

76 years of Indo-Philippines Ties and India's Act East Policy

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of the visit of the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, to India earlier in 2025, which marked the establishment of a strategic partnership between the two nations. The state visit, held from 04-08 Aug 2025 was President Marcos Jr's first visit to India since assuming office. It also carried particular importance because the previous state visit by a Philippine President to India had taken place in 2007. During the visit, the two countries signed a total of 13 Memoranda of Understanding and agreements covering areas such as culture, defence cooperation, digital technologies, science, space cooperation, and tourism, reflecting the broadening scope of bilateral engagement.

Introduction

India–Philippines relations today must be understood within the larger structural transformation of the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific is no longer merely a geographic construct; it has evolved into a strategic theatre where questions of sovereignty, freedom of navigation, supply-chain resilience, and regional balance of power intersect. For India, the Philippines occupies a uniquely important position in this evolving strategic geography. Located at the crossroads of the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea, the Philippines acts as a natural maritime gateway linking East Asia

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with the Indian ocean region. India's engagement with Manila, therefore, serves both symbolic and material strategic purposes.

From a strategic standpoint, India's growing presence in the Philippines reflects its gradual shift from a continental security mindset to a maritime-oriented outlook. Historically, India's security concerns were dominated by land-based threats along its western and northern borders. However, the changing nature of global trade, energy flows, and naval power projection has compelled India to recalibrate its strategic priorities. Over 90 per cent of India's trade by volume moves through sea lanes, many of which pass close to the South China Sea. Any disruption in this region would have direct consequences for India's economic security. Strengthening ties with the Philippines, thus, aligns with India's objective of safeguarding sea lines of communication and ensuring a rules-based maritime order.

The Philippines, on its part, views India as a reliable and non-intrusive partner. Unlike traditional great powers, India does not carry a history of colonial domination in Southeast Asia, nor does it seek exclusive security arrangements that compromise regional autonomy. This perception enhances India's acceptability within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and among Southeast Asian states that remain cautious about overt alignment with any single power bloc. Manila's decision to elevate ties with New Delhi reflects a strategic hedging approach—diversifying partnerships while maintaining strategic autonomy.

It has been almost 76 years since India and Philippines established their diplomatic ties in 1949. However, the meaningful bilateral ties between them got recalibrated after India's Act Policy came into picture in 2014. Since its independence in 1947, India did not pay much focus towards its east and rather gave an overwhelming attention towards its west. This led to an attention deficit in India's foreign policy circles towards the Indo-Pacific region, which has been rectified in the last decade. After Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi assumed power in 2014, India rebranded its 'Look East Policy' and termed it 'Act East Policy'.¹

Interestingly, in 2011, Hillary Clinton (who was the then-United States [US] Secretary of State), during her visit to New Delhi, appealed to India to 'Act East' instead of just 'Looking East'. She pointed out the need for India to play a proactive role in the Asia-

Pacific region. The policy makers in the Ministry of External Affairs paid attention to her appeal and when the Bharatiya Janata Party ascended to power under Narendra Modi in 2014, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj declared that India was now ready to 'Act East'.²

India's Look East Policy came in 1992 under the leadership of India's then-PM PV Narasimha Rao, who was a far-sighted statesman.³ He knew how the Southeast Asian region was tilted towards the Western bloc under the influence of the US. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established in 1954, and the Philippines was one of its member states.⁴ India faced a structural constraint in that Pakistan was also a member of the same grouping; consequently, the presence of Pakistan limited the possibility of developing strong bilateral ties between India and other member states of SEATO. India, though non-aligned, was seen by the West as being tilted towards the Soviet Union. This Cold War geopolitics hampered India's prospects to build its presence in the Southeast Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific region.

