Sustaining the U.S.-Philippines-Japan Triad

By Gregory B. Poling and Japhet Quitzon

THE ISSUE
China’s aggression in the South China Sea and increasingly aggressive posture toward Taiwan continue to pose a threat to the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. Recognizing the threat posed by Chinese revanchism, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States are working to deepen and better network their alliances. How can these partners better coordinate on a range of issues, including Beijing’s illegal behavior in the East and South China Seas and possible Taiwan contingencies? It is imperative that the three partners deepen strategic, military, and economic coordination to better understand and prepare for the roles each might play in a crisis.

INTRODUCTION
China is engaged in a geopolitical competition with the United States and a widening array of allies and partners—Japan and the Philippines most of all—who see their national interests directly threatened by Beijing’s choices. In its 2023 report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, the U.S. Department of Defense reiterated that China is the sole competitor with the will and ability to revise the international order. At the heart of Beijing’s increasingly contentious relationships with many states in the Indo-Pacific lies its coercive behavior in the South and East China Seas and across the Taiwan Strait. These mark the front lines of China’s efforts to revise the international order and the regional balance of power, and they are key flashpoints for a potential conflict that could implicate the United States and its allies.

China’s aggressive posturing in the South China Sea, exacerbated by the militarization of artificial island features, aims to reinforce its illegal claims to “historic rights” that intrude into neighboring countries’ exclusive economic zones. The China Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militia are engaged in regular, dangerous altercations with Philippine government and civilian vessels. Meanwhile, China continues to eat away at Japanese administrative control over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, with CCG vessels breaking records year-over-year for the amount of time spent loitering in the territorial seas around the islets. And in the waters around Taiwan, China regularly engages in coercive military exercises, including blockade simulations and missile launches, while near-constant incursions by its military aircraft and gray zone actors, such as civilian sand dredgers, strain the capacity of Taiwan’s armed forces and law enforcement.

The United States’ military alliances with the Philippines and Japan make the two countries strategically indispensable should conflict emerge in any of these flashpoints. Basing and access agreements in both countries allow the United States to project power in the region and could provide key
staging points for U.S. forces. The United States’ alliances with the Philippines and Japan are necessary to counter China’s aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific; moreover, the two countries will be on the front line of any potential escalation of conflict within the region. As such, building upon the foundation of cooperation with both countries is essential for the United States’ security strategy.

The United States, Japan, and the Philippines should urgently strengthen their partnerships with each other, reinforce the importance of cooperation, and assess the role their alliances can play in ensuring regional security. Most importantly, Japan and the Philippines should routinize convening with each other and further develop their bilateral security relationship. With increased tensions across the region, the three countries need a coherent and coordinated plan of action in the event of maritime or Taiwan contingencies. Bearing this in mind, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) convened a trilateral U.S.-Japan-Philippines track 2 strategic dialogue in September 2023 in Manila. The dialogue served as a platform for experts from the United States, the Philippines, and Japan to share insights, explore avenues for cooperation, address shortcomings, and better understand strategic outlooks in each country.

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Following a baseline discussion on threat perceptions and regional outlooks, the dialogue focused on two key themes: methods for countering Chinese gray zone coercion and the impacts of a Taiwan contingency on each country’s national interests. The dialogue informed the findings and recommendations of this report, but all opinions presented here are solely those of the authors.

THE U.S.-JAPAN-PHILIPPINES SECURITY TRIANGLE

Under President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., the U.S.-Philippines relationship has drastically shifted from the turbulence experienced under former president Rodrigo Duterte. While the difficulties in the relationship posed by the Duterte administration were not sufficient to topple the alliance altogether, the threatened abrogation of the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) nearly did so. Marcos, by contrast, has adopted a more forceful foreign policy and national security posture, standing up to Chinese bullying and seeking to deepen the U.S. alliance and security partnerships with like-minded countries such as Japan and Australia.

The modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), while a key priority of three successive Philippine administrations, remains a work in progress. In July 2023, Marcos suggested that the Philippines is only nearing the first stage of its modernization process, citing delays stemming from the pandemic. The Philippines is working to increase its capabilities, having made major investments in new naval, air, coast guard, and sensing platforms over the last decade. Manila is also seeking a land-based strike capability; it has finalized the purchase of BrahMos missiles from India and is exploring acquisition of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) from the United States. The Philippines is also weighing fighter jet options from the United States and Sweden.

