



Strategic Synchrony or Regional Provocation? Philippines–Japan Maritime Cooperation and the South China Sea Discourse

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This article investigates the evolving security partnership between the Philippines and Japan, with a particular focus on their bilateral maritime drills conducted under the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in June 2025. As tensions intensify in the South China Sea, a region marked by overlapping territorial claims and increasing geopolitical friction, the study examines how the RAA strengthens strategic cooperation while simultaneously challenging the maritime status quo. The research objective is to assess the implications of the Japan–Philippines Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) for regional maritime governance and legal order. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in secondary data including government statements, regional news reports, and international legal instruments the study dissects three interrelated dynamics: the defense collaboration between Japan and the Philippines, China’s assertive narrative response, and the Philippine Navy’s strategic rebuttal. The findings indicate that (1) the RAA signifies a robust alignment of strategic interests between Tokyo and Manila, reflecting broader Indo-Pacific trends; (2) China’s declaration of “coordinated patrols” is a deliberate narrative tool aimed at reframing lawful cooperation as provocation; and (3) the Philippines’ response is part of a coordinated regional effort to reaffirm UNCLOS norms and defend maritime sovereignty.

Keywords: Japan, Malaysia, Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), South China Sea, The Philippines.

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Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) has emerged as a critical locus of geopolitical contestation in the 21st century, where the convergence of overlapping sovereignty claims, strategic competition among major powers, and the erosion of maritime legal norms has rendered the region a persistent flashpoint in global security discourse. As one of the world’s most vital maritime

corridors facilitating approximately one-third of global shipping and harbouring vast reserves of hydrocarbons and fisheries, the SCS is not merely a site of regional tension but a crucible for testing the resilience of the international rules-based order. The intensification of China’s maritime assertiveness, particularly through its expansive “nine-dash line” claim and the militarization of artificial features, has



prompted a recalibration of strategic postures among Southeast Asian states and their external partners. Within this evolving security landscape, the Philippines–Japan Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA), conducted in June 2025 under the newly ratified Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), represents a significant inflection point in regional defence diplomacy and maritime governance (Embassy of Japan in the Philippines, 2025). The MCA, formally designated as a bilateral naval exercise, involved the deployment of advanced maritime platforms and was conducted squarely within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This operational setting was not incidental; it served as a deliberate reaffirmation of both nations’ commitment to the legal principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), particularly with respect to sovereign rights over natural resources and freedom of navigation (Newsweek, 2025). Strategically, the MCA exemplifies a broader realignment within the Indo-Pacific, wherein middle powers such as Japan and the Philippines are increasingly engaging in bilateral and trilateral defence cooperation to mitigate the risks posed by China’s coercive maritime behaviour (The Diplomat, 2025). The exercise thus functioned as both a deterrent signal and a demonstration of operational interoperability, reinforcing the credibility of regional security partnerships.

From a legal standpoint, the MCA reinforces the Philippines’ maritime entitlements under UNCLOS, as further validated by the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, which categorically rejected the legal basis of China’s “nine dash line” claim. By conducting the drills within its EEZ, the Philippines not only exercised its sovereign rights but also challenged the legitimacy of China’s maritime assertions, thereby contributing to the defence of international legal norms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). This legal signalling is particularly salient in an environment where normative erosion is increasingly weaponized through Gray zone tactics and lawfare. Narratively, the MCA provoked an immediate and calculated response from China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which claimed to have conducted “coordinated sea and air patrols” in the

same area. This rhetorical manoeuvre was aimed at reframing the MCA as a destabilizing act of foreign interference, thereby seeking to delegitimize the exercise in both domestic and international arenas. However, the Philippine Navy categorically refuted these claims, characterizing them as deliberate disinformation intended to justify China’s unlawful maritime presence and to shape the strategic narrative in its favour (Philippine News Agency, 2025). This contestation underscores the growing centrality of information operations, strategic communication, and psychological influence in contemporary maritime security dynamics. The MCA is emblematic of a multidimensional shift in regional maritime security, one that transcends traditional naval deterrence to encompass legal affirmation, alliance signalling, and narrative competition. It reflects a maturing strategic partnership between Japan and the Philippines, grounded in shared values and mutual interests, and contributes to the broader effort to uphold a stable, lawful, and inclusive maritime order in the Indo Pacific.

