

Marcos Visits India: Promise and Limits of India-Philippines Cooperation

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Summary

In the last few years, India and the Philippines have rapidly deepened their strategic cooperation, propelled by their shared concern over Chinese aggression. However, the relationship is still in want of underlying geographic or economic logic. It remains to be seen whether the Chinese threat is a strong enough glue to hold New Delhi and Manila together in the long term.

President Ferdinand Marcos Junior of the Philippines visited India 4 to 8 August 2025 to elevate the bilateral relationship to a Strategic Partnership. Unlike some other such partnerships recently inked by New Delhi, this declaration was accompanied by concrete signals that the two sides aim to substantially strengthen the relationship.

The most significant progress was made in the field of defence. Indian and Philippine navies [concluded their first joint naval exercise](#) in the South China Sea just as Marcos landed in New Delhi. The two sides [signed agreements](#) to institutionalise service-level dialogues for the three armed forces as well as the coast guard. They also committed to exploring joint defence production and sharing defence technology.

The India-Philippines relationship has deepened remarkably quickly. Historically, the two countries had limited common ground to build upon. They are geographically separated by the Southeast Asian landmass and their trade remains paltry (it hovers around two per cent of India's trade with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). In the last 40 years, Indian prime ministers have only twice visited the archipelago nation.

The two countries converged over the question of China in the late 2010s. Alarm over Beijing's rising influence in South Asia, coupled with the [2020 border clash](#), pushed New Delhi to look for new means put pressure on China. The Philippines sought out alliances and partnerships to balance against China as it faced the brunt of Beijing's aggression in the South China Sea, marked by a [series](#) of [naval standoffs](#). Since assuming office in 2022, Marcos has embraced a more confrontational China policy and deepened strategic cooperation with the [United States](#) (US), [Japan](#), [South Korea](#) and [Australia](#).

Although a closer strategic relationship serves both India and the Philippines, Manila is likely the more eager partner. Its courtship of New Delhi is symbolised by its purchase of the Brahmos missile system. In 2022, the Philippines became the first (and thus far only) country to buy the Indian long-range cruise missile. The purchase was a shot in the arm for India's ambitions to become a major weapons exporter. During his recent visit, [Marcos hinted](#) that the Philippines was eyeing more Indian military hardware, a suggestion that must have gone over very well in New Delhi.

India reciprocated by expanding its naval footprint in the Pacific and wading ever deeper into the South China Sea dispute. In the last two years, New Delhi abandoned its traditional taciturn approach to increasingly [lean towards Manila](#) in the maritime dispute. In 2023, it [voiced its approval](#) of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention arbitral tribunal award in favour of the archipelago nation. In 2024, it [declared](#) its support to the Philippines for “upholding its national sovereignty”.

In New Delhi last week, Marcos managed to score another diplomatic point. The [Strategic Partnership declaration](#) called out the “coercive and aggressive actions” in South China Sea, a thinly-veiled criticism targeted at Beijing.

The enthusiasm has spilled over to other aspects of the relationship. New Delhi and Manila have started negotiating a Preferential Trade Agreement (although given the small amount of trade between the two, the agreement would be of greater political significance than economic value).

The India-Philippines partnership may have a hard ceiling in the long run. New Delhi is happy to leverage the relationship to irk Beijing and has welcomed the Brahmos sale. However, it would likely remain reluctant to wade too deeply into security cooperation with Manila.

New Delhi is focused on the Indian Ocean. It has neither major interests to protect in nor many resources to spare for the Pacific Ocean. The Indian Naval Doctrine views the South China Sea as a theatre of secondary concern, eclipsed in priority by a host of other regions viewed as India’s “primary areas of maritime interest”. New Delhi has also been wary of escalating its conflict with Beijing in the maritime domain beyond a point.

Furthermore, Manila is a treaty ally of Washington and it tends to stitch its security partnerships around that alliance. Marcos has promoted a security minilateral – dubbed [the “Squad”](#), comprising the Philippines, the US, Japan and now Australia.

While developing strategic cooperation with Washington, New Delhi has resisted embedding itself too deeply into the American alliance network in Asia. It continues to jealously guard its strategic autonomy and likes to maintain some daylight between its foreign policy and that of the US.

This complexity is underscored by the Brahmos missile system which was developed by India in collaboration with Russia. In fact, the sale to the Philippines only went through after [Moscow signed off](#) on it. India’s singular and independent security posture makes it the odd man out in the lineup of Manila’s security partners.

In the last few months, New Delhi has begun to [normalise its relations](#) with Beijing after years of intense hostility. Its recent kerfuffle with the US over tariffs has further motivated it to [improve relations](#) with China.

It is an open question how the Sino-Indian thaw will impact the momentum of India-Philippines relations. On the one hand, New Delhi is unlikely to walk back from its new

position on the South China Sea dispute or its ongoing defence cooperation with Manila. On the other hand, the India-Philippines relations lack adequate scaffolding given the geographical distance and limited economic relations. The shared threat perception of China has been the engine of their partnership. Any revision of that perception is bound to have an effect on the partnership.

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