japan National Press Club, “Japan’s Prosperity Depends on its Ties to the Asia-Pacific,” December 14, 2011. The expression “assertiveness” appears, for example, in [Japan] Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2012*, Part I, Chapter 1, Section 3.

22) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Keynote Address by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at the 13th IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue), “Peace and prosperity in Asia, forevermore: Japan for the rule of law, Asia for the rule of law, And the rule of law for all of us,” May 30, 2014 https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page18e_000087.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

23) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting,” July 27, 2013.

Abe and President Aquino in 2015.²⁴ That declaration emphasized only the South China Sea as a specific area of importance for maritime security, while also referring to the broader G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security (2015). The G7 declaration explicitly mentioned both the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and included references to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, peaceful management or settlement of disputes, and opposition to threats and unilateral actions seeking to "change the status quo," covering nearly all the elements of the narrative Japan was communicating internationally at the time.²⁵ It is not impossible to interpret the Japan-Philippines joint declaration's reference to the G7 declaration as an indirect mention of the East China Sea, an area of importance to Japan. Yet, strictly within a paragraph that mainly addresses the South China Sea, the Japan-Philippines joint declaration only confirmed the Philippines' support for the "relevant views" expressed in the G7 declaration. It would therefore be analytically problematic to argue as if the Philippines had begun to make concrete statements, at this stage, on maritime security elsewhere in the region, including the East China Sea. This Philippine stance was consistent with that shown by the Aquino administration's response to China's establishment of a so-called "East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone," whereby Manila focused on expressing concern about the possibility that similar measures might be taken in the future, while primarily referencing the South China Sea, but not anything beyond this particular maritime subregion.²⁶ In this way, Japan's efforts to enhance like-mindedness with the Philippines through a universal narrative of maritime security had clearly encountered limits at this stage.

(2) The Duterte and Marcos Administrations: The Institutionalization of Japan-U.S.-Philippines Relations

The Philippines' focus on the South China Sea gradually began to shift under the Duterte administration (2016–2022), which succeeded the Aquino administration. In March 2017, China conducted maritime survey activities around Benham Rise, an undersea feature off the northeast coast of Luzon,

24) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-Philippines Joint Declaration: A Strengthened Strategic Partnership for Advancing the Shared Principles and Goals of Peace, Security, and Growth in the Region and Beyond," Tokyo, June 4, 2015.

25) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security," April 15, 2015.

26) "Philippines Fears China Wants West PH Sea Air Control," *Inquirer.net*, November 28, 2013.

and registered names for several geographic features. These developments fueled security concerns in the Philippines about not only the South China Sea but also its own surrounding waters.²⁷ In response, the Duterte administration deployed ground forces tasked with surveillance to Cagayan Province, which faces these waters, and decided to rename Benham Rise, located within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone, as “Philippine Rise.”

The Duterte administration subsequently asserted its commitment to defending sovereignty and rights in the Bashi Channel, the strait between Taiwan and Luzon. In 2019, President Duterte publicly stated that patrol activities would be strengthened so that the Batanes Islands would remain “ours.”²⁸ A multi-purpose shelter that the Northern Luzon Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines had been constructing on Mavulis Island in the Bashi Channel since the previous year was completed in 2019, and was described as a facility intended for use not only by fishermen but also by the military when necessary. Lieutenant General Emmanuel Salamat, commander of the Northern Luzon Command, publicly stated, “We have the Mavulis island, which we project to have Marines as well... [That will] manifest our strong claims in the partner islands in the northern frontier.”²⁹ Furthermore, when Chinese naval and air activities, including in waters south of Taiwan, intensified to unprecedented levels in 2021, President Duterte expressly stated that the Philippines was “neutral” with regard to Taiwan, confirming that the country was paying close attention to the situation in and around the Taiwan Strait.

As the Philippines extended its security interests beyond the South China Sea to maritime and air domains to the north, Japan successfully turned these developments into opportunities to articulate joint international messages on these issues. Toward the end of the Duterte administration, other countries also began to express heightened interest in the situation in and around Taiwan. The earliest such case was the July 2020 AUSMIN (the U.S.-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Consultations), which emphasized Taiwan’s

27) Ito Yuko, “Shogaikoku no tai-Chu ninshiki no doko to kokusai chitsujo no susei (4): Hi-Bei anzen hoshō kankei to Minamishinakai ryōyūken mondai o meguru Firipin no tai-Chu seisaku” [Trends in Foreign Perceptions of China and the Trajectory of International Order (4): Philippine Policy toward China in Relation to U.S.-Philippines Security Relations and the South China Sea Sovereignty Dispute], *China Report* 15 (March 30, 2018) <https://www.jiaa.or.jp/column/ChinaReport15.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

28) “Two PCG Vessels Set Sail to Batanes for Relief Mission and Maritime Patrol,” News, Philippine Coast Guard, August 1, 2019.

29) Marly Rome Bondoc, “Military to Build Fishermen’s Shelter in PHL’s Northernmost Island,” *GMA News Online*, February 16, 2018.

“important role” and stressed the “peaceful” resolution of “cross-Strait differences.”³⁰ The joint statements issued at the Japan-U.S. summit in April 2021 and the U.S.-ROK summit in May 2021 likewise emphasized the importance of “peace and stability” across the Taiwan Strait.³¹

Meanwhile, U.S.-Philippines relations remained unstable throughout the Duterte period, with tensions over human rights issues coming to a head. As a result, the Philippines was unable to use its alliance framework with the United States to articulate its concerns about maritime and air domains to the north. Indeed, only one U.S.-Philippines summit was held during the Duterte administration, in 2017, and a 2+2 was never convened.³² In this context, at the inaugural Japan-Philippines 2+2 in 2022, Japan, which maintained relatively stable relations with the Philippines, succeeded in producing a joint statement that opposed “actions that may increase tensions” and supported a “rules-based approach” not only in the South China Sea but also in the East China Sea.³³ This was a landmark statement

30) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Joint Statement Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2020,” July 28, 2020 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/united-states-of-america/ausmin/joint-statement-ausmin-2020> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

31) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement: U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era,” April 16, 2021 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100177718.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026); [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “U.S.-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement,” May 21, 2021 https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5476/view.do?seq=319610 (accessed on January 31, 2026).

32) At the start of the Duterte administration, the Obama administration was reportedly critical of the human rights situation in the Philippines and of President Duterte’s stance on human rights issues. President Duterte responded by publicly disparaging President Obama, calling him a “son of a whore” and telling him to “go to hell,” and a U.S.-Philippines summit was canceled at the last minute. Subsequently, a Philippine senator who had criticized human rights problems associated with the anti-drug campaign Duterte conducted as mayor of Davao City was arrested. This led to growing criticism within the U.S. Congress of the human rights violations under the Duterte administration, and language denying U.S. entry to relevant Philippine officials was incorporated into the FY2020 Appropriations Act. The Duterte administration responded by denying visas to the U.S. senators who had criticized it and announcing the initiation of procedures to terminate the U.S.-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement, further destabilizing bilateral relations. Termination of the agreement was ultimately averted at the last minute, but U.S.-Philippines relations stagnated overall during the Duterte period. This was further reflected in the only partial implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement agreed under the Aquino administration, the absence of a U.S.-Philippines 2+2, and the holding of only one U.S.-Philippines summit, in 2017.

33) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “First Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (‘2+2’),” April 9, 2022 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100329868.pdf>.

that coaxed the Philippines, which had focused its messaging on the South China Sea, into shifting its stance. The statement confirmed that like-mindedness between Japan and the Philippines as security partners was advancing, despite their geographic differences.