Strategic Context and the RAA

The Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), ratified by Japan’s National Diet in June 2025 and by the Philippine Senate in December 2024, constitutes a landmark development in the institutionalization of bilateral defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. As a legally binding framework, the RAA facilitates reciprocal military access between the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), enabling a broad spectrum of joint activities, including capacity-building initiatives, humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) operations, and strategic military training deployments (Japan National Diet ratifies defence pact with Philippines, 2025; Philippine News Agency, 2025). This agreement marks Japan’s third such bilateral defence pact, following similar arrangements with Australia and the United Kingdom and its first in Asia, thereby underscoring the Philippines’ elevated strategic salience within Tokyo’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. The RAA reflects a deliberate recalibration of Japan’s postwar security posture, signalling a more

proactive engagement in regional security affairs amid intensifying maritime tensions in the South China Sea (GMA News Online, 2025).

The Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) conducted on 14 June 2025 served as the inaugural operationalization of the RAA and demonstrated a high degree of tactical and doctrinal interoperability between the AFP and the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF). The deployment of advanced naval platforms including the BRP *Miguel Malvar* (FFG-06), a symbol of the Philippines' naval modernization trajectory, and the JS *Takanami* (DDG-110), a multirole destroyer equipped for anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and maritime surveillance underscored the exercise's strategic depth (Rappler, 2025). The MCA featured a comprehensive suite of coordinated manoeuvres, including ASW drills, cross-deck landing operations, communication synchronization protocols, and officer-of-the-watch exchanges. These activities not only enhanced operational readiness but also projected a credible deterrent posture, reinforcing the capacity of both forces to respond to traditional and non-traditional maritime threats (Philippine News Agency, 2025).

From a geopolitical and legal standpoint, the MCA's conduct within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was profoundly symbolic. It reaffirmed Manila's sovereign rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and served as a tangible assertion of international legal norms in the face of persistent maritime coercion (The Star, 2025). By anchoring their operations within a legally recognized maritime domain, Japan and the Philippines collectively challenged the legitimacy of China's expansive maritime claims, particularly those premised on the "nine-dash line," which were invalidated by the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling. The MCA thus functioned as a form of legal signalling, an operational expression of normative commitment to a rules-based maritime order.

China's rhetorical countermeasure claiming to have conducted "coordinated sea and air patrols" in the same area was swiftly and categorically refuted by the Philippine Navy. The latter characterized Beijing's assertions as deliberate disinformation aimed at shaping international perceptions and

legitimizing its unlawful maritime presence (Manila Bulletin, 2025). This episode illustrates the intensifying role of strategic communication and information warfare in maritime disputes, where the contest for legitimacy is increasingly waged through narrative framing and psychological operations. In this context, the MCA served not only as a platform for enhancing joint military capability but also as a strategic communication tool, one that reinforced the credibility of international law, countered coercive narratives, and exemplified the diplomatic convergence of like-minded states committed to maritime stability. The MCA represents a multidimensional advancement in regional security cooperation. It integrates legal affirmation, operational interoperability, and narrative resilience into a coherent strategic posture. As such, it contributes meaningfully to the construction of a resilient, rules based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific, one that is increasingly defined not solely by the balance of naval power but by the alignment of legal norms, strategic intent, and communicative legitimacy.

China's Narrative and the Philippine Rebuttal

In direct response to the Philippines–Japan Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) conducted on 14 June 2025, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theatre Command issued a public statement asserting that it had undertaken "coordinated sea and air patrols" in the same maritime domain. This assertion was framed by Beijing as a defensive countermeasure to what it characterized as "joint patrols" involving extra regional actors, an increasingly familiar rhetorical device employed to portray lawful multilateral exercises as destabilizing provocations (China Military Online, 2025). Such narrative framing serves a dual strategic function: first, to delegitimize regional security engagements that exclude China, and second, to reinforce its contested maritime claims by projecting an image of continuous and lawful operational presence in disputed waters.

The Philippine Navy, however, issued a prompt and unequivocal rebuttal. Rear Admiral Roy Vincent Trinidad, spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea, categorically denied the existence of any observed

PLA “coordinated patrols” during the MCA. Instead, he emphasized that Philippine surveillance assets had only detected the continued illegal presence of Chinese naval and coast guard vessels in key maritime features namely Bajo de Masinloc, Pagasa, Sabina, and Ayungin Shoals, areas that lie well within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and are protected under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Philippine News Agency, 2025a). These incursions, Trinidad argued, constitute persistent violations of Philippine maritime rights and are emblematic of China’s coercive maritime strategy.

