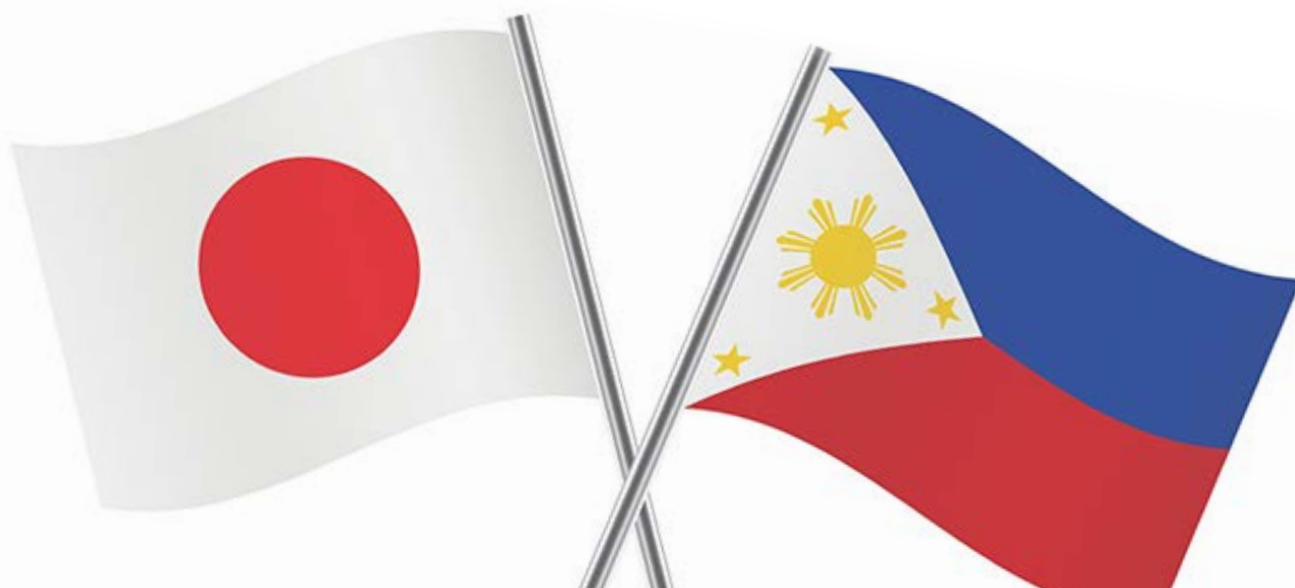


JAPAN'S OFFICIAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE TO THE PHILIPPINES: LEGITIMIZING A NEW STRATEGIC TOOL

Pihla Kukkonen and Julie Yu-Wen Chen



Both Japan and the Philippines are navigating an increasingly intricate security landscape, in which various actors—China being the most significant—are making unilateral efforts to alter the regional power dynamics. The tensions are particularly concentrated in the maritime domain, with the Philippines emerging as a prominent adversary of China's actions in the South China Sea. Numerous questions remain regarding the aid program's future trajectory. This issue brief examines how the Japanese government establishes legitimacy to extend its Official Security Assistance (OSA) to the Philippines. Japan is exploring the boundaries of its role as a security actor and the extent to which it can broaden its new aid initiative, with much of OSA's future implementation and transformation hinging on the international community and recipient nations' responses.

In Japan's updated National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2022, it was announced that "a new cooperation framework for the benefit of armed forces and other related organizations," which stands apart from Official Development Assistance (ODA), would be established. What came to be known as Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) was launched officially in April 2023,¹ with the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Fiji chosen as the first recipients of this aid. The program's total budget in 2023 was JPY 2 billion, and the aid was earmarked

to enhance areas of maritime security by providing equipment, such as a coastal radar system and patrol boats. The program was renewed for 2024, with the budget rising to JPY 5 billion, and more countries added. In April 2025, the Philippines was approved for two consecutive years of OSA aid.

OSA stands out as an exception to Japan's traditional aid policy, as it aims to enhance recipient countries' military capabilities, whereas ODA was earmarked for humanitarian purposes and disaster relief with

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aid for military purposes strictly forbidden, thereby aligning with Japan's traditional aid policy. Although the link between aid and security gradually has been strengthened over time through revisions to the ODA charter, Japan established OSA to adjust to what has been described as the most severe and complex security environment since World War II.

