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A Maritime Wall Is Forming Around China – That’s Not All Bad for Southeast Asia

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SYNOPSIS

Island nations around China are increasingly hardening their defences in reaction to Chinese muscle-flexing. Their emerging efforts to counterbalance the PRC will help the rest of Southeast Asia maintain its autonomy.

COMMENTARY

In [his keynote address](#) to the Shangri-La Dialogue on 31 May, Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. focused on his plans to protect Philippine interests and preserve the rule of law in international affairs by strengthening his country’s ability to enforce its archipelagic defence concept while also investing in its alliance with the United States and other strategic partners.

Earlier that month, the defence ministers of the Philippines, Japan, Australia and the United States [assembled in Honolulu](#), where their [conversation focused](#) on cooperative responses to PRC actions in the East and South China Seas. In April, the navies of those four nations [conducted drills](#) in the South China Sea. This team-up has gained the moniker [“Security Quad”, or “Squad”](#). These activities all represent choices that the island nations situated along China’s maritime periphery are making to beef up their defences and collectively resist what they regard as aggressive Chinese behaviour.



The Australian, Japanese, and American navies joined the Philippine Navy in conducting drills in the South China Sea, April 2024. Such activities reflect how the island nations situated along China's maritime periphery are choosing to collectively resist what they regard as aggressive Chinese behaviour after the observed failure of policies designed to accommodate Chinese power and avoid confrontation. *Image from the Royal Australian Navy.*

No one should be overjoyed to see tensions rise or more resources being put into military power when so many socio-economic challenges lurk in Southeast Asia. Yet, few Southeast Asians would disagree with Marcos when he said, "China's determining influence over the security situation and the economic evolution of this region is a permanent fact." Therefore, the rise of a counterbalancing coalition will contribute to the independence and autonomy of Southeast Asian states.

In both Japan and the Philippines, a strong political consensus has emerged where Chinese power is seen as a direct threat to national security. In both cases, this consensus only developed after deep debates and the observed failure of policies designed to accommodate Chinese power and avoid confrontation.

In 2009, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) took control of the Japanese Diet from the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Critical of the LDP's reliance on the US-Japan alliance and the support Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro had given [to American military activities](#) in the Middle East and Central Asia, the DPJ's first prime minister, Hatoyama Yukio, sought to re-evaluate foundational elements of the US-Japan alliance while [reaching out to China](#).

However, the steps that China took during a 2010 crisis discredited the DPJ's accommodation efforts. When a Chinese trawler rammed two Japan Coast Guard cutters in disputed waters of the East China Sea, Japan apprehended the crew and sought to prosecute the captain as a police action. Beijing, believing that the matter should be handled as a diplomatic rather than legal affair, escalated the matter.

At least 20 Sino-Japanese exchanges were cancelled, including the travel of a senior PRC official to Japan. Four Japanese citizens were detained in China, a Japanese school in Tianjin was vandalised, rare earth elements bound for Japan were held up in Chinese ports, and Premier Wen Jiabao threatened "further actions". When Japan released the captain without prosecution, he returned home as a national hero and Chinese media [trumpeted its presumed victory over Japan](#).

According to my discussions with dozens of Japanese strategists, these events gave Japan a “wake-up call” by demonstrating that the PRC was not only powerful but also inclined to use that strength against Japan. The experience was fundamental to building what scholar Andrew Oros calls [“Japan’s security renaissance”](#). By the time the LDP returned to power in 2012, a broad consensus had formed that Japan needed to harden itself against Chinese aggression.

Japan’s [expanded security budget](#), the [development of defensive positions](#) on the islands closest to China, decisions to acquire a [“counter-strike” capability](#) that targets weapons which strike Japan from foreign soil, and the embrace of security partnerships such as the Squad all reflect this security renaissance.

A similar story played out in the Philippines. I vividly remember sitting as the only foreigner at a lunch table of senior Philippine Navy officers in 2017 as they passionately debated the preferred strategy for facing PRC maritime aggression.