The United States and the Philippines held their first in-person Bilateral Strategic Dialogue since the pandemic at the end of 2022 and issued an ambitious “Joint Vision Statement for a 21st Century U.S.-Philippines Partnership.” Among other things, that document laid out five key efforts to modernize the alliance and make it more equal, including pledges to (1) increase U.S. support for the modernization of the AFP; (2) implement and expand the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that allows U.S. forces to construct facilities, pre-position equipment, and rotate through select Philippine military units; (3) launch a new maritime security dialogue to coordinate responses to Chinese gray zone coercion; (4) negotiate the first ever set of mutual defense guidelines between the two countries; and (5) conclude a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). They managed the first four in just 18 months, continue to work on the military information agreement, and are adding new efforts such as the development of a security sector assistance roadmap to ensure U.S. assistance aligns with Philippine modernization goals.
EDCA originally provided the United States access to five Philippine military bases, though virtually no work had been undertaken at any of them prior to 2022. The Marcos administration expanded access to four additional sites, and the two sides have begun rapidly implementing upgrade plans at all of the bases. In November 2023, work concluded on the largest EDCA project to date, a refurbished runway at Basa Air Base that can accommodate larger aircraft and better serve the needs of U.S. and Philippine forces.

Meanwhile, the Philippines has deepened military cooperation with Australia and Japan as well as explored partnerships with other like-minded countries in Asia and Europe. In so doing, the Philippines has entered the ever more diversified alliance network in the Indo-Pacific. The old “hub-and-spokes” model, in which each bilateral alliance was a distinct node in a U.S.-centric system, is increasingly defunct. In its place, strategic coordination and security cooperation is flourishing among allies and partners united pragmatically by their own threat perceptions of China. This proliferation of bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral partnerships is creating a security matrix that is denser and more resilient, and less U.S.-centric, than the old hub-and-spokes system.

As a well-perceived partner with strong economic and security bona fides, Japan is well positioned to play a linking role among Indo-Pacific countries. Disruptions in the geopolitical order over the last few decades have prompted Japanese leaders to reimagine the role the country can play in preserving the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Late prime minister Abe Shinzo notably spearheaded the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, allowing Japan to engage in collective self-defense and emerge as a regional security provider in the face of a belligerent China, North Korea, and Russia. Under the direction of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, Japan relaxed postwar-era rules against the export of defense equipment in July 2023 and has continued to strengthen defense partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

In the face of shared challenges, Japan has become an important security partner to the Philippines. Japanese officials observed the largest-ever U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercises in April 2023. In a visit to the Philippines in November 2023, Prime Minister Kishida and President Marcos confirmed that the two countries are entering negotiations on a reciprocal access agreement (RAA), improving coordination between the AFP and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). A Japan-Philippines RAA, which would be Tokyo’s first with a Southeast Asian nation, would allow Japanese troops access to the Philippines for training and support. In addition to military coordination, the Kishida administration is working to bolster the capacity of the AFP. In the same November 2023 visit, Japan committed 12 ships to the Philippine Coast Guard and announced the delivery of surveillance radars to the Philippines as the first project under Japan’s new Official Security Assistance (OSA) program. The OSA program aims to strengthen the capabilities of Japanese partners through the provision of defense equipment and infrastructure development assistance.

**REGIONAL STRATEGIC ASSESSMENTS AND THREAT PERCEPTIONS**

The Philippines bears the brunt of Chinese harassment and violence in the South China Sea. Japan views the East and South China Seas as a connected theater and believes that helping Southeast Asian countries confront Chinese coercive behavior and illegal claims in the South China Sea is part and parcel to pushing back on Chinese revisionism across the region, including in the East China Sea, where China directly threatens Japanese interests. The United States similarly believes that it must support Philippine efforts to defend its rights and push back against China’s illegal maritime claims—or risk undermining both U.S. alliance credibility across the region and the freedom of the seas globally. On the South China Sea, then, the three allies are deeply aligned.

Tensions in the South China Sea are unlikely to die down any time soon. China’s maritime militia, together with the CCG, continues to operate in a dangerous, confrontational manner. There was sustained Chinese aggression toward Philippine mariners in 2023, including several collisions, as well as water cannon and laser incidents targeting Filipinos. Any one of these increasingly frequent incidents could be the spark that cascades into open conflict. After two collisions in late October 2023, the United States reiterated its commitment to defend the Philippines under the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT).

