

A Study on the Impact of the Military Agreement Signed Between Japan and the Philippines on China's South China Sea Game and Countermeasures

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Abstract

The Japanese House of Representatives' approval of the Reciprocal Access Agreement with the Philippines marks a substantial stage in bilateral defense cooperation. As a key component of the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy," this agreement essentially uses bilateral military cooperation to intervene in the South China Sea issue, constructing a US-Japan-Philippines "triangular containment" framework to squeeze China's strategic space. This analysis shows that the agreement exacerbates the South China Sea sovereignty dispute, creates intelligence suppression against China, and contributes to the construction of a military encirclement of China. In the short term, it intensifies regional tensions, and in the medium to long term, it worsens my country's territorial maritime security environment and hinders relevant consultations between China and ASEAN. In response to these impacts, this paper proposes targeted countermeasures from three dimensions: strengthening sovereignty protection and risk assessment, deepening economic ties to dismantle the encirclement, and innovating regional narratives to shape a cooperation paradigm. These countermeasures provide support for China to address new challenges in the South China Sea game and maintain regional peace and stability.

Keywords

Japan-Philippines military agreement; South China Sea game; containment of China; countermeasures and suggestions.

1. Introduction

The South China Sea, located in southern China, covers an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers and encompasses the Dongsha, Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha Islands. It not only possesses abundant natural resources such as oil and gas and fisheries but is also one of the world's busiest maritime routes, carrying over 80% of my country's energy transport and trade routes and over 30% of global merchant shipping traffic, making its strategic position extremely important. For a long time, China has possessed indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and their adjacent waters. This position has ample historical and legal basis and is explicitly supported by international rules such as the UN Charter and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

However, in recent years, with the profound adjustments in the global geopolitical landscape, the South China Sea issue has gradually become an important tool for external forces to intervene in Asia-Pacific affairs and contain China's development. The United States, as a country outside the region, disregards the historical context of the South China Sea issue and China's core interests, continuously advancing its "Indo-Pacific Strategy." Through methods such as courting regional allies, strengthening its military presence, and hyping up the "China threat theory," it constantly disrupts peace and stability in the South China Sea region, attempting to turn the South China Sea into a "frontline for containing China." Against this

backdrop, Japan and the Philippines, as key US allies in the Asia-Pacific region, have gradually accelerated their defense cooperation. From initial diplomatic communication and military exercises, their cooperation has escalated to the signing of substantive military agreements, forming a coordinated containment strategy against China.

The signing and entry into force of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement is a milestone in bilateral defense cooperation and a significant step in implementing the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy" in the South China Sea. This agreement breaks the traditional constraints on the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' overseas operations, granting them free access to Philippine territory, territorial waters, and airspace, as well as the right to conduct military operations. It also promotes deep collaboration in intelligence, technology, logistics, and other fields, essentially establishing a military cooperation system of "Japan-Philippines collaboration, backed by the United States." The implementation of this agreement will not only directly alter the military balance of power in the South China Sea and intensify sovereignty disputes and security confrontations in the region, but will also have a series of chain reactions affecting China's maritime strategic passage security and regional diplomatic landscape, posing new challenges to China's South China Sea game.

Currently, domestic and international academic research on Japan-Philippines defense cooperation and the South China Sea game has yielded some results. However, most studies either focus on a single dimension of bilateral cooperation or emphasize the overall landscape of the South China Sea issue. Systematic research on the specific impact of the Reciprocal Access Agreement on China's South China Sea game, the risk transmission path, and targeted countermeasures after its entry into force remains to be improved. Based on this, this paper, building upon the core viewpoints of the original text and considering the latest situation in the South China Sea region, further supplements the background explanation, detailed arguments, and data support. It systematically analyzes the multiple impacts of the Japan-Philippines military agreement on China's South China Sea game, and proposes practical countermeasures, providing theoretical reference and practical support for my country to cope with new challenges in the South China Sea game, safeguard national sovereignty and security, and promote regional peace and stability.

