

EXPLAINER

David Dutton

Australia's strategic partnership with the Philippines:

The rising defence relationship

Summary

- Manila has become pivotal for Canberra's regional balancing and deterrence objectives. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines is the country that most closely aligns with Australia: it's a democracy, a US treaty ally, a supporter of international law, and integral to preserving an open maritime order. The Philippines is also the state under greatest coercive pressure from China.
- A new Defence Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) between the two countries, expected this year, represents a milestone in the transformation of the relationship into a genuinely strategic partnership. The defence relationship has become one of Australia's most important and has focused on deterrence and contingency preparation, fitting both countries' strategic objectives.
- The Philippines is fostering collective-deterrence networks with the United States, Japan and Australia, also drawing in a broader range of states. The promising four-country gathering known as Squad has progressed quickly and is developing into a joint operational structure that expands regional capability and counters Chinese maritime pressure.
- Canberra should continue improving visibility of the relationship and invest more in building collective deterrence and individual resilience. It should also commit to deeper practices of diplomatic consultation with Manila, including by upgrading the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
- The next Philippine administration could take a different approach from June 2028. However, Canberra maintains trusted institutional connections that have only grown through successive administrations, and the Philippines has enduring interests in preserving its own sovereignty.

Introduction

Over 80 years, the Philippines has rarely been prominent in Australia's strategic outlook. Canberra has invested in substantial institutional cooperation without close political engagement or visibility. Yet relations with the Philippines were Australia's first in Southeast Asia, and both countries signed alliances with the US two days apart in 1951.[1] Relations have been animated by similar responses to global strategic pressures: anti-communism during the Cold War; counterterrorism, peaking at the period of Islamic State; and, since the 2010s, the challenges of responding to a revisionist and coercive China.[2]

From terrorism to maritime security

Counterterrorism drove ties after the 9/11 attacks and the Bali Bombings. Australia supported Manila to suppress terrorism and fight insurgents in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. Security and development cooperation made its embassy in Manila one of Australia's largest and established Australia as a major provider of support to the Philippines – second to the US and complementary to Japan's economic assistance.

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From the mid-2010s, China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea became a factor. Australia initially prioritised its trading relationship with China, remaining neutral when China effectively seized Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and diffident to the Philippines' decision to take China to arbitration in early 2013.

President Benigno Aquino III proposed a Strategic Partnership with Australia in October 2012. But, nervous of South China Sea disputes, Canberra moved slowly. A Comprehensive Partnership (a lesser tier) was launched by Aquino and prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in November 2015. While the label signified modest ambition and lower priority than other partnerships announced the same year, it began a trend of increasing engagement and alignment.[3]

By 2016, Beijing's revisionist intentions had become clear, and Canberra embraced Manila's victory in its arbitration case. Angering China, Turnbull and foreign minister Julie Bishop publicly welcomed the award. It was a watershed moment in relations with Manila and a step to counter Beijing's maritime pressure.

The following year saw the Quad (a grouping involving Australia, Japan, the US and India) resurrected and Australia make new commitments to support maritime security in Southeast Asia and defend navigational and overflight rights. The context was the recasting of Australian strategy to support a favourable balance in the Indo-Pacific and 'an open, inclusive and rules-based region'.[4]

This effectively elevated the Philippines in Australia's priorities, but new possibilities were constrained by the administration of president Rodrigo Duterte from 2016 to 2022. He launched a 'war on drugs' that entailed an estimated 30,000 extrajudicial killings, attempted to accommodate China by parking the arbitration outcome, and stalled US alliance cooperation. Duterte was nonetheless supportive of Australia, especially after it provided the Philippines with intelligence and military assistance during the 2017 terrorist occupation of Marawi. Institutional relationships deepened and security cooperation expanded, despite the turbulence.

