



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



EAST ASIA EXPLORER

JULY 2024

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Volume II, Issue 7



Delhi Policy Group

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Cover Image:

Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, Ms. KAMIKAWA Yoko, and Mr. KIHARA Minoru, Minister of Defense of Japan held the second Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ("2+2") with Hon. Enrique A. Manalo, Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Philippines and Hon. Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr., Secretary of National Defense of the Philippines in Manila, Philippines on July 8, 2024. (Source: [MOFA Japan/Official X Account](#))

The 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China convened its third plenary session (Third Plenum), in Beijing, from July 15 to 18, 2024. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#))

Philippine navy ship BRP Sierra Madre at the Second Thomas Shoal, locally known as Ayungin Shoal, at the South China Sea on April 23, 2023. (Source: [AP/Official Website](#))

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South China Sea Tensions and Prospects for Peace

by

Pradeep Taneja

Unlike his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, who unsuccessfully sought to appease China in return for aid and investments, the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr of the Philippines has been forcefully defending his country's claims in the South China Sea. The China Coast Guard has frequently clashed with the poorly equipped Philippines Navy and Coast Guard in recent times, including an ugly incident on 17 June in which a Filipino sailor lost a finger.

The above incident took place when China Coast Guard aggressively tried to stop the Philippine forces from resupplying the rickety Sierra Madre, an old naval ship that the Philippines deliberately beached on the Second Thomas Shoal (known in China as Ren'ai Jiao) in 1999 to assert its claims to the shoal and its surrounding waters. The Philippines' government accused China's coast guard of crashing into their boat, illegally boarding it, damaging property and using bladed weapons. In a statement, Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, said: "Only pirates do this. Only pirates board, steal, and destroy ships, equipment, and belongings". Predictably, China blamed the Philippines for the incident, claiming that its navy personnel had "threatened the safety of Chinese personnel and ships."

Following the incident, in a phone call with his Philippine counterpart, the United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said Chinese actions "undermine regional peace and stability" as he reiterated the United States' "ironclad commitments" to the Philippines under the 1951 bilateral Mutual Defence Treaty. In late May, speaking in Singapore at the Shangrila Dialogue, President Marcos had cautioned China that the death of a Filipino in the South China Sea at the hands of a foreign power will be treated as an "act of war".

Despite the warnings, however, it is unlikely that the Philippines will invoke the Treaty and drag the United States into a war with China over a similar incident in the future. In fact, China and the Philippines were quick to engage in diplomatic negotiations to prevent the situation from deteriorating further for now. A [deal was reached](#) on 21 July to establish an arrangement for "humanitarian resupply of living necessities" to the Philippines personnel on Sierra Madre, according to a statement by the Chinese foreign ministry. But neither side has released the details of the agreement. Chinese sources have said that this is only a temporary arrangement and China will not allow the Philippines Navy to supply construction materials or weapons to the decaying outpost on the shoal. There are also differences between the two sides over prior notification and monitoring of resupply operations. China has demanded that the Philippines tow away Sierra Madre.

Although the most recent clash between China and the Philippines may have ended in a diplomatic truce, the region should brace itself for more such incidents as China's increasingly powerful navy, coast guard and maritime militia continue to push their claims at the expense of other claimant states. In the absence of a binding Code of Conduct, which China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have so far failed to agree upon, the risk of dangerous future clashes remains high. Twenty-two years after signing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea and issuing new guidelines to accelerate negotiations in July last year, an agreement on the COC remains elusive.

In the meantime, there has been a flurry of diplomatic activity aimed at fostering greater security cooperation among regional countries to counter China's aggressive behaviour. In April this year, Japan, the Philippines and the United States held their first trilateral summit in Washington, where they agreed that the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force will participate in the US-Philippines maritime exercises. This was followed in May by Australia joining the three countries to strengthen the joint exercises. The United States and the Philippines held the 2+2 meetings between their foreign and defence ministers, where the US announced it will extend US\$ 500 million in military aid to the Philippines. There is a possibility that this funding could double next year, [according to](#) Philippine Ambassador to the U.S. Jose Manuel Romualdez.

On 8 July, the Philippines and Japan [signed](#) a reciprocal access agreement which would allow Japanese forces to enter the Philippines for training and exercises as well as letting the Philippine forces enter Japan for similar purposes. The agreement will also improve interoperability between the forces of the two countries, thus making it easier for them to cooperate in a future contingency.