Despite continued reassurances, the United States should continue to reassure the Philippine strategic community of the depth and continuity of U.S. commitment.
This is the inevitable legacy of the United States being intentionally ambiguous about its alliance obligations in the South China Sea until 2019, and especially of the perceived failure of the Obama administration to adequately support Manila during the Scarborough Shoal crisis of 2012. Many policymakers have been pleased with the direction of the relationship under Presidents Marcos and Biden, but concerns remain about the United States’ reliability under future administrations. Additionally, experts express concerns that the Philippines is simply a means to an end in defending Taiwan. The United States will have to consistently rebut this line of attack by remaining focused on the Philippines’ primary concern, the South China Sea. Taiwan contingencies should become an increasingly important topic of coordination in the alliance but always remain secondary to the maritime disputes where Filipinos are under direct and daily threat.

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When it comes to Taiwan scenarios, U.S.-Philippines-Japan strategic alignment is much more contingent than it is in the South China Sea. The U.S. government has made clear that it will help Taiwan defend itself from Chinese aggression, as required by the Taiwan Relations Act, and is likely to directly intervene in the case of an overt attack across the strait. Japanese policymakers have been more circumspect, but Tokyo has been clear that the security of Taiwan and maintenance of the status quo is vital to Japanese security. And given U.S. basing in Japan and the proximity of Japanese territory to the island, it is hard to imagine an armed contingency across the strait that would not implicate Japan. Manila’s position is less clear. It acknowledges that the Philippines would be directly affected by any crisis around Taiwan given its proximity and the nearly 200,000 Filipino citizens living in Taiwan. Alliance obligations to the United States also play an important role, though the extent of the Philippines’ perceived obligations would depend on the nature of the crisis and the capability of the AFP at the time the crisis erupted.

The northernmost of the main Philippine islands, Luzon, is just around 200 miles from the southern coast of Taiwan. In a Taiwan contingency, the Philippines’ strategic location could greatly assist the United States’ ability to respond to a crisis; however, that proximity to a potential conflict also directly puts Philippine territory and citizens in harm’s way. Any major armed contingency on or around Taiwan would present an economic and humanitarian crisis for the Philippines. As the nearest potential safe harbor, the volume of refugees escaping the conflict would be likely to quickly overwhelm Philippine capacity. The Philippine government would not only be consumed by the need to evacuate its own citizens but also likely face pressure to act as a staging point for the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of overseas workers from the rest of Southeast Asia and farther afield who reside in Taiwan. To make matters worse, the Philippines is underprepared for a conflict on multiple fronts. Should conflict emerge in the Taiwan Strait, skirmishes in the South China Sea could quickly destabilize and open another front that the AFP would be ill-equipped to manage alone.

**ALLIANCE COORDINATION IN A TAIWAN CONTINGENCY**

The likelihood of a Taiwan contingency remains hotly debated. Most likely, an amphibious invasion across the Taiwan Strait would come with plenty of warning; limited military action, however, may be more difficult to detect. Hostilities would be preceded by signs that would inform the U.S., Japanese, and Philippine responses. Social media chatter, the repositioning of troops, and increases in ammunition production, among other indicators, could signal China’s intentions in the weeks and months before any conflict. Ideally, the triad would be able to heed these warning signs and coordinate messaging, force distribution, and evacuation of citizens. The United States would likely request access to the EDCA sites for the pre-positioning of equipment, though which types and whether they would be accompanied by large numbers of U.S. troops would be highly politically sensitive in Manila.

Should the situation deteriorate, the Philippines would likely be called on to play a leading role in staging and coordinating noncombatant evacuation operations and establishing a humanitarian corridor with Taiwan, given its
geographic proximity. Consequently, there must be major adjustments to the Philippines’ state of preparations, and Manila cannot make them alone. The three allies should be in lockstep before any conflict begins. Information sharing and joint messaging, though demonstrative of the triad’s unity, should also be accompanied by coordinated strategic planning. Coordination with the United States and Japan, and even with Taiwan, is of paramount importance to achieve strategic aims in the region in the event of a contingency.

Given Taiwan’s proximity to the Philippines, the Marcos administration must be adequately prepared. Marcos has suggested that Taiwan’s proximity to Luzon makes it “hard to imagine” that the country could avoid conflict. When discussing the expansion of EDCA sites, Marcos remarked that though the bases were originally for training and disaster response, they could be used in a response to a Taiwan crisis, namely in evacuating the 150,000 to 200,000 Filipino migrant workers in the country. The Marcos administration’s National Security Policy 2023–2028 largely echoes Marcos’s statements, indicating that military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would “inevitably affect” the Philippines due to Taiwan’s geographic proximity. However, the policy, which dedicates only a short paragraph to Taiwan, suggests that the administration is still thinking through the full ramifications of a conflict across the strait.