To a defence-driven strategic partnership

Relations accelerated with the presidency of Ferdinand (Bong Bong) Marcos Jr, who came to office in June 2022, a month after the election of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government. The Marcos administration embraced 'hard-balancing' to resist China's pressure in the South China Sea. It rolled out efforts to lift Philippine military capability, modernise its US alliance and forge new security partnerships.[5] This suited Canberra's regional balancing strategy and increasing emphasis on collective deterrence.[6] The Philippines became more closely aligned to Australia in threat perceptions and strategic responses than any other Southeast Asian country.[7]

Albanese and Marcos announced the upgrading of relations to a Strategic Partnership in September 2023. New elements of the partnership included deeper defence cooperation, an annual defence ministers' meeting, expanded maritime and cyber cooperation, and joint patrols in the South China Sea.[8] Marcos made a return visit in February 2024, addressing the Australian Parliament and launching agreements on maritime, cyber and critical technology.[9]

Civil maritime assistance launched in 2019 grew to support inter-agency coordination, maritime domain awareness, resource management and legal capability. In July 2026, Foreign Minister Penny Wong announced a doubling of program support to A$18 million and a total of A$14 million for drones to support the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG).[10] An officials' dialogue on maritime affairs has met six times since 2021, and the Australian Border Force has stepped up training and support to the PCG.

An expansion of collaboration outside the security sphere is less apparent, although linkages were already strong. The Philippine Australia Ministerial Meeting, a joint foreign and trade ministers' meeting, has convened only six times since its inception in 2005 and may be less suited to current objectives than a stand-alone foreign ministers' meeting or 2+2 with defence ministers. The trade and investment relationship remains lacklustre although there are good signs following strong Philippine growth, changes to foreign investment rules and Australia's 'Invested' agenda.[11] The heft is in Australian firms' back-office processing operations in the Philippines, and there may be potential in defence industry and secure supply chains. Australia joined the strategic Luzon Economic Corridor initiative in May 2026.

Defending the Philippines

The defence relationship changed direction in 2017 when Canberra's new interest in balancing and maritime security coincided with the occupation of Marawi. In June that year, defence minister Marise Payne committed P-3 Orion aircraft alongside training and intelligence support, including maritime elements. Operation Augury-Philippines followed in October 2017 and trained more than 10,000 Philippine personnel across land, sea and air domains. In 2019, this expanded to become the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Program, including the addition of a training component called the Joint Australian Training Team - Philippines.[12] Over this period, Australia's military partnership with the Philippines became one of its largest in Southeast Asia.[13] Its purposes adapted as Philippine strategy shifted from internal security to territorial defence, most recently in the 2024 Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept (CADC).[14]

Exercising increased in tempo and scale, and the scenarios became more realistic. Australia first joined the US-Philippines Exercise Balikatan in 2014. It provided its largest contingent to the 2026 exercise, which rehearsed coalition-led contingency operations in support of CADC. Exercise Alon commenced with an amphibious scenario in 2023 and was Australia's largest deployment in 2025.[15] Philippine forces have joined Australia-led exercises Talisman Sabre and Pitch Black. Australia is also undertaking eight infrastructure projects at five locations on Luzon, with a second tranche under preparation. Complementing US investments at other sites, these projects assist the Philippines

Table 1: Multilateral cooperative activities in the South China Sea with Australian participation

Date	Format	Australian Asset
25–27 November 2023	Bilateral (AU-PH)	HMAS *Toowoomba* + RAAF P-8A
7 April 2024	Multilateral (AU-PH-JP-US)	HMAS *Warramunga* + RAAF P-8A
7–9 August 2024	Multilateral (AU-PH-CN-US)	RAAF P-8A
28 September 2024	Multilateral (AU-PH-JP-NZ-US)	HMAS *Sydney* + RAAF P8A
5 February 2025	Multilateral (AU-PH-JP-US)	HMAS *Hobart*, RAAF P-8A
29 April 2025	Multilateral (AU-PH-US)	HMAS *Sydney*
2–3 September 2025	Multilateral (AU-PH-CN-US)	HMAS *Brisbane*, RAAF P-8A
30–31 October 2025	Multilateral (AU-PH-NZ-US)	HMAS *Ballarat*
15–16 February 2026	Multilateral (AU-PH-US)	HMAS *Toowoomba*, RAAF P-8A
9–12 April 2026	Multilateral (AU-PH-US)	HMAS *Toowoomba*, MH-60R Seahawk
24 April 2026	Multilateral (AU-PH-CN-JP-US) - part of Balikatan	HMAS *Toowoomba*
19–25 August 2026	Multilateral (AU-PH-US)	HMAS *Supply*, MH-60R Seahawk, RAAF P-8A

through logistics and training, as well as supporting Australia's presence for major exercises.[16]