Importantly, in a [joint statement](#) after their 8th meeting in Tokyo on 29 July, the Quad Foreign Ministers said they were "seriously concerned" about the situation in the South and East China Seas. They repeated their "strong opposition" to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion. The situation in the South China Sea also featured in discussions between the ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners in Laos in July.

Will all the above diplomatic activity and posturing be enough to deter China from engaging in unsafe behaviour in support of its claims for almost all of the South China Sea or, more broadly, throwing its weight around? It is highly doubtful. Even as the peace, stability and prosperity of the region are at risk, the prospects of China deviating from its current path seem remote. The rise of nationalism as the dominant ideology and the prevailing belief China is destined to 'once again' be the centre of world power, makes that a distant hope.

It would require a much stronger commitment to and staying power in the Indo-Pacific from the United States and its allies. It would also demand ASEAN members to speak with one voice and not be guided by their immediate economic and trade interests alone. ASEAN has the potential to be, what my research collaborator and I have called in a forthcoming paper, a buffer institution – a regional society of

sovereign states, building order amid contestation between two great powers, their allies and other sympathetic multi-aligned states.

The Delayed Third Plenum and Its Implications for Southeast Asia

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

Introduction

Following an unprecedented ten-month delay, the 20th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened its third plenum (plenary session) in Beijing from July 15 to July 18, 2024.¹ The meeting held significance because it is at this meeting that the Central Committee issues an authoritative decision (jueding) that will guide policymaking in the years ahead. The third plenum of a Party Congress has historically been accorded considerable importance in the promotion of reform policies as it was the third plenum of the 11th Party Congress in December 1978 that marked the beginning of ideological and policy changes advocated by Deng Xiaoping.² A legacy of the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress had been that the session tended to focus on reforms especially economic reforms including market and liberalisation reforms.

References to National Security and the South China Sea

Leading up to the session, numerous Chinese experts deliberated on the necessity for reforms in light of significant domestic and external challenges. These encompass a decelerating economy, feeble consumption, unequal wealth distribution, and the imperative to enhance technological innovation and attract foreign investment following a three-year economic downturn.³ However, the communique that announced that the leaders adopted 'The Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization'⁴, yielded no major surprises or unexpected policy shifts. Rather, the document reiterated China's commitment to transform the country "into a modern socialist country" by "applying a new development philosophy", by "promoting high-quality economic development"⁵. The communique simply detailed a comprehensive proposal outlining the country's transformation by 2029. However,

¹ "Communique of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/

² "Explainer: What is China's 'third plenum'?" . Reuters. (2024, July 15).

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/what-is-chinas-third-plenum-2024-07-15/>

³ Nouwens, Meia. "The CCP's Third Plenum: Economic Reforms, Strategic Continuity." IISS, (2024, July 23). <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/07/the-ccps-third-plenum-economic-reforms-strategic-continuity/>

⁴ "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization". Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of India. (2024, July 21). http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zqzxw/202407/t20240721_11457422.htm

⁵ Ibid

unlike past third plenum documents, the document resolutely did not offer a concrete diagnosis of China's economic challenges this time. It mainly focuses on what Beijing will do, without explaining how it will do it, reducing its credibility.

Nevertheless, while there has been considerable debate regarding the Resolution's capacity to transform the nation, one aspect remains evident: the pervasive focus on national security within the document. Significantly, the document's emphasis on national security is highlighted by the inclusion of two new sections titled "Modernizing China's National Security System and Capacity" and "Deepening National Defence and Military Reform". The Party regards these sections as pivotal foundations for the modernization of the country and the realisation of national rejuvenation, ultimately leading to a strengthened national position. While President Xi's definition of national security encompasses political security to a certain extent, the document primarily underscores China's military power. Explicitly stating that "National defence and military modernization is an integral part of Chinese modernization", the document reiterates the Party's commitment to maintaining absolute leadership over the People's Armed Forces and fully implementing the strategy of military strengthening through reform to serve as a robust guarantee for achieving the PLA's centenary goal in 2027 and achieving the fundamental modernization of national defence and armed forces. Furthermore, it also emphasised the plan to "improve the institutions and mechanisms for coordinated advancement of military operations, capacity building and combat preparedness"⁶.