Meanwhile, the AFP is still undergoing a generational restructuring and modernization and must make the transition from internal security to external defense before it will be capable of playing any sophisticated role in a coordinated allied response to regional crises. If conflict over Taiwan spreads into the South China Sea, the Philippines is underequipped to defend its territory and waters on multiple fronts. Philippine outposts in the Spratly Islands are currently indefensible, and if China actually threatened to expand the conflict to the Philippines, the AFP would likely have to prioritize defense of the home islands. To further complicate matters, the Philippines is unprepared to withstand sustained economic pressure. The combination of its lack of critical minerals and strategic resource stockpiles, easily disrupted supply chains, and limited industrial capacity to produce munitions and supplies within the country means that the Philippines would be unable to sustain itself in an extended conflict without major support from an outside partner such as the United States or Japan.

Given the Philippines’ desire to be treated as an equal in its alliance with the United States, it must recognize that the mutual defense obligations of Articles 4 and 5 run both ways. The Philippines has a long history of supporting the United States in times of conflict, from the Korean War and Vietnam to Iraq. With the exception of Korea, none of those deployments involved major Philippine combat forces, but they indicate that the Philippines would be expected to play some role if U.S. forces are under attack in a regional contingency.

EDCA builds on the long-standing frameworks of the VFA and MDT, offering significant benefits to both sides, not least by facilitating AFP modernization and greater interoperability. Though military dialogue and coordination at senior levels are improving, the AFP remains a long way from developing the level of interconnectedness with the U.S. military enjoyed by its Japanese counterparts. Through joint exercises such as Balikatan, the AFP is increasing its interoperability with U.S. forces, but bilateral military-to-military dialogue remains focused on tactical planning for engagements, not larger-scale strategic planning.

The United States should not be the only factor linking the triad together; ties between Japan and the Philippines must be fostered as well. Though facing challenges, the U.S.-Philippines line of communication is robust in comparison to the state of Japan-Philippines coordination. The two countries are making greater strides in military cooperation, but the basic frameworks of coordination are still in development. As of this writing, Japan and the Philippines have yet to sign an RAA, toward which negotiations have only just begun. But this follows significant progress on a Japan-Philippines Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Terms of Reference made in February 2023, which simplifies the procedures for JSDF visits for humanitarian cooperation, so the access agreement might be concluded relatively quickly. Beyond formal military channels, the Philippine and Japanese strategic communities do not often interact, with participants in the CSIS dialogue noting that they are much more likely to be convened by third parties such as CSIS than by domestic organizations. Cooperation between the JSDF and the AFP could significantly augment Philippine capacity to monitor key chokepoints around the archipelago, such as the Bashi Channel in the Luzon Strait.
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Crucially, the three partners should also have economic plans in place, including supportive measures to help sustain the triad’s economies, especially the Philippines’ shock-sensitive economy. Importantly, they should also coordinate punitive measures to constrain China, if it decides to use force, with a global coalition of like-minded allies. As an archipelagic state, the Philippines is exceedingly vulnerable to external shocks—any disruptions in the country’s energy and supply chains would not only complicate everyday function within the country but impact the ability of both the Philippines and the United States to conduct security operations from the country. In the event of a conflict, the Philippines’ internal stability is in danger. With very little stockpiled matériel and food, it would face severe difficulty in maintaining order without outside support.

Philippine fears about economic vulnerability are exacerbated by the Biden administration’s protectionist approach to trade. Instead of cementing free trade agreements and expanding market access to Southeast Asian economies such as the Philippines, the United States is emphasizing less ambitious agreements such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), of which only the supply chain, green energy, and anti-corruption and taxation pillars have been concluded. Philippine partners are concerned that the lack of concrete deliverables in IPEF, notably the lack of market access to the United States, leaves regional economies vulnerable to shocks stemming from Chinese economic coercion. Without free trade agreements to shore up support for the United States and decrease the reliance of regional countries on China, the Philippines’ Southeast Asian neighbors will be less likely to support it, or the United States, in a regional crisis. The United States, though currently unwilling to embark on further free trade agreements, should consider alternative arrangements together with Japan to safeguard the economic security of the Philippines and the larger region, which is intrinsically tied to national security.