OSA's creation indicates a change in Japan's role as a security actor. Japan traditionally has abstained from involvement in regional security issues, aiming instead to build stability in the region by supporting Southeast Asian nations' economic development while gaining access to critical trade routes and resources. Japan's role as a security actor also has been limited historically by its postwar constitution, which bans the use of war as a means of solving international disputes and heavily restricts Japan's capability to maintain armed forces. Consequently, pacifism has become an integral part of the country's foreign policy and national identity. Other foreign policy guidelines, including the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology in the United Nations Charter, also have impacted Japan's foreign policy stance significantly, as they prohibit supplying equipment to countries that are parties to a conflict. Moreover, Japan's regional policy has been defined by postwar reputational issues, with countries that suffered during Japan's pre-1945 actions viewing Japan negatively, prompting Tokyo to apply reassurance techniques to alleviate potential fears of remilitarization and portray itself as a peaceful actor.²

Through the OSA's implementation, Japan appears to be testing the limits of how much agency it can take in regional security issues. The new aid program indicates a clear effort on Japan's part to establish itself as a prominent and proactive security actor, a development that can be traced back to the end of the Cold War and which intensified during Shinzo Abe's second term, as he pushed to reposition Japan as a significant player on the global stage. Accordingly, OSA appears to be taking another step away from Japan's postwar pacifist policies. Despite OSA being implemented with the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, it cannot be guaranteed that the equipment provided through the program, which includes investments in dual-use infrastructure, will not be used in a future conflict

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by the recipient. Japan's proactive shift in its policy on military cooperation with recipients also could instigate fears in neighboring countries concerning Japan's rearmament and departure from its role as a peaceful actor.

This issue brief examines key official documents concerning OSA to understand how the Japanese government has attempted to position the new aid program within its existing foreign policy framework and earn legitimacy from the international community for its evolving role and activities in the Indo-Pacific region. OSA can be viewed as a type of precedent for Japan's future security cooperation schemes. Special attention has been paid to OSA projects with the Philippines to understand what cooperation under the new assistance scheme looks like with a long-term aid recipient, how potential tensions in the relationship are addressed by both parties, and what future cooperation under OSA or other similar mechanisms could entail.

We examine key documents generated by the Japanese government or collaboratively produced with the Philippine government, such as the National Security Strategy (2022),³ Implementation Guideline for Japan's Official Security Assistance (2023), Japan-Philippines Joint Statement (2023),⁴ Joint Press Statement of the Outcome of the Visit of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to the Philippines (2023),⁵ 2023 and 2024 press releases concerning the signing and exchange of notes for OSA to the Philippines,⁶ joint press release

on the Outcome of the 2nd Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2) (2024),⁷ and Official Security Assistance (2025).⁸ Four key features of the discourses behind the OSA can be identified.

First, **OSA was associated with Japan's pacifist initiatives and was utilized to maintain its image as a peaceful entity.** In the 2023 Implementation Guidelines for Japan's Official Security Assistance, the words “peace”, “peaceful” or “peace-loving” were featured a total of 15 times, connecting the aid type for military organizations to Japan's peace-loving philosophy.⁹ Considering that this is the main document explaining OSA's objectives, policies, and implementation principles, the high occurrence of pacifist rhetoric is notable.

Japan's shift toward proactive pacifism occurred in the 2010s under Abe's direction, advancing the idea that Japan should contribute proactively to peace based on the principle of international cooperation. The concept also includes acceptance of military power's role in peace. So far, the most concrete change to Japan's pacifism has been the 2014 revision that ended Japan's ban on exercising collective self-defense or aiding a friendly country under attack. It was argued that amid a changing regional power balance and an increasingly assertive China,¹⁰ Japan needed more flexibility in its policy.¹¹

In Japan's official documents, peace rhetoric is employed almost excessively to illustrate the

relationship between OSA and proactive pacifism. For example, the 2022 NSS asserts that Japan will adhere to a fundamental policy of maintaining a defense posture that is exclusively national defense-oriented, which serves to mitigate any potential skepticism regarding Tokyo's shift from its traditional defense stance. Furthermore, the 2023 Implementation Guidelines for Japan's Official Security Assistance states that “over the years, Japan has devoted itself to promoting peace worldwide” and that OSA aims to “contribute to maintaining and strengthening international peace and security.” The verbs “promoting” and “contribute” invoke notions of active engagement. A similarly proactive expectation also is placed on recipient countries, which are expected “to be able to contribute to regional peace, stability, and security by themselves” through aid provision.