In the new era, as Xi Jinping's vision of positioning China at the centre of the international system has gained traction largely due to the military modernisation plans, the continuation of such plans could lead to an era of unprecedented global dominance by China. China has already become a preeminent power in Asia, and its maritime domain has expanded to include control over contested areas in the East China and South China Seas. The path to building the power projection that Xi envisions is by asserting its sovereignty over long-contested territories – particularly those Beijing terms its core interests – the South China Sea and Taiwan.⁷ Beijing has already dealt with Hong Kong in 2020. As such, in order to progress towards achieving China's sovereignty in the South China Sea, it is using a modernised Chinese People's Liberation Army, including its growing powerful navy, to intimidate six other Southeast Asian nations that have overlapping claims in the South China Sea – Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. This plan of continuation of military modernisation could potentially lead to increased regional tensions and military confrontations, a cause for concern for the region.

⁶ "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization". Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of India. (2024, July 21). http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202407/t20240721_11457422.htm

⁷ Economy, Elizabeth. "Xi Jinping's New World Order: Can China Remake the International System?" *Foreign Affairs*. 101 (2022): 52.

The biggest outcome of the third plenum has been the reiteration of its commitment to continue China's path to a modernised PLA, which has already become sophisticated and aims to become completely integrated with less corruption and better combat preparedness. As a result, China's neighbours especially Taiwan and Philippines which have already been directly impacted by China's growing aggressive assertions that are a result of its growing confidence in its defence capabilities, and are going to further be burdened. While China will avoid going into a direct conflict with Taiwan or the Philippines, China can coerce the countries to do its bidding as it can militarily divert their resources, making them vulnerable. Already by enabling a modernised comprehensive command, control, communications, intelligence and surveillance system, China has been sending a strong message that it could inflict great harm on the countries that go against China's interests especially in the South China Sea. The PLA's newly acquired capabilities have allowed the China to deter Taipei's or any country's moves that go against China's interests. In response to China's aggression, countries like the Philippines, Taiwan and Japan have already been forced to adopt a proactive stance which has been more heavily based than before on enhanced defence capabilities in response to China's aggression and to deter future aggression. However, as China has made it evident in the third plenum it will continue with its project of modernising the PLA, and this could lead to more drills and confrontations in the future. China's actions will need to be answered with resolve and determination on the part of Southeast Asian claimant states in order to defend their sovereign territory against Chinese assertions.

For observers of Chinese politics, it is important to not misread the document that was communicated to the public. Although the communique is exhaustive, concise and serves as a foundational executive summary of China's medium and long-term development goals, many critics have lamented the perceived lack of immediate, detailed reforms, or solutions. However, such a response overlooks the strategic depth and long-term vision the Third Plenum aims to establish. A document to outline a comprehensive strategy has been an extremely important objective as after months of Xi's ongoing consolidation of power - which brought about the disappearance of key military leaders and the minister for foreign affairs - there has been criticism of the internal reality of turmoil within the CPC.

The reality is that the document is meant to articulate a vision of China for the next five years with a clear roadmap to emphasise that China is still on its course, despite the criticism. Therefore, based on the outlined roadmap, especially its military modernisation plans, it is important to not underestimate the Third Plenum. At the same time, it is crucial to wait and assess the feasibility of the reforms by the 2029 deadline, considering the significant political and economic challenges China currently faces. Political factionalism and internal turmoil within CPC, China's ambitious plans for defence modernisation and China's aggressive assertions in the South and East China Seas and off the coast of Taiwan have become a toxic mix, increasing the vulnerabilities of Southeast Asian countries

Conclusion

In the midst of the predominant discourse of an internal Chinese turbulence, the convening of the Third Plenum stands as a pivotal reassurance to both domestic policymakers and international counterparts, affirming China's steadfast dedication to achieving global power status in the upcoming years. China's commitment to expediate not only its status of being a self-reliant economic power but also a military power can spell trouble for its neighbours in Asia especially those that are already facing the military intimidation tactics of China. However, while the document primarily serves as a means of providing reassurance, a meticulous examination of its capacity to fulfil its objectives by 2029 prompts a shift in the nature of the discussion..

Japan-Philippines Relations: Signing of the Reciprocal Access Agreement

by
Anshita Shukla

The relationship between two natural and critical partners of the Indo-Pacific, Japan and the Philippines is undergoing a shift. As Japan revisits its pacifist defence posture under PM Kishida, and the Philippines strongly asserts its sovereignty over its territorial waters, the two countries possess the need and capability to expand bilateral cooperation. Tokyo and Manila have shared goals of expanding partnerships with like-minded countries and enhancing national defence capabilities, in the face of uncertainty over Washington's commitment to Asia and the growing belligerence of China in the East and South China Seas. The recently concluded Philippines and Japan 2+2 meeting lays the foundation for a future of complex and frequent defence collaboration between the two countries.