As per an official speech at India's Central University of Mizoram by one of the India's retired ambassadors, Dilip Sinha, on this topic, he says, "After independence from European colonial rule, which came first to India and then in phases to Southeast Asia, there was a brief period of euphoria and high expectations. The Asian Relations Conference organised by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, even before India's independence, and the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955 gave rise to hopes of Asian solidarity and revival. These hopes faded very soon as the world became embroiled in the vicious Cold War between the communist forces led by the Soviet Union and China on the one side and the capitalist forces led by the United States on the other".⁵

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1991, the regional geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asian nations came out of the influence of the Cold War era.⁶ However, as history shows us, it took decades for countries like India to reach out to other countries in the region, like the Philippines, to channelise and solidify its bilateral ties. India also looks at this region's importance through a civilisational framework. Much scholarship has focused on India's extended neighbourhood

to the west, encompassing the Central Asian region. However, India's extended neighbourhood to the east has historically and civilisationally been the Southeast Asian region, which, as a geographical entity, forms a contiguous landmass connected to India's northeastern states. Therefore, when India talks about its Act East Policy, it also includes the country domestically looking towards its own northeastern states, which require attention from the central government.

Indo-Philippines Ties

The increase in the intensity of bilateral cooperation between the two nations is an indicator of India's larger ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. India wants to shed its status of 'Emerging Power' in the international system and aspires to become a 'Rising Power'. For this to happen, India has decided to not look at the Indo-Pacific and Oceania regions as 'Peripheral' concern but as its immediate issues. For long, India looked at this whole region as a periphery due to the Cold War geopolitics as well as great geographical distances between India's main geographical landmass and this region. Today, India cannot afford to look away from the region and, therefore, it has come up with policies like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), which has been upgraded to Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR). The Hindi word SAGAR means Sea, while MAHASAGAR means Ocean. These acronyms signify India's increasing maritime interests in the region.

These interests came into being when during President Marcos' visit to India, the Philippines and the Indian Navies conducted their first ever joint exercises in the South China Sea. These exercises were conducted in the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone, where India fielded its three warships, which included INS Delhi, INS Kiltan, and INS Shakti. On the other hand, the Philippines deployed two warships, which included BRP Jose Rizal and BRP Miguel Malvar. These exercises were a portrayal of mutual effort to counter China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea.

The Indo-Philippines bilateral ties are no longer ceremonial in their nature and character. India's attempts to do joint naval patrols, supplying BrahMos missiles, strengthening joint working groups on counterterrorism, etc., are measures that give a positive

indication towards a sustainable and stable strategic vision between these two countries.

President Marcos' visit was significant on multiple fronts as both the countries agreed to cooperate and work together on regional, multilateral, as well as international forums. For instance, India and the Philippines engage closely with each other at a regional level India's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the ASEAN. The Presidential delegation included a high-level business delegation, which signified the deep economic ties, especially the business-to-business ties between the two countries. President Marcos' visit to India's information technology capital Bengaluru further indicated the country's willingness to establish strong business ties with India. The two countries have adopted a plan of action for the next four years (2025-29) which will guide their strategic interests.

India's interests towards the Philippines and possibly in the future towards other Southeast Asian nations are guided by its vision to counter China in the region. Any effort that India does in the Indo-Pacific today cannot be bereft of China's lingering presence in the background. India needs to intensify its presence in the region because a new international order has started to shape up during the current United States (US) presidency under Donald Trump. India needs strong allies and all-time friends in the Indo-Pacific to balance China and, in turn, increase its own power. India is looking at attaining a strategic depth, especially in the maritime domain, in the Indo-Pacific region.

India recognises that a deeper level of friendship can be achieved only when people-to-people ties are strengthened. Millions of Indians travel to this region for vacations to destinations such as Manila, Bali, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur. For this reason, India has placed increasing emphasis on expanding tourism with the Philippines.

