

“Safeguarding the Maritime Domain for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific”

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It is a great honor for me to speak here today. I extend my sincere appreciation to the Stratbase Institute and the Japan Institute of International Affairs, JIIA, for convening this important symposium.

I cannot thank Dindo enough for his team’s continued cooperation. I am truly delighted to see some of my mentors and friends of JIIA—Japan’s leading think tank—here in Manila. Of course, my deepest appreciation goes to Secretary **Año** for his esteemed engagement today.

Today, we discuss “Safeguarding the Maritime Domain for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” which is an extremely timely topic. The global situation surrounding maritime safety is too serious to start my talk with my poor joke.

This week, we have heard news stories regarding a

sinking ship, the conduct of drone operations, and oil price hikes caused by disruptions of transit in a strait. While they might not be the primary focus of this week's headlines, the tensions around the South China Sea remain serious.

Amid the time of rising tensions, it is imperative that we reaffirm the long-standing collective efforts that we cultivated to strengthen our collective "grip" on the maritime order through cooperation and respect for the rule of law.

By bringing together leading experts from Japan, the Philippines, India and the United States, I trust this conference provides a valuable platform to deepen discussions as to how we can address security challenges at sea, in the air, and within the economic sphere, guided by both our fundamental principles and deep-seated commitment to pragmatism.

A Changing Environment in the Indo-Pacific

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific since its launch by late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Over the past decade, shifts in the balance of power, intensifying strategic competition, and the challenges posed by advanced technologies, including telecommunications, AI, critical minerals, have further underscored the importance of cooperation among like-minded partners.

Looking back, it is heartening that many countries have adopted their own respective Indo-Pacific strategies. The term “Indo-Pacific” does not sound unfamiliar anymore. Furthermore, ASEAN’s advocacy for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific demonstrates a high degree of synergy with Japan’s own initiatives.

Parallel to these efforts, significant progress has been made through mini-lateral frameworks such as Japan-US-Philippines and Japan-US-Australia-India, QUAD.

In her policy speech to the Japanese Diet last month, Prime Minister TAKAICHI Sanae noted the growing need for countries to strengthen their autonomy and resilience and expressed her commitment to the evolution of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiatives to make the region even stronger and more prosperous. While the current environment remains undeniably complex, we should be confident in the substantive depth of our deliberations and the concrete measures we have implemented to navigate this evolving landscape.

The question now arises: why must the Free and Open Indo-Pacific evolve at this juncture? It is because the world has changed considerably. As the rules-based order faces serious challenges, we require a clear, guiding perspective for our regional architecture. Since its inception, the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific has evolved in a

way that embraces a variety of perspectives and reflects the changing environments, all while maintaining its core, foundational principles.

Together, we work with willing partners to maintain and enhance regional connectivity, and cultivate a region rooted in freedom and the rule of law. Safeguarding the region from force or coercion is essential to fostering a prosperous future. It is then a natural choice to upgrade our Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

I believe there are some elements that should be integrated in our deliberations.

First, now more than ever, like-minded partners must work together to uphold and reinforce a free and open international order— an order that should benefit all countries, large and small alike, in the long run.

As maritime democracies positioned along vital sea lanes, Japan and the Philippines are natural partners. Japan

places the utmost value on its collaboration with the Philippines, a strategic partner that shares our vision for realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Our two countries are steadily and rapidly deepening security cooperation. Shortly after I started my service in the Philippines, we formally signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which was subsequently approved by the Philippine Senate and Japan's National Diet respectively and has since entered into force. Negotiations on the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) commenced last spring and the Agreement was officially signed during Foreign Minister MOTEGI Toshimitsu's visit to Manila last January.

The Philippines is also the main recipient and partner of our Official Security Assistance (OSA). Last month I had the honor of attending the handover ceremony of the five (5) Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems with Secretary of National Defense Gilberto C. Teodoro.

Together with the U.S., the Philippines and other like-minded countries, Japan has been conducting numerous Maritime Cooperative Activities (MCA), and the latest trilateral iteration took place in Northern Luzon just last week.

Trilateral cooperation among the Philippines-Japan-the U.S. and the quadrilateral cooperation among the Philippines-Japan-the U.S.-Australia are both growing rapidly. We anticipate strengthened participation of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in the upcoming exercises held in the Philippines, particularly in the Balikatan.

Boosting Philippine Economic Resilience

Second, enhancing economic resilience has become an increasingly critical priority. Ten years ago, the focus was more on enhancing the connectivity for regional development. But now, enhancing resilience is the

mainstream issue in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan has been actively supporting the Philippines in strengthening its economic resilience, guided by the strong belief that a prosperous, resilient, and like-minded Philippines in our neighborhood is essential to Japan's own national interest.

On top of the fact that Japan has been the Philippines' largest ODA donor for decades and around 1,600 Japanese companies are operating in the Philippines today, we are proud to have supported the enhancement of the Philippine Coast Guard's vessels through our ODA. This includes the provision of its largest and most capable vessels, such as the BRP Teresa Magbanua and the BRP Melchora Aquino. They are defending the rule of law in the sea around this country day by day.

Enhancing supply chain resilience through diversification is also paramount. Therefore, it is indispensable to review supply chains and strengthen

cooperation between like-minded countries to reduce excessive dependency on specific countries. For instance, Japanese and Philippine businesses have been working together to produce minerals including nickel, to operate facilities utilizing Liquefied Natural Gas and to establish a Liquefied Petroleum Gas terminal.

To further strengthen the Philippines' economic resilience, Japan places great emphasis on connectivity. This focus lies at the heart of our broader efforts to consolidate a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Enhanced connectivity also lays the foundation for the supply chain resilience. While we are in the final stages of formalizing our agreement with the Philippines Government this month, I am honored to announce that the third tranche of the "Metro Manila Subway Project" and the "Central Mindanao High-Standard Highway Construction Project" are the next milestones down the road.

Ensuring a healthy digital infrastructure is another area to enhance our economic resilience and connectivity. Japanese businesses are already making contributions for the development and maintenance of the undersea cable networks in the Philippines. The Japanese Government has also been supporting the development of an open, interoperable, secure, reliable and trusted ICT ecosystem demonstrated by the provision of Open Radio Access Network laboratory equipment. Collaborations to enhance capacity against cyber-attacks are also on-going on multiple fronts.

Milestones that Shape Our Shared Responsibility

This year marks not only the 10th anniversary of FOIP and the arbitration ruling, but also the 70th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Philippines. Over seven decades, our partnership

has grown into one founded on trust, shared values, and strategic cooperation.

The Philippines' ASEAN chairship would highlight ASEAN's central role in maintaining balance, stability, and inclusiveness across the Indo-Pacific. Together, these milestones remind us that maritime security is not only about addressing present challenges, but also about honoring longstanding commitments and shaping a future anchored in law, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

Conclusion

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of attending a commencement ceremony of a Maritime Academy. Major Japanese shipping companies have established their own

maritime academies in the Philippines, as Filipino seafarers account for around 70% of the crew on Japanese-operated vessels.

This simple fact clearly showcases that maritime safety is our shared agenda for Japan and the Philippines. New graduates filled with optimism for the future always reminds me of the need for our collective efforts to realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

As we look ahead, one thing is clear. Peace and stability cannot be taken for granted. It must be actively and collectively sustained.

Japan will continue to work closely with the Philippines, ASEAN, the U.S. and other like-minded partners to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains free, open, and governed by international law.

Once again, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Stratbase ADR and the JIIA. I trust that today's discussions will be both engaging and fruitful and will give us

opportunities to translate ideas into actions in the future.