One side urged a strong line against China and expanding investment in the US alliance. The other group supported President Rodrigo Duterte’s outreach to China. They believed that China’s rise was inevitable, they had few tools to resist PRC encroachment, and the United States was an unreliable ally. They argued that the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of the Philippine position on the South China Sea put the country in the best negotiating position they could ever hope for. “Now is the best time to cut a deal”, they advocated.

Today, individuals from both camps tell the same story: while Duterte shuttled to Beijing to make deals, the PRC continued to up the pressure in the South China Sea, and Chinese promises never materialised in tangible investments. Thus, Duterte’s attempt at accommodation was seen as a complete failure. A strong consensus in Manila today sees strength as the only viable option. Thus, the Philippines is investing [US\\$35 billion in military modernisation](#), strengthening its international security partnerships, and internationalising the issues through diplomacy and public affairs.

Japan and the Philippines, together with Taiwan, comprise the “1st Island Chain”, a string of land features that prevents easy access from the Asian mainland into the open Pacific. When the military forces of Japan and the Philippines team up for activities such as the South China Sea patrols or when Japan observes the [US-Philippine Balikatan exercise](#) (as it has done since 2012), it appears, from a Chinese perspective, that such activities are something akin to the building of a wall that boxes the PRC in and constrains its maritime ambition.

China would have little trouble battering its way through this wall if that barrier were not buttressed by powers farther away. The United States, a treaty ally of both Japan and the Philippines that holds its own national consensus backing action to prevent China from gaining the geopolitical upper hand, has gladly responded to requests to upgrade the security arrangements. New American military capabilities tailored for this island geography are [being rapidly fielded](#), [alliance command and control arrangements](#) are being tightened, and military facilities such as [ports and airfields are being developed](#).

The fourth member of the Squad, Australia, is also reinforcing efforts to deter Chinese aggression. For example, the 2023 Reciprocal Assessment Agreement makes it easier for Australian forces to base out of Japan and for Japanese forces to train in Australia. Australia's decision to develop a nuclear submarine force is about developing options to fight maritime battles farther from Australia's homeland. [China is the only potential foe](#) that could warrant such an investment.

While consensus for a hardline response to China is less firm in Canberra than in Tokyo or Manila, China's decision to punish Australia with economic penalties such as [tariffs targeting wine](#) and a series of dangerous incidents at sea have established a view of Chinese power as a clear threat.

In his [Shangri-La intervention](#), Australian defence minister Richard Marles noted that "the Australian Navy has also experienced recent unsafe and unprofessional behaviour" by PRC forces, highlighting two events in the East China Sea. In the first, a Chinese warship harmed [Australian divers](#) by blasting active sonar in their vicinity. The Chinese government officially denied the act, but [PRC officials also explained to the media](#) that such things are bound to happen if Australia "provocatively" operates "near" China. The second event happened last month when a Chinese jet put fired flares in the path of an Australian helicopter. China's national spokesman explained this happened because the chopper "[deliberately approached China's airspace](#)". PRC forces operating far from China have also behaved similarly. In 2022, a Chinese navy ship aimed a blinding laser at an Australian patrol aircraft during operations south of Indonesia.

Southeast Asian national strategies to handle the emergence of [China as the most influential power](#) in the region vary widely. However, no state's interests are served by any power becoming clearly predominant. Without a counterbalance, such a power would possess too much opportunity to interfere in national affairs or set the terms for engagement.

Of course, this military balancing is not without its drawbacks. Unlike strategists in Tokyo and Manila, some Southeast Asian leaders prefer flexible responses that include elements of appeasement as they see these as offering more benefit in terms of their near-term relations with China. Furthermore, [arms races](#) divert state resources from development goals. If conflict were to break out, more weapons may mean more destruction. Yet, the situation has long been such that any open conflict would be absolutely devastating.

In an ideal world, China would stop mistreating its neighbours and the major powers would tone down competition in favour of cooperation. However, no one has proposed a reasonable route to détente, and wishful thinking is not going to bring us to a fairyland solution.

In the real world, Tokyo and Manila are closing ranks because they believe their attempts at accommodation were met with malice. Thus, they have decided to double down on deterrence. Those efforts will contribute to a more balanced regional situation. They may not be a dreamy solution, but they will ultimately benefit Southeast Asia better than other options.

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