The Philippines and Japan convened the second Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting ("2+2") in Manila, Philippines on July 8, 2024⁸. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Ms. Kamikawa Yoko, and Minister of Defense of Japan, Mr. Kihara Minoru, met with the Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, Enrique Manalo, and Gilberto Teodoro, Secretary of National Defence of the Philippines. This was the first such meeting in two years, held under the Marcos administration. The four ministers discussed the regional situation, with a focus on the increasing tensions in the East and South China Seas, and the nuclear and missile issues as well as the abduction issue relating to North Korea. The two countries reaffirmed their commitment to "multilayered cooperation with allies and like-minded countries" and confirmed the promotion of the commencement of Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) negotiations.

A key outcome of the Japan-Philippines 2+2 meeting was in the area of security and defence cooperation. The two countries signed the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in the presence of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., President of the Philippines⁹. The agreement establishes 'procedures for the cooperative activities that are conducted by forces of Japan and the Philippines while the forces of one country is visiting the other country and defines a legal status of the visiting force'. It is intended to facilitate cooperative activities, such as joint exercises and disaster relief, and improve interoperability between the Self-Defence Forces of Japan (SDF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The agreement was successfully concluded after seven months of negotiation.

⁸ "Second Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (. " n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00001.html.

⁹ "Signing of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement." n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00432.html.

The outcome of the agreement facilitates enhanced defence cooperation between Manila and Tokyo. A key outcome of the agreement is that it reduces the red tape of burdensome bureaucratic procedures, paperwork, and clearance requirements and streamlines the process to move forces between countries for training, exercises, or exchanges. It facilitates longer and complex bilateral exercises, by eliminating the requirement of cabinet-level coordination for each interaction¹⁰. Previously, in the absence of such an agreement, Japan and Philippines defence engagement required long months of preparation and were often nestled with multi-lateral exercises, anchored by the US. In addition, the RAA helps nullify a key impediment in fostering a closer defence relationship. This impediment is described under Article 18 of the 1987 Philippines' Constitution that states that "foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate"¹¹.

The RAA with Japan comes at a time when the Philippines, under President Marcos Jr., is actively expanding security partnerships to counter China's growing belligerence in the South China Sea. In January 2024, the Philippines signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation with the United Kingdom¹² and Canada¹³. The country has also agreed to a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement with New Zealand in June 2024, with a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA) under consideration¹⁴. France and the Philippines have started negotiations for a Visiting Forces Agreement in May 2024¹⁵, after signing the Letter of Intent to Upgrade Defence Cooperation in December 2023¹⁶.

The interest in forming partnerships of "cooperation and collaboration with its ally and like-minded countries" aligns with that of Japan, as underscored in the "Defence of Japan 2024"¹⁷. Japan has entered into an agreement with the Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and

¹⁰"IP24060 | Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement Strengthens Defence Links Across the First Island Chain." n.d. @RSIS_NTU. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24060-japan-philippines-reciprocal-access-agreement-strengthens-defence-links-across-the-first-island-chain/>.

¹¹Inquirer, Philippine Daily. 2013. "In The Know: PH Constitution on Foreign Military Bases." INQUIRER.Net, June 28, 2013. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/434443/in-the-know-ph-constitution-on-foreign-military-bases>.

¹²"PH, UK Ink Defense Pact; Focus Set on Maritime Domain." n.d. Philippine News Agency. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1217069>.

¹³"PH, Canada Sign MOU on Defense Cooperation." n.d. Philippine News Agency. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1217294>.

¹⁴"PH, New Zealand Strengthen Defense Ties With Signing of MLSA." n.d. Philippine News Agency. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1226631>.

¹⁵Requejo, Rey E., Vince Lopez, and Rey E. Requejo. 2024. "PH, France to Begin VFA Talks in May - Manila Standard." Manila Standard. April 26, 2024. <https://manilastandard.net/news/314440025/vfa-between-philippines-france-to-be-explored-this-may-french-envoy.html>.

¹⁶Reuters. 2023. "Philippines, France Agree to Ramp up Defence Ties." US News & World Report. December 2, 2023. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-12-02/philippines-france-to-level-up-defence-ties>.

¹⁷"Japan Ministry of Defense." n.d. Japan Ministry of Defense. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/index.html.