2. Background and Core Content of the Military Agreement Signed between Japan and the Philippines

2.1. Historical Context of the Agreement's Signing

The signing of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement was not accidental, but rather a result of global geopolitical adjustments, changes in regional security needs, and the convergence of bilateral interests. Behind it lies a profound historical context and complex considerations of interests. From a global perspective, the geopolitical landscape is undergoing a profound shift, with the East rising and the West declining. The increasingly fierce strategic competition between China and the United States has become a core factor influencing the security landscape of the Asia-Pacific region. To maintain its global hegemony, the United States continues to shift its strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region, advancing its "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and attempting to contain China's rise by building an "alliance system" and a "values-based alliance." As a key battleground in the Sino-US strategic competition, the South China Sea has naturally become a key area for the United States to court regional allies and strengthen its military presence. The United States has continuously pressured allies such as Japan and the Philippines to strengthen their defense cooperation, forming an "encirclement" against China, providing external impetus for the signing of the Japan-Philippines military agreement.

From a regional perspective, the security situation in the South China Sea is becoming increasingly complex, with territorial disputes escalating and regional countries experiencing

rising security anxieties. In recent years, the Philippines has consistently adopted a hardline stance on the South China Sea issue, repeatedly sending coast guard vessels and fishing boats to illegally intrude into the waters of Ren'ai Reef and Huangyan Island in the Spratly Islands, attempting to challenge China's sovereignty and jurisdiction, leading to frequent maritime standoffs between China and the Philippines. According to the China Coast Guard's "South China Sea Rights Protection Operations Report," from January to May 2025, Philippine coast guard vessels illegally intruded into Chinese territorial waters 23 times, a 92% increase compared to the same period last year. The duration of each standoff increased from 12 hours to over 72 hours, indicating a continued escalation of regional tensions. The Philippines, with its weak military capabilities, is unable to confront China alone and therefore urgently needs the support of external allies. Deepening defense cooperation with Japan is a key driving force behind the Philippines' push for a military agreement with Japan.

From Japan's perspective, in recent years, Japan has continuously broken free from the constraints of its "Peace Constitution," pursuing a "military normalization" strategy in an attempt to escape the limitations of post-war military development, become a "military power," and expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. The South China Sea is a crucial energy transportation route and a strategic area of interest for Japan. Japan has consistently sought to intervene in the South China Sea issue, aiming to expand its military presence and influence in the region by deepening defense cooperation with neighboring countries like the Philippines. Simultaneously, it seeks to leverage the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy" to solidify its alliance with the US and enhance its position in the regional landscape. Furthermore, Japan and China also have territorial disputes in the East China Sea. By coordinating with the Philippines, Japan can create a "coordinated east-west" situation, diverting China's strategic attention and gaining more initiative in the East China Sea issue.

From a bilateral perspective, Japan and the Philippines have a long-standing foundation and shared interests in defense cooperation. In recent years, the two countries have frequently conducted high-level visits, military exercises, and intelligence exchanges, gradually deepening mutual trust and cooperation in the defense field. In July 2024, Japan and the Philippines held a "2+2" (Foreign Ministers + Defense Ministers) meeting and formally signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement. This came against the backdrop of renewed tensions in the South China Sea between China and the Philippines due to a ship collision, with both sides attempting to strengthen military cooperation to jointly address the so-called "regional security threat." In addition, Japan has gradually expanded its influence in the Philippines by providing defense equipment, infrastructure assistance, and military training, while the Philippines hopes to enhance its defense capabilities with the help of Japanese military technology and financial support. The increasing convergence of interests between the two sides laid a solid foundation for the signing and implementation of the agreement.

2.2. Core Contents of the Agreement

The Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement revolves around mutual visits, deployments, cooperation, and logistical support between the two countries' military forces. It breaks down many restrictions on the overseas operations of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and represents a substantial upgrade in defense cooperation between the two nations. Its core contents mainly include the following aspects:

First, it grants both sides the right to free movement of military forces. The agreement explicitly stipulates that the JSDF and Philippine military can freely enter and exit each other's territory, territorial waters, and airspace without cumbersome approval procedures, requiring only prior notification to the relevant departments. This provision breaks the traditional constraints of "restricted overseas operations" for the JSDF, enabling the JSDF to routinely deploy troops and

conduct military operations in the Philippines, further expanding Japan's military presence in the South China Sea region.