Importantly, Australia has joined 12 Philippine-led Maritime Cooperative Activities in the South China Sea since November 2023. These joint patrols help the Philippines to defend its maritime interests. At the same time, they allow Australia to assert presence, deter destabilising actions, and uphold navigational and overflight rights under international law.[17]

Defence Minister Richard Marles and Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro are driving a relationship focused on deterrence and contingency preparation.[18] A Defence Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) is planned for late 2026 and will supersede a 1995 memorandum that has underpinned the relationship. The DCA will strengthen bilateral architecture, exchange of information, cooperation in maritime domain awareness and search and rescue, and arrangements for infrastructure.[19] Officials have foreshadowed that it will provide expanded reciprocal military access and rights.[20]

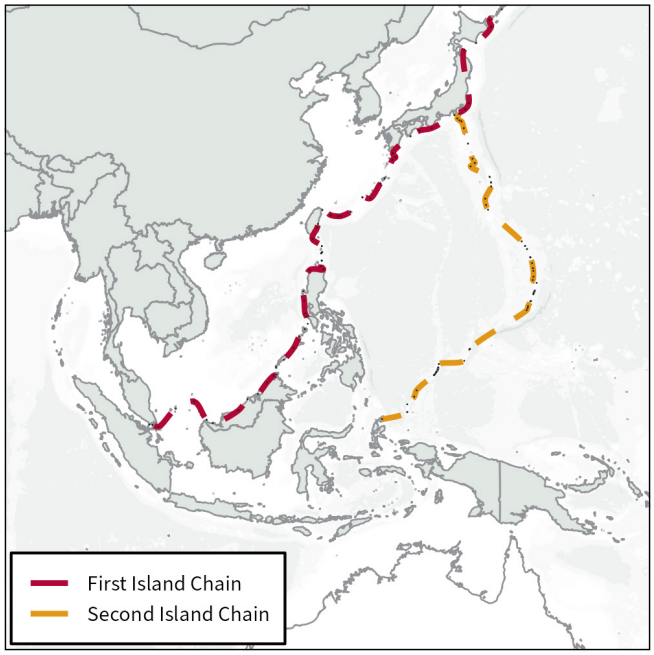
Inter-alliance cooperation

Strengthening bilateral ties also bolsters the latticework of the US alliance system in Asia, serving Australia's objective to build networks that support regional balance and deterrence.[21] The Philippines is fostering an architecture of collective deterrence with the US, Japan and Australia and drawing in a broader range of states.[22] This strengthens and diversifies security partnerships and fits the focus of US-Japan-Australia cooperation on countering China's coercion along the First Island Chain.[23]

The four-country Squad grouping, led by defence ministers of the US, Australia, Japan and the Philippines, has grown quickly since June 2023. Squad ministers underscored in April 2024 the importance of 'multilateral defence cooperation … at all levels'.[24] In November 2025 they committed to enhance joint deterrence and readiness and established an Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defence Cooperation Council (DCC).[25] In turn the DCC agreed in May 2026 to regular multilateral patrols 'to sustain persistent, deterrence-reinforcing presence', backed by closer information-sharing, communications and interoperability.[26]

The most recent gathering, held in October 2026, progressed joint operational concepts, joint investment in infrastructure in Luzon, and policy collaboration. Marles emphasised the 'really significant substantive effort between the four countries'.[27] Distinct from the Quad, which has steered away from military cooperation, the Squad is developing into a joint operational structure to counter Chinese maritime pressure.

Figure 1: The Philippines and first and second island chains



Source: Linus Cohen, ASPI.

Conclusion

The Philippines has become a pivotal state for Australia's strategic objectives and relations have transformed over the past decade into a genuinely strategic partnership. Canberra is increasing support to the defence of the Philippines and building new mechanisms of collective deterrence with the US and Japan. The Squad is promising because it is driven by function, based in close alignment and operational. It combines the advantages of US engagement with stronger links between Japan, Australia and the Philippines that increase burden-sharing and aggregate effort.