Technology on January 9, 2024¹⁸. Subsequently, it concluded an agreement concerning the Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the Self-Defence Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany on January 29¹⁹. Japan has also signed agreements with Australia for undersea warfare²⁰ and with the United States to buy 400 long-range Tomahawk missiles²¹.

In the last decade, the bilateral ties between the Philippines and Japan have been driven by an alignment in threat perception. The two countries are locked in territorial disputes with China- the Philippines in the South China Sea and Japan in the East China Sea. In 2023, China dispatched its coast guard ships to waters near the Senkaku Islands for a record high of 352 days²². For the first time four armoured Chinese coastguard vessels, carrying what appeared to be cannons, entered Japan's territorial waters in the East China Sea on June 7, 2024²³. These are a few of the rising cases of incursions by China in Japan's territorial waters. Similar incidents have been observed by the Philippines in the South China Sea with China's coastguard shooting water cannons, engaging in dangerous manoeuvres, and deliberately ramming Philippine vessels to disrupt Manila's resupply missions in the Second Thomas Shoal²⁴. The geopolitical threat is further heightened for the two treaty allies of the United States, by uncertainty regarding Washington's ability to provide extended deterrence across the Indo-Pacific especially due to ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East and the likelihood of Donald Trump's return to presidency.

Another critical component of contemporary bilateral relations between Japan and the Philippines is trade and investment. Japan is the largest official development assistance (ODA) partner of the Philippines, with \$12.3 billion in net commitments of

¹⁸ "Entry Into Force of the Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology." n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00088.html.

¹⁹ "Signing of the Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services Between the Self-Defence Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany." n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00124.html.

²⁰ scheme=AGLSTERMS.AglsAgent; corporateName=Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence; address=Russell Offices, Russell, ACT, 2600; contact=1300 333 362. 2024. "Australia and Japan Sign Research Agreement for Undersea Warfare." Defence. January 25, 2024. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2024-01-23/australia-and-japan-sign-research-agreement-undersea-warfare>.

²¹ Afp. 2024. "Japan Inks Deal to Buy 400 Long-range Missiles From US." The Hindu. January 18, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/japan-inks-deal-to-buy-400-long-range-missiles-from-us/article67752482.ece>.

²² Roy, Denny. 2024. "China's Zombie East China Sea Policy." Archive.Ph, February 8, 2024. <https://archive.ph/1sejb>.

²³ Reuters. 2024. "Chinese Armed Vessels Patrol Waters Around Disputed Islands, Angering Japan." Reuters, June 7, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-armed-vessels-patrol-waters-around-disputed-islands-angering-japan-2024-06-07/>.

²⁴ Royandoyan, Ramon. 2024. "Philippine Coast Guard Calls China's Incursion Claim 'inaccurate.'" Nikkei Asia, February 22, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/Philippine-Coast-Guard-calls-China-s-incursion-claim-inaccurate>.

loans and grants as of the end of 2023²⁵. This comprises 33 percent of the total ODA received by Manila. According to the National Economic and Development Authority, Japan has 45 ongoing or completed ODA projects in the Philippines. A few of the critical infrastructure projects in the Philippines funded by Japan are the Metro Manila Subway Project (MMSP), Davao City Bypass Construction Project, North-South Commuter Railway (NSCR), Arterial Road Bypass Project and the Central Luzon Link Expressway Project, etc²⁶. Upon the establishment of Official Security Assistance (OSA) by Japan in 2023, the Philippines was the first beneficiary of 600-million-yen grant aid under the programme²⁷.

The RAA signals a convergence in interest and an intent to collaborate between the two US allies, Japan and the Philippines. The exchanges between the two are likely to grow in the coming decade with the rising threat emanating from China's actions, the USA's preoccupation with the wars in the Middle East and Europe, the potential return of an alliance-averse US foreign policy under Donald Trump, and an emphasis by the respective governments on enhancing national defence capabilities. A future area of collaboration can stem from the potential market in the Philippines for the export of next-generation fighter aircraft by Japan, under the GCAP agreement. The RAA emboldens two critical powers of the first island chain, Manila and Tokyo, and paves the way for a future collaboration.

²⁵ Simeon, Louise Maureen. 2024. "Japan Commits P84 Billion Projects for Philippines." Philstar.Com, May 2, 2024. <https://www.philstar.com/business/2024/05/03/2352120/japan-commits-p84-billion-projects-philippines>.

²⁶ Pinoy Builders. 2023. "5 Big Ticket Infrastructure Projects in the Philippines Invested in by Japan." November 17, 2023. <https://pinoybuilders.ph/5-big-ticket-infrastructure-projects-in-the-philippines-invested-in-by-japan/>.