Alongside these significant statements, Japan was steadily consolidating its position as an important partner for the Philippines in the security field. One pillar was the further expansion of capacity-building support for the PCG, specifically the Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard, Phase II (2016–2023). This project provided two multi-purpose vessels of approximately 97 meters in length, twice that of the patrol vessels supplied during the Aquino administration, through long-term, low-interest yen loans.³⁴ These are the largest patrol vessels in the PCG fleet, expected to deliver an annual increase of 1,200 hours of operations and 24 patrols. As of the time of writing, they have already participated in patrol activities and joint exercises with Japan, contributing directly to enhancing the Philippines’ capabilities as a maritime nation. In addition, during the Duterte period, Japan agreed to launch an ODA project to develop a PCG facility at Subic Bay (April 2022), which would support the construction of an operations headquarters building, maintenance and repair facilities, and roads at Subic Bay as an additional key base complementing the increasingly congested Manila Port.³⁵ Some of the patrol vessels Japan has provided are slated to be based at Subic Bay, and “synergies” across multiple projects emerged by design.

In parallel, cooperation between Japan’s Ministry of Defense and the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines expanded. During the Aquino administration, relations between the two countries’ defense authorities were limited to goodwill visits and exchanges, with the exception of a single bilateral maritime exercise in 2015. During the Duterte period, meanwhile, cooperation expanded to include joint exercises. After previously participating only as observers, the SDF formally took part in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise in 2017 and 2018, and the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade joined the Kamandag exercise

34) “Firipin engan keibitai kaijo anzen taio noryoku kyoka jigyo (fezu II)” [Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard (Phase II)], ODA Mieruka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/PH-P263/index.html>.

35) “Anken gaiyoshō: Firipin engan keibitai Subikku-wan chiiki kyoten seibi keikaku” [Project summary: Philippines Coast Guard Support Facility Development Project in Subic Bay Area], JICA, April 26, 2022.

in 2018 and 2019.³⁶ In 2021, the first bilateral exercise between the Japan Air SDF (ASDF) and the Philippine Air Force was held at Clark Air Base, involving ground-based disaster relief training using both countries' C-130 transport aircraft. Besides joint training and exercises, the transfer of defense equipment also expanded. From 2017, Japan transferred a total of five Maritime SDF (MSDF) TC-90 training aircraft (with training opportunities provided at MSDF bases), and donated spare parts and equipment for the Ground Self-Defense Force's (GSDF's) UH-1H. In 2020, Japan decided on the transfer of four air surveillance radars to the Philippine Air Force.³⁷ The radar transfer also drew attention as Japan's first overseas transfer of a finished defense product. In this way, well before the institutionalization of Japan-U.S.-Philippines relations discussed below, both *de facto* trilateral cooperation and like-mindedness had grown in scope.

It was against this backdrop of advancing Japan-Philippines relations and Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation that the Marcos administration (2022–present at the time of writing) took office. The Marcos administration moved to strengthen the alliance with the United States. It agreed to expand U.S. military access to bases in the Philippines, including those facing the East China Sea, and developed new U.S.-Philippines bilateral defense guidelines that confirmed that the South China Sea fell within the scope

36) At the 2017 Balikatan exercise, ASDF personnel participated in a multilateral coordination cell on disaster relief, and as part of capacity-building support, personnel of the Joint Staff Office's Chief Logistics Officer and GSDF personnel participated in medical-related programs. See the announcement made by the Joint Staff Office on social media on May 22, 2017 <https://www.facebook.com/jointstaffpa/> (accessed on January 31, 2026) and [Japan] Ministry of Defense and SDF, "Eisei Balikatan 2017" [Medical Program of Balikatan 2017], May 1, 2017. On Kamandag, see [Japan] Ministry of Defense and GSDF, "Heisei 30-nendo Bei-Hi kyodo kunren (Kamandag 18) e no sanko ni tsuite" [Participation in U.S.-Philippines Joint Exercise (Kamandag 18) for FY2018], September 10, 2018; [Japan] GSDF, "Reiwa gan-nendo Bei-Hi kyodo kunren (Kamandag 19)" [U.S.-Philippines Joint Exercise (Kamandag 19) for the First Year of Reiwa], November 8, 2019 <https://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/news/train/2019/20191108.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

37) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Kaijo Jieitai renshuiki TC-90 no Firipin e no iten ni tsuite" [Notice on the Transfer of MSDF Training Aircraft TC-90 to the Philippines], March 20, 2018; [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Rikujo Jieitai tayoto helikoputa UH-1H no buhin to no Firipin e no musho joto no kanryo ni tsuite" [Notice on the Completion of the Gratuitous Transfer of Parts and Equipment for GSDF UH-1H Multi-purpose Helicopters to the Philippines], September 30, 2019; [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Firipin e no keikai kansei reda no iten ni tsuite" [Notice on the Transfer of Air Surveillance Radars to the Philippines], November 2, 2023.

of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.³⁸ This shift was clearly informed by mounting concern over rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. President Ferdinand Marcos has publicly addressed the safety of the Filipino diaspora in Taiwan and concerns that the Philippines itself could be drawn into harm in the event of a U.S.-China conflict. The advent of the Marcos administration thus revitalized U.S.-Philippines relations, which had been stagnating, and elevated like-mindedness among Japan, the United States, and the Philippines on maritime security spanning the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Following the Marcos administration’s inauguration, in June 2023, the three countries held the first meeting of national security advisers in Tokyo, and in April 2024, the first Japan-U.S.-Philippines summit was convened in Washington, D.C.³⁹ The outcome documents of these meetings reaffirmed the like-mindedness that Japan had cultivated with the Philippines over many years, in that they explicitly indicated that Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation now extends beyond the South China Sea to encompass the entire Indo-Pacific, including the East China Sea. The documents also enumerated a wide range of areas for cooperation involving not only maritime law-enforcement agencies but also defense authorities. The next section analyzes the process by which Australia eventually emerged as a key partner for this Japan-U.S.-Philippines framework, in the broader context of expanding Japan-Australia cooperation centered on Southeast Asia and the Philippines.

2. Japan-Australia Relations and the Philippines

(1) The History of Japan-Australia Cooperation in Southeast Asia

Throughout the history of Japan-Australia cooperation from the end of the Second World War to the present, Southeast Asia has consistently been the connective region in which the two countries have come together as partners. Geographically separated by the “tyranny of distance” and burdened with

38) Ueno Hideshi, “Minamishinakai no ima: Chugoku no iatsuteki kodo no jotai-ka to Firipin no taio o chushin ni” [The South China Sea Today: With a Focus on the Normalization of China’s Coercive Behavior and the Philippines’ Response], *Kaiyo Anzen Hoshō Joho Tokuhō* [Ocean Newsletter Special Report], June 2, 2025.

39) [Japan] Cabinet Secretariat, “Japan-United States-Philippines Trilateral National Security Advisors’ Joint Press Release,” June 16, 2023; [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States,” April 11, 2024.

many different conditions, the issues that Japan and Australia first addressed together in postwar Southeast Asia were primarily economic.⁴⁰ This was prompted by the restoration of Japanese independence under the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the country's economic return to Southeast Asia. At the time, many Southeast Asian countries and territories were part of the sterling area, with their currencies pegged to the British pound, and there was serious policy debate within Australia regarding the geopolitical and economic implications of an expanded Japanese presence there.⁴¹ Subsequently, as Japan underwent rapid economic growth, particularly from 1955 to 1972, and its economic network began to expand across the Asia-Pacific, it worked together with Australia to advance regional economic dialogue frameworks, including the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC), which would eventually lead to the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), involving Southeast Asian countries as key partners.⁴²

In contrast, the absence of cooperation in the security field, including the military domain, is unsurprising in light of the historical background of Japan's security policy. Japan limited its defense cooperation partners to the United States, its ally, and exercised extreme restraint regarding external military activity. Moreover, Japan's stance of not pursuing a regional security role aligned with Australian perceptions of Japan at the time. Throughout the Cold War, Australia harbored continuing suspicion of Japan, not only as a former wartime adversary but also as a country whose material strength was expanding at a staggering pace. To address uncertainties over Japan's economic rise, Australia adopted what came to be known as the "cap-in-the-bottle" thesis, holding that the U.S. military presence served to keep Tokyo in check.⁴³ From this standpoint, the fact that Japan-Australia cooperation in Southeast Asia was confined to the economic domain and conducted

40) Satake Tomohiko, *Nichi-Go no anzen hoshō kyōryōku: "Kōjori no senshu" wo koete* [Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Beyond the "Tyranny of Distance"] (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2022).