By aligning OSA with Japan's pacifist framework and placing special emphasis on its connection to proactive pacifism, the aid program is portrayed as an essential mechanism in maintaining and strengthening peace in the region. This results in a balancing act in which Japan seeks to maintain its image as a peace state, i.e., “heiwa kokka (平和国家),” while simultaneously expanding and adjusting its role as a security actor in a rapidly changing security environment.

The official documents also indicated that OSA is an essential tool for maintaining and strengthening peace. When considering the fields in which OSA aid should be provided, priorities will be given based on the importance to Japan's national security and international peace and security. Examination of OSA cooperation between Japan and the Philippines demonstrates the type of recipient-donor relationships Japan aims to maintain through OSA and how Japan's reputational issues are managed under the new security assistance program.

The second feature of discourses around OSA is that **Japan's relations with a recipient country are framed as being based on equality, reciprocity, and mutual understanding.** It also has been demonstrated that OSA can be used to support and fulfill both countries' shared objectives. When discussing the quality of the Japan-Philippines

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relationship, emphasis is placed on temporal longevity: It is described as one based on a strong historical foundation (“decades-old”)¹² underscored by “friendly and historical ties woven through decades of exchanges,” with a clear future direction (“transformative and forward-looking”).¹³ Japan’s holistic commitment to supporting the Philippines’ development also is highlighted. Although special emphasis is placed on strengthening cooperation on security and defense in all the documents, collaboration is conducted across multiple sectors, including cybersecurity and economic resilience, and Philippine President Bongbong Marcos is said to value Japan’s “strong intention” to support his country’s future development even as it reaches upper-income status.¹⁴

These shared fundamental principles and values, as well as Japan’s support for the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), further consolidate the image of a relationship based on mutual respect. On a practical level, both countries are said to share the same goals of peace and stability in the region, and the partnership they are working toward should respond to contemporary needs and goals. This relationship’s framing functions to alleviate potential tensions in the donor-recipient relationship, as well as fears concerning Japan’s neo-imperial security activities with partner countries, granting legitimacy to the establishment of OSA, which also can be viewed as an effort to consolidate the partnership in the long run.

The emphasis on equality in the aid relationship is part of a long-term transition in Japan’s thinking: Rather than viewing aid as a one-way process, proactivity and reciprocity are expected from both sides. As demonstrated in the ODA charter of 2015, it was the first instance in which the words “development cooperation” were used instead of “assistance.”¹⁵ In practice, according to the Japan-Philippines Joint Statement,¹⁶ both partners are committed to increasing their own defense capabilities while also furthering security cooperation.

Third, **OSA is framed as a tool for enhancing maritime security in the region.**¹⁷ Both Japan and the Philippines are island nations, i.e., surrounded by water, and both have been involved in disputes with China concerning its incursions into their territorial

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waters. The East and South China Seas have emerged as theaters for power competition and are testing the resilience of the rules-based international order. In the documents that we examined, maintaining international maritime order and developing the Philippines’ maritime capabilities emerge as key objectives of OSA. Maintaining and strengthening a rules-based order is part of Japan’s vision for the region,¹⁸ and the Philippines envisions the same future. Furthermore, both parties are opposed to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion.

As a result, in 2023, OSA grant aid worth JPY 600 million was provided for a coastal radar system, and in 2024, aid for rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), coastal radar systems, and other equipment to improve the Philippine Navy’s maritime domain awareness capabilities was announced. Both sides also expressed their commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Japan expressed support for the July 2016 arbitral tribunal on the South China Sea, which determined that China’s assertion of historical rights to resources conflicts with the specific distribution of rights and

maritime zones, as outlined in the UNCLOS. In this context, OSA can be viewed as part of a larger effort to support international order, as the program was used to enforce the recipient country's ability to protect its territorial waters against unlawful threats.