Trinidad’s explicit characterization of China’s claims as “misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation” reflects a growing institutional recognition within the Philippine security apparatus of the centrality of information warfare in contemporary maritime disputes (Manila Bulletin, 2025). The PLA’s attempt to construct a counter-narrative through state-controlled media and official communiqués is not merely a reactive gesture; it is a deliberate effort to shape both domestic and international perceptions, thereby undermining the legal and normative legitimacy of the MCA and similar cooperative activities. This discursive manoeuvring forms part of a broader Chinese strategy of lawfare and narrative dominance, wherein the manipulation of legal language and public messaging is employed to erode the credibility of rival claims while simultaneously normalizing its own expansive assertions.

From an operational standpoint, the PLA Navy’s deployment of a Jiangkai-class frigate to shadow the MCA task force, along with the launch and recovery of surveillance drones was interpreted by Manila not as a legitimate counter-presence, but as a form of tactical shadowing. These actions, while visible, lacked the coordination, scale, and transparency that would characterize a genuine joint patrol. As such, they were perceived as symbolic gestures aimed at asserting presence rather than deterring adversaries (BusinessWorld, 2025). This distinction is critical, as it underscores the evolving nature of maritime competition in the South China Sea, where the projection of force is increasingly accompanied by the projection of narrative authority. More broadly,

these developments reaffirm the South China Sea as a multidimensional theatre of contestation, where disputes are waged not only over territorial sovereignty and legal interpretation, but also over legitimacy, perception, and informational dominance. In this context, strategic communication emerges as a critical force multiplier, capable of amplifying or eroding a state’s credibility depending on its ability to shape the interpretive frameworks through which maritime activities are understood. The MCA, therefore, must be viewed not merely as a demonstration of operational readiness, but as a deliberate act of normative signalling, one that tests the resilience of international legal norms and the capacity of regional actors to resist coercive revisionism through coordinated, lawful, and transparent engagement.

Legal and Normative Dimensions

The bilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) conducted by the Philippines and Japan on 14 June 2025 was deliberately situated within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in full conformity with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As codified in Part V of UNCLOS, coastal states possess sovereign rights within their EEZs to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage natural resources, as well as to regulate economic and security-related activities up to 200 nautical miles from their baselines (UNCLOS, 1982). By anchoring the MCA within this legally defined maritime space, both Manila and Tokyo issued a clear juridical and strategic signal: that their actions are grounded in international law and that they categorically reject unilateral maritime claims such as China’s “nine-dash line” that lack legal validity and have been repudiated by the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

This deliberate legal framing is not merely procedural; it is a form of normative resistance to the erosion of maritime governance in the South China Sea. It reinforces both states’ commitment to the rule of law at sea and affirms their alignment with the broader strategic vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). FOIP, as articulated by Japan and supported by regional partners, emphasizes the

sanctity of sovereign rights, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the centrality of multilateralism as the foundation for regional maritime stability (Embassy of Japan in the Philippines, 2025; The Philippine Business and News, 2025). In this context, the MCA functioned not only as a tactical military engagement but as a strategic act of legal and diplomatic signalling, projecting operational transparency, alliance cohesion, and normative clarity in a region increasingly characterized by legal ambiguity and coercive behaviour.

The salience of this signalling is heightened by the backdrop of China's expansive and coercive activities in the South China Sea, including the construction and militarization of artificial islands, the deployment of maritime militia, and the conduct of disruptive patrols in contested waters. These actions have been widely criticized for violating UNCLOS provisions and for undermining the 2016 arbitral tribunal's legally binding decision, which found no legal basis for China's historic rights claims within the nine-dash line (MEMRI, 2024; Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). In this light, the MCA can be interpreted as a countervailing legal performance, a demonstration that regional actors can assert their maritime entitlements through lawful, transparent, and cooperative means, rather than through unilateralism or force.