41) Matsui Hirokazu, "Osutoraria to Nihon, Tonan Ajia keizai kankei no saikakuritsu: Menjizu seiken no seiritsu kara 1954 nen 8 gatsu no tai Nichi seisaku kakugi kettei made o chushin ni" [The Re-establishment of Australia's Economic Relations with Japan and Southeast Asia: From the Formation of the Menzies Government to the August 1954 Cabinet Decision on Policy toward Japan], paper presented at the Southeast Asia Section, Annual Convention of the Japan Association of International Relations, October 19, 2025.

42) Oba Mie, *Ajia Taiheiyō chūiki keisei eno dotei: Kyōkai kokka Nichi-Go no aidentiti mosaku to chūiki shugi* [The Invention of the Asia Pacific Region: A History of Regionalism and Search for Identity by Japan and Australia as Liminal Nations] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 2004).

43) Author's interviews with Australian government officials.

with virtually no military instruments was an acceptable arrangement for Australia. Surveying the public statements of many Japanese leaders of this period, it is evident that they were clearly aware of this regional view akin to the “cap-in-the-bottle” thesis.⁴⁴ In sum, the fact that Japan-Australia cooperation in Southeast Asia developed without like-mindedness as potential partners in the security domain was rooted in the two countries’ perceptions of each other.

In contrast to these constraints on Japan, throughout the Cold War, Australia consistently engaged in military activities in the region. Early in the Cold War, in the face of the threat of communist advance, this policy took the form of a Forward Defence strategy, with Australia fighting alongside the United States and the United Kingdom on the Malay Peninsula and in Indochina.⁴⁵ While the front line of this strategy was on land, the maritime domain, and in particular the South China Sea, which is the focus of this section’s analysis, was also a key area of Australian military engagement. During the early Cold War, naval exercises under the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), of which Australia was a member, were continuously conducted in the South China Sea, including in waters near the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, and Royal Australian Navy surface ships participated regularly.⁴⁶

Following the U.S.-China rapprochement and the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, which served as significant turning points, SEATO was dissolved in 1977, and Asia-Pacific security underwent transformation. Even so, Australia’s engagement in the South China Sea continued. During this period, Australia was shifting from a Forward Defence strategy of expeditionary operations alongside the United States and the United Kingdom to a strategy focused on the Defence of Australia itself, while it maintained peacetime regional operations including intelligence activities in the South China Sea. The Royal Australian Navy’s Oberon-class submarine force collected intelligence in the South China Sea, including imagery and signals intelligence relating

44) Ishihara Yusuke, “Futatsu no Nikuson shokku to ‘sengo bagen’: Haken henyoki Nihon no sekinin” [The Two Nixon Shocks and the “Postwar Bargains”: Japan’s Responsibility in the Period of Hegemonic Transformation], *Kokusai Seiji: Guroobaru 70-nendai* [International Politics: The Global 1970s] 218 (March 2026): 64-79.

45) Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2017).

46) Edward J. Marolda, “Cold War Allies: Commonwealth and United States Naval Cooperation in Asian Waters,” *Canadian Military History* 23, nos. 3 and 4 (Summer and Autumn 2014): 230-231; “HMAS Melbourne (II),” Sea Power Centre Australia <https://seapower.navy.gov.au/history/units/hmas-melbourne-ii> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

to Soviet naval activities that became more active from 1979 onward at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.⁴⁷ Royal Australian Navy surface ships also began conducting naval exercises in the South China Sea from 1981, known as Starfish (later renamed Bersama Lima), under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), the framework through which the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand cooperate in the defense of Malaysia and Singapore.⁴⁸ Royal Australian Navy surface ship operations in the South China Sea continued to be supported by the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay, and joint exercises with the U.S. Navy and port calls in waters off the base continued during this period as well. Based on these experiences, from Australia's perspective, the Cold War can be described as a period of prolonged Japanese absence as a player in Southeast Asian geopolitics.

After the Cold War ended, Southeast Asia's functions, as the region connecting Japan and Australia, gradually expanded from its traditional economic focus to encompass cooperation in the field of non-traditional security. The existing literature has already analyzed the roles of Japan and Australia in peacekeeping operations in Cambodia and in dialogue and cooperation through the ASEAN Regional Forum; here, in line with the theme of this chapter, the discussion focuses on the Philippines and the South China Sea.⁴⁹ Australia's engagement with the Philippines after the Cold War expanded rapidly through the former's participation in the so-called "war on terror." Prime Minister John Howard, who happened to be visiting Washington, D.C. when the September 11 attacks occurred in 2001, witnessed the events firsthand and was deeply shaken by the experience. He became the first leader to invoke the U.S.-Australia ANZUS Treaty, and subsequently committed Australian forces to the invasion of, and counterinsurgency operations in, Afghanistan, as well as the invasion and postwar reconstruction of Iraq, becoming known as a prime minister who devoted himself to enhancing alliance cooperation.⁵⁰ That said, it would be overly simplistic to assess that Australia fought the war on terror solely out of

47) Geoffrey Cole, "The O-Boat Mystery Boats," Naval Officers Association of Australia website, August 11, 2009.

48) Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever," 1st Berlin Conference on Asian Security, September 14-15, 2006 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/projekt_papiere/Thayer_ks.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

49) Ishihara Yusuke, "Chapter 6: Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region," in *Beyond the Hub and Spokes: Australia-Japan Security Cooperation*, eds. William Tow and Yoshizaki Tomonori (Tokyo: NIDS, 2014), 93-122.

50) John Howard, *Lazarus Rising: A Personal and Political Autobiography* (Sydney: Harper, 2010).

alliance considerations. Australia tackled the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia as a matter of direct national concern, especially after the 2002 Bali bombings, in which many Indonesians and even more Australians lost their lives.⁵¹ In this context, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) began lending military support to Philippine military counterterrorism operations through training and intelligence sharing, with a view to preventing the expansion of terrorist networks across Southeast Asia.⁵²

Australia’s support to the Philippines later extended into the law-enforcement domain, and there were instances in which Japan and Australia engaged in similar activities. In particular, Australia also supported Philippine maritime law-enforcement capabilities with the aim of preventing insurgents within the Philippines from working with foreign terrorist networks and using maritime transport routes to move people, supplies, and information. In December 2001, the two countries agreed on the provision of small patrol boats to the Philippine Coast Guard. From 2001 onward, Australia provided the Philippines with San Juan-class patrol vessels (56-meter class) and Ilocos Norte-class patrol boats (30-meter class), and subsequent training was conducted by Australian government personnel.⁵³ Before the South China Sea issue re-emerged, Australia was the only country other than Japan and the United States providing bilateral support for the PCG and Philippine maritime law-enforcement capabilities. At this stage, the foundation for what would later become the formalized Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines framework was arguably starting to take concrete shape. Indeed, the various documents on Japan-Australia and Japan-U.S.-Australia relations, which were institutionalized rapidly during this period, indicate that cooperation in Southeast Asia, centered on non-traditional security, was widely

51) [Australia] Department of Defence, “Bali Bombings 20th Anniversary: Resilience Meets Tragedy,” October 12, 2022 <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2022-10-12/bali-bombings-20th-anniversary-resilience-meets-tragedy> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

52) “Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of Australia on Co-Operation to Combat International Terrorism,” Supreme Court E-Library, March 4, 2003 <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/35/9941>; “Philippines Counter-Terrorism Assistance Initiative,” Transcripts from the Prime Ministers of Australia, July 14, 2003 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-20795> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

53) As far as can be confirmed, four vessels of each type appear to have been provided by 2006. See Australian Ship Builders Association, “Submission for the Senate Inquiry into the Scope and Opportunities for Naval Shipbuilding in Australia,” May 29, 2006 https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/fadt_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004_07/shipping/submissions/sub36_pdf.ashx (accessed on January 31, 2026).