Canberra should improve visibility of the relationship, continue to invest more in building collective deterrence and individual resilience, and commit to deeper practices of diplomatic consultation with Manila. Given alignment on regional stability, international rules and countering Chinese coercion, the status of the relationship should be upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Australia's ties with Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore are already designated as such. All are highly significant, but none is as closely aligned with Australia as the Philippines, nor as immediately critical to a region in which 'no country is dominated'.

Among partners, 'institutionalisation' is the watchword leading up to the Philippines' presidential election in May 2028. Philippine democracy is notoriously personalistic, and the past four presidents have tried different ways of dealing with China. Throughout late 2026, the country has been gripped by impeachment proceedings against Vice President Sara Duterte, which include allegations of receiving Chinese funds. China works to constrain Philippine options and coerce acquiescence, even if its intrusiveness also stokes nationalist resistance.[28] Canberra can't discount that a future president might take a different course, but it can be confident of its trusted institutional connections and convergent interests. With the US and Japan, Australia can help create conditions that enable the Philippines to exercise its sovereignty in the contested times ahead.

Notes

1 Australia and the Philippines established diplomatic relations on the day of Philippine independence, 4 July 1946, preceding independence of other regional states emerging from colonialism. Australia established relations with Thailand, which was not subject to colonial rule, in 1952.
2 For a historical overview see: Dan Halvorson and Lucy West, 'A retrospective on the Australia-Philippines political and security relationship: on Canberra's terms?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2020, Vol. 74, No. 5, 557-577.
3 In 2015 Australia announced an 'enhanced comprehensive partnership' with Vietnam, a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with Singapore, and a 'strategic partnership' with Malaysia.
4 Australian Government, Foreign Policy White Paper: Opportunity Security Strength, Canberra, 2017, p. 47, online.
5 Renato Cruz De Castro, 'The Marcos Administration's Foreign Policy: Seeking the Elusive Balance in Dealing a Changing Indo-Pacific Region', *East Asian Policy*, 2023.
6 Penny Wong, 'National Press Club Address, Australian Interests in a Regional Balance of Power', 17 April 2023, online; Peter J. Dean and Georgie Hicks, 'Australia and the Second Trump Administration', Asan Security Quarterly, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2026, online.
7 Euan Graham, *Allies entwined: Australia's strategic convergence with the Philippines*, ASPI, November 2025, online.
8 Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership, 8 September 2023, online.
9 Anthony Albanese, Media Release 'Realising Australia's Strategic Partnership with the Philippines', 29 February 2024, online.
10 Penny Wong, Remarks at Philippine Coast Guard Headquarters, 22 July 2026, online.
11 Two-way trade with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam is three to four times larger than with the Philippines. Australian investment in the Philippines was $7b in 2022, behind Malaysia at $10.1b, and Singapore at $76b, but ahead of other Southeast Asian states.
12 Department of Defence, Media Release, 'Philippine engagement taken to new level', 8 December 2025, online.
13 Graham, ibid; Ian Hall, 'Australia-Philippines security cooperation: the maritime dimension', Griffith Asia Insights, 31 July 2019, online; see also data on defence agreements, dialogues and exercises in Rahman Yaacob, Susannah Patton and Jack Sato, ' Southeast Asia's Evolving Defence Partnerships', Lowy Institute, 2025, online.
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25 Joint Readout of the Meeting of Defense Ministers From Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, 2 November 2025, online.
26 Press Release, 'DCC Signs Terms of Reference at Shangri-La', PACOM, 4 June 2026, online.
27 Department of Defence, Transcript, 29 October 2026, online.
28 Haroro J. Ingram, 'Proving Ground: China's Strategic Ratcheting of the Philippines and the Indo-Pacific's Gray Zone Problem' CSIS, 11 August 2026, online; Herman S. Taylor, 'The Cost of Consistency: China's miscalculation in the First Island China', 9Dashline, 1 September 2026, online.

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