Fourth, **the threat imposed by China and the changes in the power balance are implicitly used in the official documents to justify Japan's turn toward more traditional security issues and its recent establishment of OSA.** The NSS, without naming China explicitly, stated that "some nations" are attempting to revise the international order, with such attempts at sea highlighting unilateral changes. Against this backdrop, it has been said that Japan will strive to create a desirable security environment for itself while using its comprehensive national power, including economic and technological capabilities, and attach importance to cooperation with like-minded countries. As OSA is delivered in the form of grant aid to support the Philippines' capabilities in a strategically important domain, it can be viewed as part of Japan's attempts to manage its security environment.

Beijing's increasingly assertive foreign policy and changes in international power balances have been cited as key factors behind Japan and the Philippines' new strategic approach. In Japan's NSS, China is said to be the greatest strategic challenge to ensuring Japan's peace, stability, and security, and the international community at large. As OSA is part of measures to reinforce the comprehensive defense architecture set out in the NSS, OSA should

be viewed as a tool to respond to strategic threats faced by Japan and the Philippines.

The Philippines' stance toward China has become particularly assertive during the Marcos administration in the 2020s, and the period has been marked by heightened confrontations in the South China Sea, as well as the Philippines' exit from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Similarly, the Japanese government has taken a harder line toward China in the 2000s amid accelerating events, such as repeated Chinese incursions into the Senkaku Islands. This stance was reflected in Abe's foreign policy, which viewed China's military ascension as a significant security threat and adjusted Japan's security strategy to fit the changing geopolitical environment. Meanwhile, since the 2010s, ASEAN countries increasingly have turned to the United States and Japan for support against China's territorial claims over the South China Sea. According to the 2025 State of Southeast Asia Report, issued by the well-known ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Japan remains the most trusted major power in the region, and the Philippines' support for Japan was 42.7 per cent when inquired about a preferred and trusted third party to hedge against the U.S.-China strategic rivalry's uncertainties.¹⁹

In conclusion, Japan's aid initiative has been utilized consistently for strategic objectives, with the Philippines being one of the foremost recipients of Tokyo's assistance since the postwar period's onset. The use of aid for security-related purposes saw a notable rise in the 2000s, and the OSA can be regarded as a result of this evolution, created to address modern requirements that ODA by itself could not meet.

Furthermore, Japan's extended cooperation with partner countries through aid projects such as OSA can be viewed as a manifestation of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, as well as the more recent Free and Open International Order (FOIO), an evolved version of FOIP in which the scope reaches beyond the Indo-Pacific, integrating the Global South into its sphere of influence.²⁰ By applying these strategies, Japan has been able to take

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on a more proactive role in the global arena, taking the initiative in fostering order and expanding its security strategy beyond the U.S. security umbrella. While Tokyo still views its partnership with Washington as the foundation of its security strategy, collaboration with like-minded countries such as the Philippines and creation of new cooperative frameworks demonstrate Japan's intention to enhance its role as a more prominent international actor. This evolution has been in progress since the Cold War ended and gradually developed throughout the 21st century.

Many questions about the aid program's direction remain unanswered. Japan is testing the limits of its role as a security actor and how far it can expand its new aid program, but notably, OSA has budget limits, which could affect how much really can be implemented ultimately. Moreover, much of OSA's future development depends on the international community and recipient countries' reactions. While OSA fits into Japan's established foreign and security policy framework, the aid program's future also depends on development of the region's security situation and the responses and adjustments required from Japan and the Philippines.²¹ As the future commitment from the U.S. to its allies in Asia seems increasingly uncertain during the current Trump administration, OSA may serve as a tool to mitigate concerns regarding potential U.S. abandonment by enhancing regional players' security capabilities without depending on American security support.

It has yet to be determined what kind of relationship and collaboration Japan intends to forge with OSA beneficiaries in the long term, whether new cooperative frameworks will emerge alongside OSA, and what type of legitimacy narrative Japan will employ to rationalize its future endeavors. During the 2024-2025 cycle, the scope of OSA aid has been expanding beyond its initial emphasis on Southeast Asia to include countries such as Mongolia and Djibouti, indicating that Japan is persistently developing strategic instruments for regions that are both vulnerable to Chinese influence, as well as crucial for Tokyo's diplomatic and economic security.

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