As per Rahul Mishra, Associate Professor in Indo-Pacific Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, "This strategic realignment extends into non-military domains too. For instance, India and the Philippines announced visa-free entry for Indian tourists and free e-visas for Filipino nationals, alongside plans for direct Delhi-Manila flights, expected to expand bilateral tourism

and people-to-people exchanges. It has not gone unnoticed in Manila that Thailand and Malaysia offered visa-free entry to Indian tourists and, as a result, saw great benefits in tourism. These recent moves promise to further strengthen people-to-people linkages between the two countries".⁷

New Delhi's partnership with Manila should not just be seen a measure to tackle and counter China. Rather, it should be a robust and proactive relationship that lasts for long. For the Philippines, acquiring the Brahmos missile system from India not only boosts its defence capabilities in the maritime domain, but today it has gained a greater strategic importance due to Manila's 'Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept'.⁸ India's BrahMos missiles will aid the Philippines in defending its entire archipelago. The budding maritime capability of the Philippines must be supported by its land-based anti-access/area denial capability. President Marcos' visit to India was not just symbolic but carried substance in the sense that India has become one of the five major strategic partners to the Philippines. The other four strategic partners are Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Australia.

India looks at the Philippines not only as a strategic partner but also as an important ASEAN member. New Delhi has backed Manila's position against China's 'Nine Dash' line claims. India has backed the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea tribunal arbitration award to the Philippines and has called China to respect the multilateral order in the Indo-Pacific. This has a significant impact on the sub-regional as well as regional geopolitical dynamics. For enhancing the bilateral maritime cooperation, India has invited the Philippines to join its Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). Hosted by the Indian Navy, the IFC-IOR is a maritime security centre which has been enhancing maritime domain awareness.

Deepening Cooperation

India–Philippines diplomatic relations, established on 26 Nov 1949, have now reached a significant turning point. The establishment of diplomatic ties between the two nations coincided with a historic moment, as it occurred on the same day that India formally adopted its Constitution. Today, in hindsight, the start of the bilateral diplomatic ties almost feels symbolic of the deep ties and friendships that these two countries can cultivate together. India

and the Philippines have elevated their ties to strategic partnership, but this can evolve into much deeper cooperation. The rise of China and the reluctance of the US to play its role in the international system is creating a seismic shift in the international order. The old strategic alliances are gradually shifting and creating space for new relations, ties, and cooperation to germinate. India should look at this as an opportunity for her to raise its stature regionally.

India and the Philippines have shared a history of strong defence tie-ups, which has been a pillar of strong bilateral cooperation between the two countries. This was showcased aptly on 19 Apr 2024, when India successfully delivered its first batch of the BrahMos missiles system to the Philippines.

The bilateral relationship between New Delhi and Manila could possibly shape up to become a new regional alliance, with other allied partners in the region joining such a framework. India has a high population with a huge consumer base. If economic ties can be boosted between India and the Philippines, it could naturally reflect in other strong converging issue areas. Yes, defence cooperation and strategic talks are considered high priority areas in the realist framework of international relations but, in the end, it is the people who matter the most. The people-to-people ties can only grow with an upward swing in the bilateral trade.

Conclusion

To sum it up, President Marcos' visit to India has started new conversations in the strategic circles within both the countries. This may open new doors for both the nations to grow from being strategic partners to become allies and possibly friends. Looking ahead, the challenge for India–Philippines relations lies in translating strategic intent into sustained outcomes. Strategic partnerships risks remain rhetorical if not supported by institutional depth, economic substance, and societal engagement. Regular high-level visits, implementation of the 2025–29 Plan of Action, and follow-through on signed agreements will be crucial in maintaining the momentum.

For India, success in the Philippines will serve as a template for broader engagement with Southeast Asia. It will demonstrate India's capacity to act as a credible Indo-Pacific power that

balances strategic ambition with diplomatic sensitivity. For the Philippines, partnership with India offers diversification, resilience, and access to an emerging power that shares its commitment to strategic autonomy. In this sense, Indo-Philippines relations are not merely bilateral in nature; they are reflective of a broader reordering of Asia's strategic landscape. As traditional power hierarchies evolve and new actors assert themselves, partnerships rooted in mutual respect, shared interests, and long-term vision will define the future of the Indo-Pacific.

Endnotes

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