Moreover, by conducting the MCA within a contested yet legally designated maritime zone, Japan and the Philippines illustrated how bilateral defence cooperation can serve as both a tactical instrument of deterrence and a diplomatic platform for norm diffusion. This dual function is particularly critical in the Indo-Pacific, where the contest for maritime order is increasingly waged not only through naval deployments but also through competing legal interpretations and strategic narratives. The MCA thus contributes to the construction of a resilient maritime security architecture, one that is anchored in legal legitimacy, reinforced by operational readiness, and sustained through strategic solidarity among like-minded states. The MCA exemplifies a multidimensional approach to maritime security, one that integrates legal affirmation, strategic signalling, and alliance-building into a coherent framework for defending the

rules-based order. It underscores that the preservation of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific will depend not solely on the projection of naval power, but on the institutionalization of legal norms, the credibility of cooperative deterrence, and the collective resolve of regional actors to resist coercive revisionism through principled engagement.

Implications for Regional Maritime Governance

The Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA), conducted under the auspices of the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), constitutes a pivotal development in the Indo-Pacific's evolving maritime security architecture. It marks a discernible shift from traditional bilateral defence arrangements toward a more integrated, multilateral framework of operational solidarity. This transformation reflects the emergence of a coalition of like-minded regional actors namely Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and the United States who are converging around shared strategic imperatives, legal norms, and normative commitments in response to the increasingly complex and contested maritime environment of the South China Sea. The MCA has proven instrumental in advancing tactical interoperability, enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), and reinforcing a layered deterrence posture through synchronized training, real-time operational coordination, and doctrinal harmonization (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2024; Department of Defence Australia, 2025). Beyond its immediate military utility, the MCA also functions as a confidence-building measure, designed to foster transparency, predictability, and mutual trust among participating forces thereby contributing to regional stability.

Nevertheless, the institutionalization of such cooperative security mechanisms is not without geopolitical ramifications. The People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to perceive these exercises as strategic encroachments on its claimed maritime domain, often framing them as externally orchestrated provocations that undermine regional peace and stability. In response, Beijing has adopted a dual-track approach: deploying parallel naval and aerial patrols to assert its presence, while simultaneously engaging in discursive countermeasures aimed at delegitimizing the legal

and normative foundations of these multilateral drills (Geopolitical Monitor, 2024). This strategy reflects China's broader effort to assert narrative dominance in the South China Sea, where the contest for maritime legitimacy is increasingly waged through information operations, legal reinterpretation, and psychological signalling.

Within this contested strategic landscape, the Philippines' doctrine of "partnered presence" emerges as a nuanced and adaptive model of middle-power maritime diplomacy. By leveraging bilateral and multilateral defence engagements while simultaneously emphasizing legal transparency, public diplomacy, and real-time media engagement Manila has succeeded in internationalizing its maritime security concerns and exposing coercive behaviour to global scrutiny (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). This approach stands in stark contrast to China's unilateralism and opacity, underscoring the Philippines' agency in transforming maritime cooperation into a multidimensional instrument of deterrence, norm diffusion, and strategic communication.

Crucially, the MCA transcends the conventional paradigm of kinetic deterrence. It operates as a sophisticated platform for strategic signalling, wherein legal affirmation, alliance cohesion, and normative alignment are deployed as instruments of influence alongside traditional naval capabilities. In this sense, the MCA exemplifies the evolving character of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, one that is increasingly defined by the interplay of law, narrative, and coalition-building. It reinforces the proposition that the preservation of a stable and rules-based maritime order will depend not solely on the projection of naval power, but on the ability of regional actors to institutionalize legal norms, cultivate operational interoperability, and construct compelling strategic narratives that resist coercive revisionism.

Malaysia's Strategic Lens

For Malaysia, a state long committed to a policy of strategic ambiguity in its foreign and defence posture, the recent Philippines–Japan Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) presents both a strategic aperture and a diplomatic inflection point.

Malaysia's enduring emphasis on freedom of navigation and overflight, consistent with international legal norms and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) demonstrates its principled support for a rules-based maritime order. However, its reluctance to overtly align with any singular geopolitical bloc, particularly in the context of intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, reflects a cautious and calculated approach that prioritizes autonomy over confrontation (Storey, 2020). This posture is emblematic of Malaysia's broader hedging strategy, which seeks to navigate great power competition by cultivating multidimensional ties like military, economic, and diplomatic without forfeiting sovereign flexibility (Kuik, 2024).

Behind this publicly neutral stance lies a discreet yet steady pursuit of military modernization. Malaysia has incrementally expanded its naval capabilities through the procurement of littoral combat ships, the deployment of maritime surveillance assets, and the institutional strengthening of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). Such developments are most visible in contested maritime features such as Luconia Shoals and James Shoal areas of recurrent Chinese activity where Malaysia has visibly increased patrol frequencies and presence operations (Ministry of Defence Malaysia, 2024; ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020). These calibrated actions underscore a soft hedging approach: projecting sovereignty through operational resolve while avoiding the strategic signalling that accompanies formal alignments or confrontational rhetoric.