considered an important agenda item among officials in both Australia and Japan. The first Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue at the foreign-ministerial level, held in March 2006, issued a joint statement that referred to ASEAN as an important partner for the three countries and called for the promotion of cooperation in non-traditional security. Such language signaled rising like-mindedness in Japan-Australia and Japan-U.S.-Australia relations.⁵⁴

The like-mindedness between Japan and Australia, which developed after the Cold War and was centered on non-traditional security in the Philippines, remained limited to the non-military domain for some time. The reason can no longer be attributed to the Cold War-era “cap-in-the-bottle” thesis. According to Australia’s 2000 Defence White Paper, “Japan-U.S. relations” provided a “welcome framework” for Japan to assume a security role, and the document included positive language regarding cooperation with Japan, particularly in the non-traditional security field.⁵⁵ According to interviews conducted by the author, after the Cold War ended and as the postwar generation took on core positions in the Australian government, Australia adopted policies that more positively welcomed Japan’s role in international security.⁵⁶ While the Australian side harbored some uncertainties regarding the security strategy Japan would employ if the alliance were to dissolve, it also deemed that, precisely to avoid such a scenario, having Japan expand its security role and thereby strengthen the alliance would contribute to regional stability. A look at Australian circumstances at the time reveals that relations with China were beginning to cast a shadow over Australia’s regional policy, including its policy toward Japan. From 2009 onward, in light of incidents such as the harassment of the U.S. Navy’s USNS *Impeccable* by Chinese fishing vessels, pressure by Chinese maritime law-enforcement agencies on Southeast Asian fishing vessels, and Chinese resource extraction activities in disputed areas, Australia emphasized the importance of general principles such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea, while carefully avoiding direct criticism of China. The Gillard Labor government (2010–2013) institutionalized a Strategic Partnership with China, while publicly stating the position that Australia did not need to “choose between its longstanding Alliance with the United

54) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Australia-Japan-United States Joint Statement (Trilateral Strategic Dialogue),” March 18, 2006.

55) [Australia] 2000 *Defence White Paper* <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/wpaper2000.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

56) Author’s interviews with Australian government officials.

States and its expanding relationship with China.”⁵⁷ At this time, Australia was beginning to confront the fact that the changes in Indo-Pacific security, including the destabilization of the South China Sea, were being driven by structural factors, namely the end of overwhelming U.S. preeminence and the expansion of Chinese power, but it was still at the stage of debating how to address these issues.

For Australia’s still-undefined posture toward China in this transitional period, Japan was a delicate issue. Bob Carr, who was Foreign Minister toward the end of the Gillard government, maintained a cautious stance regarding strengthening cooperation with Japan, given Japan’s ongoing frictions with China over maritime issues. Even Kevin Rudd, who served as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and was known for a more realist perspective on China-related security issues than Carr, suggested in his later memoir that he was wary of having Australia drawn into the “toxic” relationship between Japan and China.⁵⁸ These considerations did not bring about an overall stagnation in Japan-Australia relations, but they undoubtedly constrained efforts to give concrete form to bilateral cooperation on sensitive China-related issues, including maritime security. Consequently, like-mindedness between the Japanese and Australian defense authorities regarding the South China Sea and policy toward the Philippines did not advance much in this period.

(2) Developments in Japan-Australia Defense Cooperation Concerning the South China Sea and the Philippines

In 2012, however, the second Abe administration came to power in Japan, and in 2013, there was a change of government in Australia from Labor to the Coalition. Like-mindedness between Japan and Australia regarding the South China Sea and the Philippines began to expand gradually, including in the military domain. The Australian Coalition government (2013–2022) reinjected momentum into the foreign-minister-level Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, which had stagnated under the previous Labor government. The fifth joint statement issued in 2013 included, for

57) [Australia] *2013 Defence White Paper* https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/WP_2013_web.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

58) In his memoir, Rudd recounts that he decided not to participate in the Japan-U.S.-Australia-India framework then being proposed because of the need to insulate Australia’s policy toward China from the “toxicity” of Japan-China relations. Kevin Rudd, *The PM Years*, Kindle ed. (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2018), 1116–1117.

the first time (in the framework), language opposing “coercive or unilateral actions that could change the status quo in the East China Sea.” Similarly, it emphasized, for the first time, the importance of “peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded trade and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.”⁵⁹ This new posture toward Japan, adopted by the Coalition government, came to be gradually shared across Australian society as China-Australia relations faced various obstacles and rising tensions, leading to growing instability. As is well known, these problem areas were diverse, including Australia’s heightened concern regarding the security implications of the Belt and Road Initiative, the spread of suspicion and criticism within Australia regarding alleged Chinese influence operations in Australia’s democratic society, and friction between Australia and China over the 2020 call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. The changes in the South China Sea situation analyzed in this section further accelerated changes in Australia’s policies toward China and Japan.⁶⁰

Reports as early as 2012 indicated that China was undertaking large-scale infrastructure expansion on Woody Island that could support military use. When a runway exceeding 2,000 meters and capable of supporting bomber operations was actually constructed in 2014, the Australian government hardened its critical stance over the reclamation activities.⁶¹ Subsequently, between 2015 and 2016, the further construction of a 3,000-meter-class runway on Fiery Cross Reef and its use for the deployment of aircraft including H-6K bombers confirmed that Chinese reclamation and infrastructure construction in the South China Sea had indeed come to serve as a foundation for military activities. The construction of runways and the deployment of bombers in the South China Sea theoretically brought the Australian mainland and its surroundings within the range of air-launched cruise missiles. From 2014 onward, Australian researchers, think tanks, and media produced analyses that sounded the alarm over

59) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Fifth Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement,” October 4, 2013.

60) Euan Graham, *Australia’s Security in China’s Shadow* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

61) Brendon Taylor, “Australia and Asia’s Maritime Disputes: Continuity amidst Chaos,” Special Forum, Asan Forum, February 22, 2016 <https://theasanforum.org/australia-and-asias-maritime-disputes-continuity-amidst-chaos/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

the situation.⁶² According to some insiders’ accounts, these private think-tank efforts captured, with reasonable accuracy, the strategic perceptions that ultimately informed the development of Australia’s National Defence Strategy, published in 2024.⁶³ That is to say, Australia’s criticism of the reclamation, infrastructure development, and militarization of features in the South China Sea was grounded not only in principles of international law and the stability of trade routes but also more direct concerns about the country’s own national security. In this context, Australia decided in 2014 to participate for the first time in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise, expanding its military engagement with the Philippines and the South China Sea.⁶⁴

As concerns regarding Chinese activities in the South China Sea intensified, Australia’s expectations of Japan gradually shifted. This transition is evident from a comparison of the 2013 Defence White Paper and the 2016 Defence White Paper, issued by the Labor and Coalition governments respectively. The 2013 White Paper, crafted by the Labor government, emphasized Japan as one of the regional powers whose influence “is becoming more important,” but the concrete examples it cited of “practical cooperation” were limited to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and to peacekeeping operations, that is, to non-traditional security. By contrast, the 2016 White Paper set out a more expanded policy of cooperation with Japan, “a major power in North Asia,” not only on non-

62) “Construction of an Airfield on the Disputed Spratly Islands Puts Australia in Reach of China’s Strategic Bombers,” news.com.au, November 24, 2014 <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/inventions/construction-of-an-airfield-on-the-disputed-spratly-islands-puts-australia-in-reach-of-chinas-strategic-bombers-reports/news-story/a5d4a77491052213a69d663bca755d15> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Malcolm Davis, “China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea and Australian Defence Policy,” The Strategist, November 11, 2015 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-militarisation-of-the-south-china-sea-and-australian-defence-policy/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

63) Based on various statements made by Professor Peter Dean, who was involved in the Defence Strategic Review that informed the National Defence Strategy 2024. See “Inside the Defence Strategic Review: A Conversation with Secretariat Co-lead, Professor Peter Dean,” The National Security Podcast, May 23, 2023; “Defence Strategic Review & Implications for the Maritime Domain; Delhi’s Role in the Indo-Pacific,” ASPI Podcast: Policy, Guns & Money, June 7, 2023; “US and Australian Defence, Policy, and Politics with Professor Peter J Dean,” Defence Connect Podcast, August 14, 2023; “Australia’s Evolving Defense Strategy,” Asia Chessboard, June 13, 2023.