²⁷ "Signing and Exchange of Notes for Official Security Assistance (OSA) to the Republic of the Philippines." n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003330.html.

The Demise of Vietnamese Party Chief Nguyen Phu Trong

by
Biren Nanda

Vietnamese Party Chief Nguyen Phu Trong passed away on July 19, 2024, at the age of 80. The Vietnamese government held two days of State mourning on July 25 and 26, 2024. The funeral ceremonies were attended by global leaders - including the US Secretary of State and India's National Security Adviser, Mr Ajit Doval .

Trong was, for more than a decade, Vietnam's most powerful leader. As the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party since 2011 and at one point of time also the President of Vietnam, Trong was seen as one of Vietnam's most powerful leaders. Trong was acting president of Vietnam from 2018 and 2021. At the Party Congress in 2021 Trong won an unprecedented third term as party secretary. The General Secretary is the most important of Vietnam's 'Four Pillars' alongside the Prime Minister, the President and the Chairman of the National Assembly. But unlike in China, the Communist Party of Vietnam still operates on a system of collective leadership.

Trong passed away during a rare third term as general secretary of the party. Trong opened up Vietnam's economy. His legacy included overseeing Vietnamese emergence as a global electronics supplier and economic powerhouse in Southeast Asia and the "blazing furnaces" anti-corruption campaign that claimed the careers of many victims including officials and business leaders. Nearly 200,000 officials are estimated to have faced criminal charges or faced disciplinary actions during the anti-corruption campaign²⁸.

During the period when he was at the helm of the CPV, Vietnam's GDP more than doubled and Vietnam concluded a number of Free Trade Agreements with the West and Vietnam's Asian neighbors. Under his watch, Vietnam improved its relations with world leaders including President Biden, President Xi Jinping and President Putin. Trong's most significant foreign policy legacy has been the balancing of Vietnam's relations with the United States, China and other powers. Trong hosted President Joe Biden, Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Putin in Hanoi last year.

²⁸ Tessa Wong (19 July, 2024) Vietnamese leader Nguyen Phu Trong dies at 80 . BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c51y3r09zr2>

Trong was unwell for some time and had previously been absent from public events including the launch of a book, which contained a compilation of his speeches. He was seen in June during President Putin's State visit to Vietnam. The Politburo named President To Lam – a former Minister for Public Security – to assume charge as interim party secretary.

Xi Jinping went to the Vietnamese Embassy in Beijing to express his condolences on the demise of Party Secretary Trong. Xi said

"The passing of Comrade Nguyen Phu Trong has deprived us of a promoter of China-Vietnam relations and a companion for the cause of socialism, and we are deeply saddened,"

Xi Jinping's visit to the Vietnamese Embassy in Beijing to express his condolences underlined the close relations that continue to exist between the communist parties of the two countries. Xi Jinping may have also utilized his visit to the Vietnamese Embassy in Beijing to quell rumors that he had suffered from a health issue in recent weeks.

On behalf of Prime Minister Modi, and the government and people of India, NSA Doval conveyed his grief at the sad demise of General Secretary Trong to the Vietnamese leadership and the people of Vietnam. Referring to the visit of NSA Doval "The Nhan Dan." - the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam - stated:

"Vietnam and India always share strong mutual trust and friendship, which is a stepping stone for them to continue expanding cooperation in various fields, including defense - security, economy - trade, culture - tourism, and people-to-people exchanges.... "

Mr. Doval added that India always wishes to further intensify the comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam, especially amidst complex developments in the world and the region at present."

What will be the impact of Trong's demise on Vietnam's foreign policy? Firstly, Vietnam adheres to the practice of "collective leadership" despite the long-standing competition between competing factions in the Party. Second, President Lam has assumed charge as the acting General Secretary. A final resolution of the succession issue may wait till the Party Congress in 2026. Lam's elevation as General Secretary has fueled speculation about an increased role for security services due to his background in public security. Third, the Party will likely continue to prioritize its independence in the context of great

power competition in the region. This means that Vietnam's key objective will be to balance relations with China, the United States and Russia.

In 2015, Trong became the first General Secretary of the CPV to visit the United States. In September 2023, during the visit of President Biden to Vietnam, the two countries concluded a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". Vietnam also recently concluded comprehensive strategic partnerships with India, Australia, South Korea and Japan – all middle powers in the Indo-Pacific.



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