Second, it promotes regular joint military exercises. The agreement explicitly supports joint military exercises, joint patrols, counter-terrorism operations, and disaster relief operations between Japan and the Philippines in the South China Sea and surrounding areas. Both sides can share military training grounds, equipment, and technical resources to enhance their joint operational capabilities. In fact, since the signing of the agreement, Japan and the Philippines have conducted joint military exercises in the South China Sea on multiple occasions. In April 2025, the Japan Coast Guard officially announced its participation in the Philippines' "regular patrols" on Ren'ai Reef and conducted trilateral joint law enforcement exercises with the US and Philippine Coast Guards, further escalating the military confrontation in the South China Sea.

Third, the agreement establishes a comprehensive intelligence-sharing mechanism. It explicitly stipulates that Japan and the Philippines will establish a military intelligence-sharing mechanism to share information on the maritime situation, military deployments, and intelligence reconnaissance in the South China Sea. This will be combined with the previously signed Military Information Protection Agreement (MIPA) to ensure the secure transmission and efficient use of intelligence. Currently, Japan has deployed the J/FPS-3MEs active phased array radar system at the San Fernando Air Base in northern Philippines, with a coverage range of up to 350 nautical miles. This system directly monitors Scarborough Shoal and the Bashi Channel and is linked to radar systems in Okinawa. Through intelligence sharing, both sides can obtain real-time information on the movements of Chinese Coast Guard and naval vessels, thus exerting intelligence pressure on my country.

Fourth, the agreement improves logistical support cooperation between the two sides. The agreement explicitly stipulates that Japan and the Philippines will conduct in-depth cooperation in areas such as logistical support, equipment maintenance, and material resupply. During military operations in the Philippines, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) can use Philippine military bases, ports, airports, and other facilities, and the Philippines will provide logistical support and guarantees to the JSDF. Conversely, Japan will also provide corresponding logistical support and technical support to the Philippine military. Furthermore, the agreement allows for military-technical cooperation, with Japan providing the Philippines with defense equipment and military-technical training to help enhance the Philippines' defense capabilities.

Fifth, the agreement clarifies the applicable laws and the division of responsibilities between the two sides. It explicitly stipulates that during military operations in the Philippines, the JSDF will be subject to relevant Japanese laws, and the Philippine government will provide necessary legal protection to the JSDF. At the same time, the responsibilities in the military cooperation process are clearly defined to avoid legal disputes and liability controversies arising from military operations. In addition, the agreement allows third-party contractors to participate in data analysis and other related work, which also provides an opportunity for external forces to intervene in Japan-Philippines military cooperation and steal relevant intelligence.

3. Analysis of the Impact of the Military Agreement Signed Between Japan and the Philippines on China's South China Sea Game

(1) Escalation of the South China Sea Sovereignty Dispute, Endangering the Strategic Balance in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. China and Japan and the Philippines have long had maritime and island sovereignty disputes. According to the China Coast Guard's "South China Sea Rights Protection Operations Report," from January to May 2025, Philippine coast guard vessels illegally entered Chinese territorial waters 23 times, a 92% increase compared to the

same period last year, with the duration of each standoff increasing from 12 hours to over 72 hours. In July 2024, Japan and the Philippines signed the "2+2" RAA agreement, against the backdrop of renewed tensions in the South China Sea due to collisions between their vessels. With the deepening of the Japan-Philippines alliance, the two countries have reached a consensus on their stance on the South China Sea issue. Therefore, Japan may further increase its maritime military assistance to the Philippines to counter my country's maritime power, which will have a more serious impact on South China Sea sovereignty. According to a report by the Nikkei Asian Review, the Japanese government has decided to include the Philippines and three other countries as recipients of its "Government Security Capability Enhancement Support" program for fiscal year 2024, providing them with defense equipment and infrastructure assistance free of charge. In April 2025, the Japan Coast Guard officially announced its participation in the Philippines' "regular patrols" on Ren'ai Reef and conducted joint law enforcement exercises with the US and Philippine Coast Guards. This move directly challenges China's actual control over Ren'ai Reef, leading to a surge in maritime confrontations between China and the Philippines and potentially triggering direct US intervention. For example, if a collision occurs between China and the Philippines in the waters around Ren'ai Reef in March 2025, prompting the Philippines to urgently request military support from the United States, the US will subsequently declare that the "US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty" applies to the disputed waters of the South China Sea. If such frictions continue to escalate, they could trigger the military linkage mechanism under Article 5 of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, jeopardizing the regional strategic balance.