64) “ADF Participate in Philippines Exercise,” *Australian Defence Magazine*, May 1, 2014.

traditional security but also on “maritime security.”⁶⁵ The white paper noted that the important trade routes between Australia and its major trading partners in North Asia, including Japan, accounted for “more than half” of Australia’s exports, and expressed expectations for cooperation with Japan in ensuring “secure and free-flowing” trade routes. Read together with the associated maps, the white paper leaves no doubt that the critical parts of these trade routes are through the South China Sea and the waters around the Philippines.

In this period, as Australia’s concerns about the South China Sea deepened, Japan was likewise strengthening its engagement on maritime issues in Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, both in its discourse and its actions. A representative and widely known example is the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), an idea originally proposed by Prime Minister Abe in his keynote speech at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 2016.⁶⁶ FOIP was a vision of broad prosperity and peace connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, emphasizing both infrastructure that enhances connectivity and maritime security. Strictly speaking, however, even before setting out the FOIP concept itself, the Abe administration had consistently set out a policy of advancing the rule of law and peaceful resolution of disputes in maritime domains, including the South China Sea, and pursuing security cooperation with various countries, through the five principles of Japan’s ASEAN diplomacy (2013) and the Shangri-La Dialogue keynote speech (2014) referred to above.⁶⁷ In line with this overall direction, in 2016, the same year FOIP was articulated, the Ministry of Defense and the SDF announced the Vientiane Vision, which set out Japan’s approach to defense cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and in 2019, issued an updated version, Vientiane Vision 2.0, emphasizing maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia, further promotion of the rule of law, and the advancement of various joint exercises

65) [Australia] *2016 Defence White Paper* <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

66) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI),” August 27, 2016.

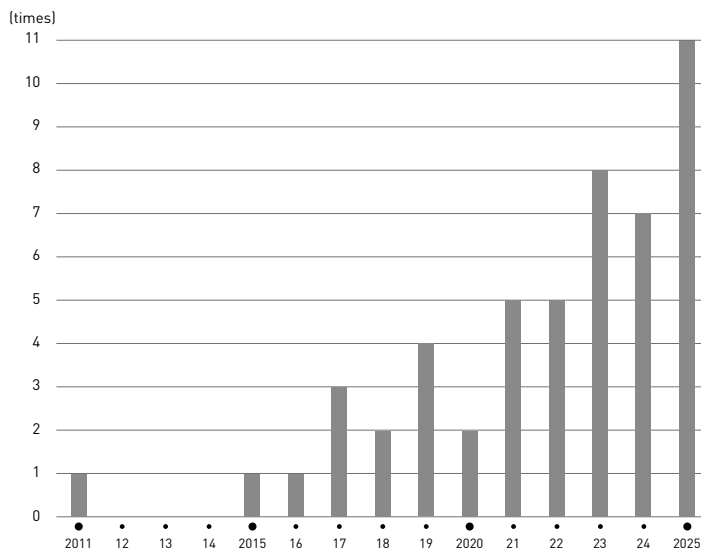
67) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy,” January 18, 2013; [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abe, “Peace and Prosperity in Asia Forevermore.”

and capacity-building support.⁶⁸

This rhetoric became concrete actions implemented by the Ministry of Defense and the SDF. 2015 was a particularly important turning point, with the SDF participating as observers in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise, Japanese and Philippine naval vessels conducting communications and tactical maneuvering training in waters off Manila in May, and the two countries’ maritime patrol aircraft conducting joint training in search and rescue and disaster relief in waters off Palawan Island, which faces the South China Sea, in June. These training activities were the first instances of Japan-Philippines defense cooperation. As Figure 1 shows, the SDF subsequently expanded its engagement with the Philippines through formal participation in the U.S.-Philippines Kamandag exercise and through maritime cooperative activities of various configurations including the four Squad countries. Not only did the frequency of training and visits increase, but their content also diversified, encompassing amphibious landing training, defense against weapons of mass destruction, and tactical maneuvering aimed at upholding freedom of navigation.

68) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “Vientiane Vision: Japan’s Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN,” https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/vientianevision/index.html (accessed on January 31, 2026); [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “Reference 57: Vientiane Vision 2.0,” *Defense of Japan 2023* (online) https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023_EN_Reference.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

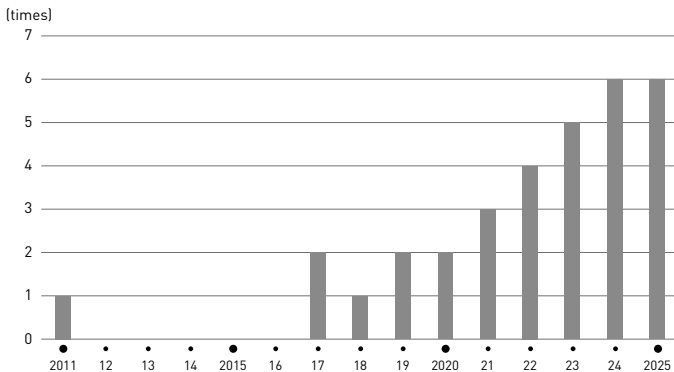
Figure 1. The SDF's Participation in Exercises in and around the Philippines⁶⁹



69) The exercises included in this graph (including observer participation) are as follows. 2011: Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Exercise (SCS); 2015: Japan-Philippines bilateral exercise; 2016: Balikatan; 2017: Balikatan, Kamandag 1, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Canada Joint Cruise Training (June 2017); 2018: Kamandag 2, Balikatan 2018; 2019: Japan-U.S.-France-Australia multilateral exercise, Sama Sama 2019, Balikatan, Kamandag 2019; 2020: Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Exercise, Japan-U.S.-Australia Joint Exercise; 2021: Japan-U.S. Exercise, Kamandag 6, LSCE21 (Japan-U.S.-Australia), Japan-U.S.-U.K.-Netherlands-Canada-New Zealand Joint Exercise, Malabar 2021 Phase 1; 2022: Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Maritime Exercise, Sama Sama-Lumbas 2022, Balikatan 2022, Japan-U.S.-Canada (Noble Raven), Japan-U.S.-Australia-Canada Joint Exercise (Noble Smith); 2023: U.S.-Australia-Japan-Philippines Joint Exercise, Kamandag 7, Balikatan, Japan-U.S.-Canada (Noble Raven), Japan-U.S.-France (Noble Buffalo), Sama Sama 2023, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Canada-New Zealand (Noble Caribou) October 2023, Pacific Airlift Rally, Japan-U.S.-Canada-France (Noble Typhoon), U.S.-Philippines Salaknib; 2024: Japan-U.S.-Australia Joint Exercise, Sama Sama 2024, Balikatan 2024, Kamandag 24, Valiant Shield 2024, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines-New Zealand MCA, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Joint Exercise (April 2024); 2025: U.S.-Japan-Philippines MCA, Japan-Philippines MCA, U.S.-Australia-Philippines-Japan-Canada-France-New Zealand Exercise, Balikatan 2025, Kamandag 9, Sama Sama 2025, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Joint Exercise, Japan-U.S.-France (Pacific Steller), Japan-Philippines (Doushin Bayanihan), Australia-Philippines Exercise Alon, U.S.-Philippines (Salaknib). The list of these exercises was compiled by the author to the extent ascertainable based on materials posted on the websites of the Ministry of Defense and the SDF.

The SDF’s participation in various exercises represented the deepening of like-mindedness between Japan and Australia in the Philippines. As shown in the graph below, the ADF, which was likewise increasing its training in and around the Philippines during the same period, was having more opportunities to participate in the same exercises as the SDF. Against this backdrop, Japan’s perceptions of Australia also shifted. Japan’s official explanation, which had initially emphasized “non-traditional security” as the central focus, was supplanted from 2021 onward by language framing Australia as a partner in a wider range of fields. This is consistent with the new Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation issued in 2022, which, unlike the earlier joint declaration that emphasized cooperation in non-traditional security, presented a broader vision of cooperation that included a commitment to consult in the event of “contingencies.”