RESPONDING TO GRAY ZONE CHALLENGES
All three allies have spent more than a decade learning from and honing responses to Chinese gray zone tactics. What is lacking most is coordination among the three. Working on joint responses to gray zone contingencies is the focus of the new U.S.-Philippines maritime security dialogue as well as a wide array of tabletop engagements, joint exercises, and exchanges between the two sides over the last two years. Further cooperation on this front will be facilitated by the conclusion of the GSOMIA. And similar efforts between the Philippines and Japan, as well as in the trilateral context, seem likely once the Philippines-Japan RAA is concluded. But a successful, coordinated strategy to confront Chinese gray zone coercion over the long term is not just about operational activity; it also hinges on effective messaging to maintain public support, rally the international community, and defend against mis- and disinformation campaigns.

In its actions and statements, China often strips the Philippines of its agency and paints it as an actor dependent on the United States. From China’s perspective, the Philippines has limited sovereignty and little to no agency over key issues. China believes that if the United States were not behind the Philippines and Japan, the two countries would have no will to oppose Beijing’s maritime claims and coercive regional behavior. As such, China resorts to gray zone tactics aimed at steadily changing the status quo without provoking U.S. intervention. Were these tactics to succeed, they would drive a wedge between the partners. China’s gray zone behaviors targeting Japan around the Senkaku Islands cannot be seen as separate from those it employs against the Philippines in the South China Sea or to cow Taiwan; they are all part of Beijing’s regional strategy.

Consequently, the triad must maintain a firm handle on its narrative and messaging. Though the United States and Japan are not monoliths, most individuals in their respective strategic communities and wider publics agree on the threat posed by China, if not on how to deal with the issue. Conversely, it is unclear in the Philippines to what extent members of leadership and the public are supportive of efforts to counter Chinese aggression not just in the South China Sea but across the region. Philippine strategic and media elites have yet to coalesce behind a unifying message. Certain groups within the country believe that U.S. involvement will only drag the Philippines into a
conflict over Taiwan, calling to junk EDCA and promoting Philippine self-determination.

Disinformation and pro-China narratives circulating on Philippine airwaves and cyberspace exacerbate the issue and threaten to disrupt a national effort to prepare the country against a contingency in the South China Sea. These information operations promoting pro-China content are rampant throughout cyberspace, downplaying aggressive Chinese behavior and placing the blame instead on the United States or even the Philippine Coast Guard. Though regular updates and messaging from the Philippine Coast Guard under the current government have played a positive role in informing the public, stakeholders have raised concerns about the staying power of that messaging campaign, as senior officers and government officials inevitably change positions. With no codified script or guidelines for this messaging campaign, it is unclear whether such counter-disinformation tactics have the institutional support to continue for the long term. Japanese government messaging about Chinese patrols in the territorial sea around the Senkakus, as well as its aerial incursions into Japan’s air defense identification zone, is instructive. Tokyo has been remarkably consistent in documenting and publicizing both for more than a decade.

Chinese economic influence in the Philippines could also be a constraining force that prevents the Philippine government from taking decisive action against future aggression. Though it is important to note that the extent of this vulnerability is hotly debated, the Philippines is less exposed to Chinese trade, investment, and development assistance than the rest of Southeast Asia, and prior cases of Chinese economic coercion in the Indo-Pacific and Europe have a poor track record of achieving Beijing’s desired outcomes. Nonetheless, workshop participants raised concerns about the influence China could wield with stakes in vital public services, ranging from telecommunications to the electricity grid. At the very least, it is important for the Philippines in particular to remain vigilant about Chinese investments in critical national infrastructure that could provide Beijing with points of leverage in future crises.

**KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Finding:** The Philippines is vulnerable to energy and supply chain shocks, made worse by the lack of stockpiled matériel and food and absence of robust domestic production. The United States and its allies should ensure that the Philippine economy remains robust: any societal disruption resulting from a South China Sea crisis or Taiwan contingency jeopardizes the operational capacity of allied troops operating from the country.

- **Recommendation 1:** The United States should deepen its economic relationship with the Philippines. Partners do not perceive IPEF as an adequate safety net from Chinese coercion, much less a protracted conflict. The United States should do more to encourage U.S. investors to take a serious look at the increasingly open Philippine economy, including by lifting travel advisories to Davao and other safe areas of Mindanao, and encourage the development of local manufacturers and industries, supporting the Philippines’ domestic ability to pursue its national security aims. Though free trade agreements are not currently being pursued by the Biden administration, the proliferation of such agreements in the Philippines and Southeast Asia could serve as a bulwark against Chinese economic coercion.

