

## **President Marcos in Delhi: India and the Philippines Get Closer**

C Raja Mohan

### **Summary**

*The visit by the Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr to New Delhi in early August 2025 – the first in nearly 20 years – has heralded a decisive upgrade to the relationship that has long suffered from mutual neglect. Purposeful diplomatic outreach over the last decade and the growing convergence of the Indian and Filipino regional security interests have provided the framework for exploring a strategic partnership.*

The Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's visit to India from 4 to 8 August 2025 stands out as a watershed moment in the bilateral relations between the two countries and adds an important new element to Asia's evolving strategic landscape. Marcos was in New Delhi to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, the visit was more than symbolic. It not only fortified bonds between New Delhi and Manila but also marked the end of the prolonged "mutual neglect" that characterised bilateral relations for much of the last 75 years. Through [several agreements](#), unprecedented security cooperation and renewed people-to-people engagement, the two countries have opened a new chapter in their relations.

After the talks between Marcos and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other Indian officials, the India-Philippines relationship was elevated to the level of a [strategic partnership](#). One of the most prominent dimensions of the upgraded relationship is the dramatic expansion of defence and security ties. Shared concerns about China's growing assertiveness on territorial disputes, including the South China Sea, the Great Himalayas, and the broader Indo-Pacific, have been major catalysts for this growing convergence.

Central to the defence and security partnership is the institutionalisation of defence dialogue through mechanisms like the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee and the Joint Defence Industry and Logistics Committee. These platforms are expected to promote collaboration in defence technology, training and capacity building, with an emphasis on co-development and co-production of equipment to promote self-reliance.

Maritime cooperation is another major element and will see New Delhi and Manila collaborate in maritime domain awareness, shipbuilding, coastal surveillance, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Security cooperation extends to counterterrorism, cyber defence and protection of critical infrastructure, supported by regular exchanges and joint working groups. The declaration also visualises collaboration in peacekeeping operations.

The bilateral focus on defence cooperation is deeply tied to the changing geopolitical context in Asia. For New Delhi, the Philippines' geographic location makes it a key partner in

its eastward outreach – what India characterises as its ‘Act East’ policy. For Manila, security cooperation with New Delhi is part of the diversification of its defence ties. While the United States (US) remains the main partner for Manila, it is also looking to other Quadrilateral Security Dialogue members – Australia, India and Japan.

The 2022 agreement on the sale of Brahmos missiles has been a major turning point in bilateral defence cooperation. Marcos is now looking to buy [additional batteries of missiles](#) from India. As Marcos arrived in India on 4 August 2025, the navies of the two sides [sailed together](#) for the first time in the South China Sea. Beijing, whose naval ships had [shadowed the sail](#), cautioned the two sides against destabilising the South China Sea. [Chinese Defence officials](#) labelled the Philippines as a “troublemaker” for collaborating with outside countries and asserted that China would implement “resolute countermeasures” against any provocations in what it claims as its territorial waters. India has long supported a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, strongly backed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and has opposed the use of force to change the territorial status quo. However, it has hesitated in the past to move beyond diplomatic support for the Philippines towards concrete military cooperation. That has begun to change.

On the economic front, India and the Philippines have a long way to go in building a substantial partnership. [New Delhi and Manila](#) hope that bilateral trade, now at around US\$3 billion (S\$3.84 billion), can be boosted through a preferential trade agreement.

The real significance of the visit was in its effort to end the prolonged mutual neglect between India and the Philippines. For decades, neither nation was a priority for the other. Part of the problem was the Cold War era regional divide, with India leaning more toward the Soviet sphere and the Philippines maintaining a strong pro-Western stance. After gaining independence in 1947, India adopted non-alignment as its worldview. In contrast, the Philippines, having gained its independence from the US in 1946, maintained a close relationship with Washington throughout the Cold War. Manila became part of the US’ alliance system, formalised through the Mutual Defence Treaty of 1951 and underpinned by a substantial US military presence, including large military bases at Clark and Subic Bay.

The end of the Cold War and India’s new engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which the Philippines was a founding member, did not lead to a transformation of the ties with Manila. India’s ‘Look East’ policy did not, however, mean expansive engagement with all its members. Its post-war ties in the region were initially focused on Indonesia (a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement) and later on Vietnam (an important strategic partner through the Cold War).

Much of India’s diplomatic energies in the 1990s were focused on building strong ties with Singapore – at the heart of Southeast Asia. India’s diplomatic outreach steadily enveloped other countries in the 2000s. The Philippines is arguably the last major country that came onto India’s radar in the 2010s.

This legacy of low engagement began to change gradually in the 2010s and sharply accelerated in the 2020s. China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea as well as the Himalayas highlighted the reality that New Delhi and Manila were at the receiving end

of a China that had risen to be a great power. While territorial security and shared concerns about regional security have driven New Delhi and Manila closer, neither side would want to build a strategic partnership focused on countering Beijing. Living next door to China, both India and the Philippines have a stake in normal ties with their giant neighbour. The strategic partnership between New Delhi and Manila will have to stand on its own merits.

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Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at [crmohan@nus.edu.sg](mailto:crmohan@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.