Figure 2. Joint Exercises in and around the Philippines Involving Both the SDF and the ADF⁷⁰



This expansion of joint exercises suggests that the Philippines is becoming an increasingly important point of convergence between Japan and Australia, two countries pursuing strategies with very different geographic focuses. Australia’s 2024 National Defence Strategy presented a “Strategy of Denial” against the approach of hostile forces to the Australian continent

70) Among the exercises and training Japan participated in (shown in the previous graph), these are ones in which the ADF also participated.

and threats to its peace and prosperity.⁷¹ To achieve this objective, it set out a policy of acquiring the capability to impose high costs on adversaries as far away as possible in Australia's "immediate region," that is, the area extending from the eastern Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia to the South Pacific, including the Philippines.⁷² Thus, one of Australia's principal motivations in relation to the Philippines is preventing the potential southern advance of hostile forces toward Australia. Domestically, given the recent strengthening of Australia-Philippines relations and the existence of a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement between the two countries, the geographical location of the Philippines and the cooperation with Manila are of clear importance for Canberra's strategy of denial. Thus, Australia's engagement with the Philippines and Japan-Australia cooperation should be understood in the context of Australia's own defense concerns rooted in its position further to the south.

Japan's strategy is likewise centered on its own defense. The National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program, formulated in 2022, set out a policy of fundamentally strengthening defense capabilities and the country's overall defense posture within five years, on the principle that Japan itself bears "primary responsibility" to "disrupt and defeat" any invasion.⁷³ In this context, the importance of the sea lanes on which Japan depends was emphasized, and one of the regions specifically referenced was the South China Sea. In recent times, Japan's perception of the Philippines has emphasized the latter's location facing not only the South China Sea but also the Luzon Strait, by the East China Sea, which hints at the Philippines' growing geographic importance for Japan's own defense.⁷⁴ As the above discussion suggests, the South China Sea and the Philippines are the areas where Japan and Australia, each with its own geographic perspective and distinct strategy, effectively meet, one from the north and the other from the south. At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue,

71) Inoue Rintaro, "Osutoraria kokubo senryaku no koso to jittai: Nichi-Go boei kyoryoku no shinka ni mukete" [The vision and reality of Australia's National Defense Strategy: Toward Deepening Japan-Australia Defense Cooperation], *Chikei-gaku Kenkyu Repoto* [Goeconomics Research Report], no. 4 (June 2025).

72) [Australia] Department of Defence, *National Defence Strategy 2024* <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

73) These are also called the "three strategic documents" <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou.html>.

74) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2025*, was the first edition to expressly emphasize this point.

Defense Minister Nakatani Gen emphasized the importance of Japan and other countries striving “to generate synergy through enhanced cooperation and collaboration.” Japan-Australia cooperation involving the Philippines can be cited as an example of this.⁷⁵

In June 2023, the first-ever Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines defense ministers’ meeting was held, and the four countries subsequently conducted maritime cooperative activities, further formalizing the Squad. The proximate trigger was the inauguration of the Marcos administration in 2022, which placed the previously unstable U.S.-Philippines relations back on a positive trajectory. This was, however, not a sudden development. The trend toward strengthened relations and the underlying rationale had been gradually built up before 2022 as like-mindedness involving Japan, Australia, and the Philippines materialized with discernible substance. This is consistent with the rapid pace at which cooperation has been given concrete form since the framework’s formalization. As noted above, Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines are working to construct an information-sharing “hub,” and to that end, the four countries are discussing the development of information-protection agreements. In this context, Japan has begun the transfer of air surveillance radars to the Philippines and carrying out the relevant work, while Australia has implemented infrastructure investment in Philippine military-related facilities and concluded an Australia-Philippines cooperation agreement that anticipates the expansion of ADF activities in the Philippines.⁷⁶

3. Squad Plus?

(1) Cooperation with France and the ROK

As this chapter has shown, like-mindedness among Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines has begun to materialize and what

75) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “DM Nakatani’s Speech at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue (2025) 2nd Plenary Session: Ensuring Stability in a Competitive World 31st May 2025 <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2025/05/146ea433618bcfe264fda5b7c657207c37ac7008.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).”

76) [Australia] Department of Defence, “Joint Press Conference with Gilberto Teodoro Jr, Secretary of National Defense, Philippines,” Transcripts, Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, August 22, 2025 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2025-08-22/joint-press-conference-gilberto-teodoro-jr-secretary-national-defense-philippines> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

this entails, in terms of actual practice, has become clearer in recent years. These trends have encouraged the four countries to recognize one another as partners for cooperation in the context of regional security spanning the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and driven the Squad's development. Such networks of like-mindedness are by no means confined to the formal Squad framework and have a broader reach. This is embodied by the coordinated efforts by Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines to enhance various forms of cooperation with countries beyond the Squad. Such an expansion of like-mindedness can be characterized as taking two principal directions.

First, overlapping areas of cooperation and convergence in policy directions can be observed between other partners that have the will and capability to contribute to Philippine security and the four Squad countries, which amount to *de facto* cooperation. In other words, countries that do not formally participate in the Squad can nevertheless be regarded as like-minded partners associated, in a broad sense, with cooperation under the Squad framework. France is a leading example. France's policies and track record stand out particularly with respect to support for Philippine maritime law-enforcement capabilities. When President François Hollande visited the Philippines in 2015 as the first sitting French president to do so, the two countries issued a joint declaration on an Enhanced Partnership, which emphasized freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the importance of advancing maritime security.⁷⁷ Consistent with this, from 2018 onward, four FPB72-MarkII patrol boats (24-meter class) were delivered through French loans, and the Gabriela Silang offshore patrol vessel (84-meter class) was delivered in 2020, making France, along with Japan, another key provider of patrol vessels currently operated by the

77) [Philippines] Office of the President, "Philippines, France Agree to Enhance Bilateral Ties," February 27, 2015 https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/philippines-france-agree-to-enhance-bilateral-ties/ (accessed on January 31, 2026); for the text of the declaration, see [Philippines] Department of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Declaration on the Enhanced Partnership between the Republic of the Philippines and the French Republic" <https://dfa.gov.ph/index.php/newsroom/dfa-releases/5507-joint-declaration-on-the-enhanced-partnership-between-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-french-republic> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

PCG.⁷⁸ In April 2025, France’s OCEA concluded a contract to build forty new patrol boats (35-meter class), adding to the country’s track record as a partner in upgrading the PCG’s capabilities.⁷⁹ In February 2025, the Charles de Gaulle Carrier Strike Group made a port call in the Philippines and conducted joint exercises in the South China Sea with the Philippine Navy as part of maritime cooperative activities.⁸⁰ Given these overlapping areas of cooperation and activity, France can be characterized as a like-minded country outside the Squad framework. France has continued to issue various joint documents that refer to cooperation with Japan and the United States across the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, after a period of stagnation in its cooperation with Australia following the September 2021 launch of AUKUS (when the Morrison government cancelled its conventional submarine construction program with France), France has restabilized cooperation with the current Albanese government, increasingly emphasizing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.⁸¹ As France’s activities in the Philippines demonstrate, its statements and policy directions for cooperation with Squad countries reflect a concrete like-mindedness backed by action, not merely rhetoric.