- **Recommendation 2:** The United States and Japan should continue aiding the Philippines in exploring more reliable energy options. In November 2023, the United States and the Philippines signed a nuclear cooperation agreement aimed at helping the Philippines deploy small modular nuclear reactors that could fit the country’s energy needs. Cheap, reliable energy in the Philippines is vital to the resilience and effectiveness of security operations.

- **Recommendation 3:** The United States and Japan should continue providing support to the Philippines in modernizing its armed forces. The two countries should play to their strengths and coordinate their assistance to prevent duplicative measures. Aid from Japan has vastly improved the ability of the Philippine Coast Guard to respond to incursions, while U.S. equipment and munitions can firm up the Philippines’ ability to defend its shores. Like Taiwan’s “porcupine” strategy, the Philippines needs to acquire hardware and technology that will serve as an asymmetric deterrent to aggression. Though military aid is crucial, the United States and Japan should also assist the Philippines in growing homegrown defense industries, aiming to
provide jobs and increase the country’s capacity for homegrown self-defense. The Philippines currently has very few domestic defense manufacturers.

**Finding:** Though the U.S.-Philippines and U.S.-Japan alliances are firmly ingrained in the security network of each respective country, the Japan-Philippines defense relationship is only beginning to take off. The U.S.-Philippines alliance withstood several key shocks under the administrations of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte and U.S. president Donald Trump that challenged the bedrock of the alliance. Though Presidents Biden and Marcos have reversed the situation for now, their terms in office are finite, and gains are not guaranteed to stick. Commitment to the relationship and its goals should remain consistent throughout administrations.

- **Recommendation 4:** The United States, the Philippines, and Japan should deepen and improve network defense ties. Participants noted that the complicated web of bureaucracy beneath the political level was instrumental to the preservation of defense agreements during the Duterte and Trump administrations. Implementing the mutual defense guidelines, maritime security dialogue, security sector assistance roadmap, GSOMIA, and other alliance coordination mechanisms will make the alliance even more resilient in both countries. Similar efforts are needed for Japan and the Philippines, starting with the conclusion of the RAA.

- **Recommendation 5:** Lawmakers from all three countries should convene regularly to discuss shared challenges and explore opportunities for collaboration. Regardless of the ruling administration, elected officials should be well informed and in communication with each other. A significant number of invested lawmakers could help spread awareness of issues in their respective legislatures, lobby the executive branch, and maintain ballast in the alliances from administration to administration.

- **Recommendation 6:** Decentralization of security policy from the Philippine executive branch, the codification of the Philippines’ 2016 arbitral ruling, and the codification of procedures for AFP and Philippine Coast Guard messaging will ensure the strength of the Philippines’ military engagements with its allies. President Duterte’s pro-China, anti-U.S. rhetoric was tempered by service members and bureaucrats who recognized the importance of the U.S.-Philippines military relationship. Decentralization from the executive branch and the empowerment of institutions to codify effective strategies and legal victories will mitigate the chance of dramatic (and unpopular) foreign policy realignments.

**Finding:** Disinformation and misinformation operations are among the greatest challenges facing allied cooperation in the region. Chinese influence operations are particularly worrying in the Philippines.

- **Recommendation 7:** The triad should create a unified front through harmonized messaging and coordinated anti-disinformation campaigns. Building off the dialogues suggested in Recommendations 4 and 5, coordinated messaging limits China’s ability to wedge the triad apart. Countering Chinese disinformation in all three countries with credible, accessible, and fact-based reporting will help delegitimize Chinese narratives aimed at dividing public opinion.

**Finding:** Taiwan has almost no seat in the conversation in the Philippines regarding allied responses to a Taiwan contingency. Workshop participants found engagements with Taiwan challenging and rare. Taiwanese participation in at least track 2 discussions with the Philippines and the triad overall are of growing importance.

- **Recommendation 8:** Taiwanese participants should be included in more dialogues with the Philippine strategic community to shed light on important information necessary to future alliance planning. The strategic community should engage with Taiwanese counterparts on a track 2 basis to achieve deeper understanding of Taiwan’s concerns and vulnerabilities, with the hope of steering the triad in a more supportive, integrated, and coordinated direction. At the base level, even discussing noncombatant evacuation operations would be deeply insightful for the triad, as it will likely be instrumental in making such evacuations possible.
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