(2) Japan and the Philippines seek to establish a surveillance network to suppress our intelligence. The RAA agreement, coupled with the signing of the Military Information Protection Agreement (MIPA) between Japan and the Philippines, will significantly enhance the joint surveillance capabilities of the two countries in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait, forming a continuous intelligence tracking system over my country's eastern and southern maritime strategic passages. Currently, Japan has deployed the J/FPS-3MEs active phased array radar system at its San Fernando Air Base in the northern Philippines, with a coverage range of up to 350 nautical miles. This system directly monitors Scarborough Shoal and the Bashi Channel and is linked to radar systems in Okinawa. This allows Japan and the Philippines to obtain real-time information on the movements of my country's coast guard and naval vessels. Furthermore, the intelligence sharing mechanism under the agreement's framework risks making my country's routine exercises in the South China Sea "transparent," increasing instability in the region. The South China Sea carries over 80% of my country's energy transport and trade routes. By sharing radar data, satellite reconnaissance information (such as the ALOS-3 satellite), and underwater sonar networks, Japan and the Philippines are constructing a "dynamic blockade line" from the Strait of Malacca to the Taiwan Strait, directly threatening the safe passage of merchant ships in the region. The Japan-Philippines agreement, along with the US-Philippines agreement, completes the crucial piece of the "iron triangle intelligence circle," enabling the three countries to automate the integration of South China Sea intelligence through "data relay stations" such as Clark Air Base, and directly connect to the US Indo-Pacific Command, forming 24/7 monitoring of my country's South China Sea communication system. Any local conflict could also escalate rapidly into regional confrontation due to the US-Japan-Philippines agreement, compressing my country's diplomatic maneuvering space. The agreement's provisions allowing third-party contractors to participate in data analysis could also lead to the indirect theft of core intelligence such as my country's military deployments and diplomatic communications due to the Philippines' weak intelligence protection system.

(3) Constructing a military encirclement of China in line with the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy." The deepening of military cooperation between Japan and the Philippines is essentially a

tactical implementation of the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy." The Japan-Philippines agreement will deeply integrate with the US-led military alliance, jointly forming a multi-layered military encirclement against my country; for example, in March 2025, the four countries signed the "Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Security Cooperation," explicitly stating the "shared operational mandate" in disputed waters of the South China Sea and establishing a joint intelligence center. In the current geopolitical situation in the South China Sea, strategic ties between the US-UK-Australia trilateral security partnerships and the US-Japan-South Korea quadrilateral security mechanism have become closer. For example, Japan has reached Relational Aid Agreements (RAA) with Australia and the UK, India is attempting to strengthen defense cooperation with the US, Japan, and Australia, and there are calls in Philippine politics to strengthen regional security cooperation. These developments provide a solid foundation for the US to advance more flexible military cooperation mechanisms based on its Indo-Pacific strategy. Against this backdrop, the Japan-Philippines agreement will facilitate the US integration of Japan's intelligence processing capabilities and the Philippines' geopolitical leverage, thereby enabling "offshore balancing" to exert military pressure and economic threat against China. Simultaneously, Japan will achieve its overseas penetration and expansion of its so-called "security capabilities," paving the way for future intervention in a Taiwan Strait conflict and undermining regional peace and stability. Given the Philippines' status as a founding member of ASEAN, its deepening military and defense cooperation with Japan and its hostile attitude on the South China Sea issue may further worsen relations between China and ASEAN and its member states. This could not only restrict the further expansion of economic and trade cooperation, but also prompt countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam to adjust their strategies toward China and seek external support, thus hindering the consultation process of the China-ASEAN Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