The ROK is another country that has been increasing its concrete cooperation in similar fields. In some areas, it is advancing even greater direct cooperation with Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines than France. Japan’s expectations regarding the ROK originally centered on broad cooperation that extended beyond the Korean Peninsula to address regional and global challenges. For example, the 2013 edition of the Diplomatic Bluebook, the first issued after the second Abe administration’s inauguration, characterized Japan and the ROK as “most important

78) “Philippine Coast Guard Commissions 2 Fast Patrol Boats from France,” *Asia Pacific Defense Journal*, January 18, 2019 <https://www.asiapacificdefensejournal.com/2019/01/philippine-coastguard-commissions-2.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Xavier Vavasseur, “Philippine Coast Guard OPV BRP Gabriela Silang Arrived in Manila,” *Naval News*, August 4, 2020 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/04/philippine-coast-guard-opv-brp-gabriela-silang-arrived-in-manila/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

79) “40 x 35 m Fast Patrol Boats OCEA FPB 110 MKII for the Philippine Coast Guard,” *News, OCEA*, May 22, 2025 <https://www.ocea-ssm.com/40-x-35-m-fast-patrol-boats-ocea-fpb-110-mkii-for-the-philippine-coast-guard/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

80) Geoffrey Maitem, “French Aircraft Carrier in Historic First Visit to the Philippines,” *Naval News*, February 24, 2025 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/02/french-aircraft-carrier-in-historic-first-visit-to-the-philippines/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

81) Matthew Doran, “Australian Government Agrees to Pay \$835 Million to French Submarine Contractor Naval Group over Cancelled Contract,” *ABC News*, June 11, 2022 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-11/albanese-submarine-deal-with-france/101145042> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

neighboring countries, which share fundamental values and interests, such as democracy and market economy, and will work together on various regional and global challenges including North Korea, peacebuilding, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, climate change, and poverty.”⁸² As has been well documented, when Japan-ROK relations subsequently destabilized over questions such as the issue of civilian Korean workers under Japanese colonial rule and tensions between defense authorities, such a characterization was scaled back. Although both countries have since worked on these pending bilateral issues, the language regarding Japan-ROK relations from that earlier period has not been restored. Nevertheless, the most recent Diplomatic Bluebook 2025 maintains the language that “the ROK is an important neighboring country with which Japan should cooperate as partners in dealing with various issues of the international community” and that “in light of the current strategic environment, the importance of Japan-ROK relations remains unchanged.”⁸³

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration, inaugurated in 2022, pursued a foreign policy that aligned more closely with Japan’s broad expectations than previous administrations. As is well known, this resulted in the steady expansion of Japan-U.S.-ROK relations. The pillars of these strengthened relations, as articulated in the Camp David agreement documents of 2023, were a commitment to consult on challenges and provocations in the region, the real-time sharing of information on North Korean missiles, and the regular conduct of the multi-domain exercise Freedom Edge.⁸⁴ The Japan-U.S.-ROK joint statement issued at Camp David emphasized the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait in addition to challenges on the Korean Peninsula, referred to “dangerous” Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, and affirmed that the 2016 arbitral award should serve as the “legal basis” for

82) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Gaiko Seisho 2013* [Diplomatic Bluebook 2013] https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2013/html/chapter2/chapter2_01_01.html#h0201010201 (accessed on January 31, 2026).

83) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2025* <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2025/pdf/pdfs/2-2.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

84) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Commitment to Consult Among Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States.” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100541780.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026). As of the time of writing, basic information on the most recent Freedom Edge 3 can be found at [Japan] Joint Staff Office, “(Announcement) Japan-ROK-U.S. Exercise Freedom Edge 25,” September 5, 2025.

negotiations between the parties concerned.⁸⁵

The ROK’s stance of agreeing to language critical of China in relation to the South China Sea has been backed by concrete action and reflects the ROK’s evolving like-mindedness with the Squad countries. Its Navy has, since the 1990s, transferred used vessels to the Philippine Navy and, to date, has built and delivered ten new ships.⁸⁶ In 2024, when President Marcos and President Yoon issued a joint declaration on a Strategic Partnership, they agreed to strengthen cooperation in maritime law enforcement as one of its pillars. The two countries’ coast guards subsequently signed a memorandum of understanding on maritime cooperation, and the ROK is reportedly seeking opportunities to participate in the PCG’s new vessel acquisition program. The ROK’s proactiveness has also contributed to elevating the like-mindedness between itself and the Squad countries. The land exercise Kamandag 9, conducted in the Philippines from May to June 2025, included the participation of Japan, the United States, the ROK, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom, with activities including coastal maneuvering and amphibious operations.⁸⁷ While Australian operational units did not participate, many of the U.S. Marines who took part in the exercise were deployed from the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin hosted by Australia. Moreover, ADF staff participated in discussions held as part of the program, thereby making substantive contributions to the realization of the exercise.⁸⁸ Given the overlap in cooperation areas and a track record of actual coordination, it is unsurprising that a five-country defense ministers’ meeting of Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines plus the ROK was held in

85) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” August 18, 2023 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100541826.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

86) Chris Panella, “A Top South Korean Shipbuilder Is Arming the Philippines with a New Fleet of Warships Built for Tougher Pacific Fights,” *Business Insider*, December 12, 2025 <https://www.businessinsider.com/top-south-korean-shipbuilder-arming-philippines-with-new-frigates-2025-12> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

87) “Multinational Forces Set to Launch Kamandag 9 in the Philippines,” *News, U.S. INDOPACOM*, May 5, 2025 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4175053/multinational-forces-set-to-launch-kamandag-9-in-the-philippines/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

88) “U.S., Philippines, Japan and the Republic of Korea Conclude Kamandag 9,” *News, U.S. INDOPACOM*, June 6, 2025 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4209035/us-philippines-japan-and-the-republic-of-korea-conclude-kamandag-9/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

November 2024.⁸⁹ It will be worth watching whether the Lee Jae-myung administration that took office in June 2025 continues such initiatives. In this regard, a telling piece of empirical evidence is the joint statement issued by the Japan-U.S.-ROK foreign ministers' meeting in September 2025, which emphasized peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and the importance of international law in the South China Sea.⁹⁰

(2) Outreach to Malaysia and Indonesia

The networks of like-mindedness extending beyond the Squad are not limited to states such as France and the ROK, which seek to expand their activities in and around the Philippines. As a second direction in the expansion of like-mindedness, an emerging de facto network of cooperation between the Squad and Southeast Asian countries with which the Philippines is itself strengthening relations can be observed. Illustrative examples are Malaysia and Indonesia. They have long engaged in cooperation on counterterrorism and combating transnational crime with the Philippines in the Celebes Sea, where they share maritime borders. Such cooperation was further strengthened after the 2017 terrorist incident in Marawi in the Philippines and formalized in 2018 as a Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement. Furthermore, based on the agreement reached at the 2022 trilateral defense ministers' meeting, the three countries are promoting cooperation among their maritime law-enforcement agencies and enhancing joint training and information-sharing.⁹¹ In practice, the navies and maritime law-enforcement agencies of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia coordinate joint training and patrol activities for law enforcement and the stable use of the tri-border area.

As noted above, Japan, Australia, and the United States have been extending capacity-building support for the maritime law-enforcement agencies of Malaysia and Indonesia, with which the Philippines is strengthening cooperation. In this sense, they are like-minded countries that

89) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-Republic of Korea-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting," November 21, 2024 <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/images/5038b243cbc015b93db26d353181f80de8a27667.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

90) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement from the Trilateral Meeting of the United States of America, Japan, and the Republic of Korea in New York City," September 22, 2025 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100908422.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

91) Raymund Jose G. Quilop, "Trilateral Co-operation by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines: Temper Expectations," *Global Asia* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 90-94.

share a degree of common concern. (Indeed, Japan refers to countries that receive its support for security capacity-building as “like-minded countries,” and Malaysia and Indonesia are included on that list).⁹² Japan has long worked to enhance Indonesia’s maritime law-enforcement capabilities, beginning with grant aid in 2005 under the Project for Construction of Patrol Vessels for the Prevention of Piracy, Maritime Terrorism and Proliferation of Weapons, which included the provision of three patrol vessels in response to counterterrorism and counter-piracy concerns.⁹³ More recently, in 2023, Japan agreed to provide two fishery monitoring patrol vessels as grant aid to the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency, and in March 2024, it agreed to extend low-interest yen loans for the provision of an 85-meter-class large patrol vessel.⁹⁴ In January 2025, Japan agreed to provide two high-speed patrol boats to the Indonesian Navy under the Official Security Assistance (OSA) scheme.⁹⁵ Indonesia has multiple government agencies responsible for maritime law enforcement, and Japan has provided cross-cutting support to them, including the provision of surveillance cameras and gate management equipment from the 2000s onward, as well as capacity-building support across multiple domains, including arrest techniques, search and rescue, and maritime domain awareness, through joint training and seminars conducted by the Japan Coast Guard.

Alongside Japan’s efforts, the United States and Australia have likewise worked to strengthen Indonesia’s maritime law-enforcement capabilities. Since 2008, the United States has provided numerous high-speed patrol vessels and conducted training between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency. It has continued such capacity-building support, including agreeing in 2021 to provide financial support

92) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy Bureau, Security Cooperation Division, “Official Security Assistance” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100826252.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

93) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Grant Aid to Indonesia for the Project for Construction of Patrol Vessels for the Prevention of Piracy, Maritime Terrorism and Proliferation of Weapons,” June 16, 2006 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2006/6/0616-3.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

94) “Signing of Grant Agreement with Indonesia: Contributing to the Improvement of Maritime Safety and Security in the Territorial Waters of Indonesia through the Deployment of a Patrol Vessel,” News Release, JICA, March 25, 2024 https://www.jica.go.jp/english/information/press/2023/20240325_10.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

95) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Signing and Exchange of Notes for Official Security Assistance (OSA) FY2024 project to the Republic of Indonesia,” January 11, 2025 https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/pageite_000001_00753.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

for the establishment of a maritime training center on Batam Island.⁹⁶ The center opened in January 2024 and serves as a hub for various forms of training to equip personnel from the relevant Indonesian agencies with maritime law-enforcement capabilities. Australia shares a maritime border with Indonesia and there is a history of friction between the two countries over the handling of asylum seekers traveling by sea between them and through nearby waters. In recent years, however, the two countries have not allowed such individual issues to deteriorate their bilateral political relationship. In 2017, they issued a Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, and in the following year, they developed a corresponding action plan. Since then, they have conducted joint patrols in waters around the maritime border in the Timor Sea and in the Arafura Sea, built mutual trust, and enhanced Indonesia's capabilities through various seminars, tabletop exercises, and field exercises.⁹⁷

Similarly, Japan, the United States, and Australia have been moving in step on strengthening the maritime law-enforcement capabilities of Malaysia, with which the Philippines is also seeking closer cooperation. Even before Malaysia established the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) in 2005, Japan had been conducting joint training and joint patrol vessel and aircraft activities in waters around Malaysia. Following MMEA's establishment, Japan provided grant aid for the Project for Improvement of Equipment for Maritime Security Enhancement, which included the establishment of camera and radio detection control centers necessary for a maritime surveillance system. Subsequent grant aid has supported the construction of various facilities and the provision of equipment, as well as human resource development through the dispatch of Japanese practitioners.⁹⁸ In 2016, Japan agreed to donate two patrol vessels and to

96) "US, Indonesia Building Maritime Training Base on Batan," Radio Free Asia, June 28, 2021 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/base-06282021182525.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

97) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation," February 26, 2017 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-indonesia-joint-declaration-maritime-cooperation.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

98) "Kaijo keibi kyoka kizai seibi keikaku (1/2-ki)" [The Project for Improvement of Equipment for Maritime Security Enhancement (Phase 1/2)], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/0711100/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); "Kaijo keibi kyoka kizai seibi keikaku (2/2-ki)" [The Project for Improvement of Equipment for Maritime Security Enhancement (Phase 2/2)], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/0802700/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

provide funding and technical cooperation to enhance the functions of the ASEAN Regional Training Center, an educational institution located in Malaysia, to strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries.⁹⁹

For its part, Australia agreed to donate two Bay-class patrol vessels (38-meter class) built by the Australian shipbuilder Austal in 2015. Since 2018, Australia and Malaysia’s maritime law-enforcement agencies have jointly conducted Operation Redback off Kuala Perlis and elsewhere, carrying out boarding inspections of vessels and apprehending those engaged in illegal activities.¹⁰⁰ The United States provides capacity-building support through joint training and seminars, and in May 2024, it was announced that the United States would transfer a large cutter to the MMEA to strengthen Malaysia’s high seas capabilities, with the delivery completed in September 2025 under the new Trump administration.¹⁰¹ In sum, Japan, the United States, and Australia have begun to take on a concrete like-mindedness in supporting cooperation between the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Squad, composed of the United States and three of its Indo-Pacific allies, and analyzed its formation process and forms of cooperation. In doing so, it has shown that even among partners commonly described as “like-minded,” differences in position on important issues exist, and these differences have shaped the form and process of cooperation in concrete ways. The chapter has further illuminated the process by which the four countries’

99) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Exchange of Notes for the Grant of Patrol Vessels and for the Grant Aid to Malaysia,” November 16, 2016 https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001355.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

100) “Australian Vessel Gifted to Malaysia,” Media Release, [Australia] Department of Home Affairs, February 10, 2015 <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/peterdutton/Pages/2015/australian-vessel-gifted-malaysia.aspx> (accessed on January 31, 2026); “Australia and Malaysia Cooperation Combats Maritime Crime through Operation REDBACK,” [Australia] Australian Border Force, June 30, 2021 <https://www.abf.gov.au/newsroom-subsite/Pages/maritime-crime-operation-redback-30-06-2021.aspx> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

101) [U.S.] Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “The United States’ Commitment to Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific,” Fact Sheet, September 23, 2025 <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-commitment-to-maritime-security-in-the-indo-pacific/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

perceptions and positions have shifted, materializing and clarifying their like-mindedness. In these contexts, like-minded countries or like-mindedness were by no means self-evident or fixed from the outset. They have fluctuated as the result of changes within, and interactions among, the relevant countries. This perspective on dynamic like-mindedness offers conceptual implications in the following three respects.

First, the analytical concept of minilateralism itself should be reconsidered. A broader survey of debates on the concept shows that minilateralism is often characterized as involving only issue-specific areas of cooperation and as being exclusive in that lines are drawn between participants and non-participants. The analysis of changing like-mindedness and the Squad process presented in this chapter, however, suggests the need to reexamine these two received notions. As like-mindedness becomes more concrete and clearer, areas of cooperation may broaden, and meaningful coordination and synergistic activities can be realized even with countries that do not formally participate in the framework. In this sense, minilateralism may not always become exclusive in nature.

Second, the Squad provides empirically rich material for examining this book's broader theme of "competitive pluralization." This chapter's analysis sheds light not only on U.S. leadership but also the role of Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, as well as the existence of cooperating countries beyond the Squad. It reveals the diverse facets of minilateralism, which is often explained solely in the context of U.S. strategy toward China. The Squad countries explore areas of cooperation among themselves and, having identified domains in which the Squad framework can support cooperation, exert actual influence in them. In this respect, to understand the patterns of cooperation and competition in the Indo-Pacific, it is essential to view competition in this region not solely through the lens of U.S.-China rivalry but to adopt a perspective of pluralization that takes into account the dynamics and distinctive influence of U.S. allies.

Third, Japan's long-running Squad-related initiatives addressed in this chapter exhibit a certain consistent character. As has been pointed out, the policy of developing security relations with the Philippines, Australia, and many other countries around the Squad is by no means a recent undertaking; it has followed a long-term trajectory and steadily accumulated results. Along this trajectory, a flexible and persistent Japanese posture can be seen: Japan has seized on changes in the geographic perceptions and security policies of partners such as the Philippines and Australia, used these as opportunities to strengthen relations, and gradually developed new areas of cooperation.

This differs from the image conveyed by the so-called “reactive state” model of postwar Japanese foreign policy, in which a domestically divided Japan merely reacts to external changes and leaves open a window of opportunity for other countries to intervene in its decision-making process. Rather, it can be interpreted as an indicator that some consistent and strategic thinking does exist on the part of Japan with its own agency in being alert to shifts in circumstances and turning them to its advantage. The analysis in this chapter shows that the results of such Japanese initiatives have been one of the important factors that have made possible the launch and development of the Squad.