4. Relevant Countermeasures and Recommendations

(1) Strengthen Sovereignty Safeguards and Enhance Risk Assessment. Accelerate the technological upgrading of the South China Sea island and reef defense system, deploy quantum radar, low-orbit satellites, and AI-driven marine monitoring systems, and construct an all-weather, full-spectrum monitoring network for disputed waters. Promote the deep integration of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System with reef communication facilities to ensure the concealment of military operations and the anti-jamming capability of command links. Utilize think tank channels to expose to the international community the legal flaws of the US-Japan-Philippines intelligence-sharing mechanism in violation of Article 279 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Regularly publish the "White Paper on Navigation Safety in the South China Sea," and organize non-traditional security projects such as the "Joint Search and Rescue Exercise in the South China Sea" to counteract military narratives with transparent actions.

(2) Deepen Economic Ties and Dismantle Multilateral Encirclement. Expand infrastructure investment in countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia based on the RCEP framework, and enhance ASEAN's economic dependence on China through deep integration of the industrial chain. Accelerate consultations on the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea," and promote the establishment of the "China-ASEAN Maritime Dispute Mediation Committee," shifting the focus of the issue from military confrontation to rule-making. Invite Vietnam and Brunei to participate in joint exploration of resources in the South China Sea, using a benefit-sharing mechanism to divide the military alliance. Consider appropriate countermeasures against the Philippines, such as suspending some economic and trade projects and strengthening cooperation with local forces in the country. Apply a dual approach of "historical and contemporary" pressure on Japan, leveraging the 80th anniversary of the victory against

Japan to release archives of Japanese atrocities in the South China Sea, weakening its moral basis for intervention.

(3) Innovate regional narratives and shape cooperation paradigms. Proactively propose the "South China Sea Peace and Development Initiative," establish the "Indo-Pacific Maritime Fund" to fund ASEAN countries in coral reef restoration, oil and gas exploration and development, shifting the focus from military to sustainable development. Utilize short video platforms and overseas social media to produce multilingual historical documentaries about the South China Sea, systematically refuting the so-called "inherent territory" argument. Promote the establishment of the "Asian Maritime Security Cooperation Organization," attracting participation from India, Malaysia, and others, providing a more inclusive dialogue platform than the United States. Accelerate the construction of the "Digital Silk Road," providing neighboring countries with new infrastructure such as BeiDou navigation and quantum communication, forming a path dependence on cooperation with China.

5. Conclusion

The signing and entry into force of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement is an inevitable result of global geopolitical adjustments and the advancement of the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy." It marks a substantial stage in defense cooperation between Japan and the Philippines and also presents new challenges to China's South China Sea game. The implementation of this agreement not only exacerbates sovereignty disputes and military confrontation in the South China Sea and creates intelligence suppression against China, but also cooperates with the US in constructing a military encirclement of China, worsening China's regional diplomatic landscape. Faced with these challenges, my country should adhere to a "bottom-line mentality," balancing sovereignty protection with regional cooperation. This can be achieved through diverse measures, including strengthening sovereignty protection, improving risk prevention and control systems, deepening economic ties, dismantling multilateral containment patterns, innovating regional narratives, and shaping a paradigm of peaceful cooperation. These measures will precisely address various risks and challenges, resolutely safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests.

At the same time, my country should always adhere to the path of peaceful development, uphold the principles of equal consultation and mutual benefit with ASEAN countries, accelerate the consultation process on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, promote the construction of a new regional cooperation mechanism, and guide the South China Sea region from "military confrontation" to "cooperative development," achieving peace, stability, and common development in the South China Sea region. The resolution of the South China Sea issue is not something that can be achieved overnight. It requires my country's long-term commitment and multi-pronged approach to continuously improve its strategic capabilities and bargaining skills, while actively seeking the understanding and support of the international community, breaking through the encirclement and containment by external forces, and creating a favorable surrounding security environment for realizing the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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