This strategic balancing act is further constrained by the structural reality of Malaysia's deep economic interdependence with China, its largest trade and investment partner. At the same time, Malaysia's evolving defence ties with extra-regional partners, such as Japan, Australia, and the United States embedded within institutional arrangements like the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and ASEAN's multilateral security platforms, illustrate its effort to diversify security dependencies without antagonizing any particular actor (Gerstl, 2024). The Philippines–Japan drills, in this regard, provide an illustrative case study against which Malaysia's

hedging strategy may be evaluated: a demonstration of maritime cooperation that reinforces international norms and defence interoperability while remaining within the bounds of legal legitimacy and diplomatic restraint.

Ultimately, Malaysia's positioning reflects a deliberately nuanced synthesis of sovereignty assertion and economic pragmatism. Rather than choosing between alignment and autonomy, Malaysia has opted to refine a third-way strategy, one that leverages legal norms, operational presence, and quiet diplomacy to shape regional security outcomes without escalating geopolitical risk. In a maritime domain increasingly defined by strategic signalling and normative contestation, Malaysia's approach stands out as a model of measured resilience and calibrated engagement.

Analysis

The Philippines–Japan Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA), conducted under the auspices of the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), marks a significant inflection point in the Indo-Pacific's evolving maritime security architecture. While traditionally framed as bilateral defence cooperation, the MCA reflects a broader strategic recalibration in which maritime partnerships are increasingly leveraged not only for operational readiness but also for the projection of legal norms and regional deterrence. By situating the MCA within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), both Manila and Tokyo reaffirmed their commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), thereby reinforcing the legal sanctity of maritime entitlements and rejecting expansive, extra-legal claims such as China's "nine-dash line" (Embassy of Japan in the Philippines, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024).

Strategically, the MCA exemplifies the emergence of a distributed security posture in the Indo-Pacific, one characterized by flexible, horizontally networked alignments rather than rigid alliance structures. The RAA, in this context, functions as a structural enabler of forward presence and doctrinal interoperability, allowing for enhanced maritime domain awareness (MDA), rapid response capability, and joint operational planning without necessitating formal

alliance entanglement (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2024). This model of "strategic synchrony" allows middle powers to pool resources and coordinate actions in ways that complicate adversarial power projection, particularly in contested maritime zones.

However, this cooperative posture is not without geopolitical consequence. China's rhetorical framing of the MCA as a destabilizing provocation reflects its broader strategy of discursive hegemony, wherein legal ambiguity, historical revisionism, and narrative control are employed to delegitimize multilateral maritime engagements that challenge its claims (China Military Online, 2025; Philippine News Agency, 2025a). Such counter-legitimation efforts exemplify a broader shift in maritime competition, where the contest extends beyond territory and access to encompass the authority to define what constitutes lawful behaviour at sea.

For regional states such as Malaysia, the MCA presents a dual strategic imperative. On the one hand, it affirms the viability of principled maritime alignment anchored in international law and operational transparency without necessitating overt bloc formation. On the other, it reinforces the necessity of strategic hedging, whereby states seek to balance normative alignment with geopolitical flexibility (Kuik, 2024; Storey, 2020). Malaysia's calibrated approach evident in its quiet military modernization, increased patrols in the eastern maritime frontier, and engagement through ASEAN-led mechanisms reflects a deliberate strategy of incremental resilience aimed at preserving autonomy while mitigating the risks of entrapment or abandonment.

Ultimately, the MCA signals a paradigmatic shift in how maritime security is conceptualized and operationalized in the Indo-Pacific. No longer confined to kinetic deterrence or traditional alliance politics, maritime security now encompasses a multidimensional matrix of legal affirmation, strategic signaling, narrative construction, and multinational force projection. Through the MCA, the Philippines and Japan have not only enhanced their bilateral defence posture but have also contributed meaningfully to the consolidation of a

regional maritime order grounded in lawfulness, transparency, and collective resolve.

Conclusion

The Philippines–Japan Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA), conducted under the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), marks a pivotal recalibration of regional security dynamics anchored in legal legitimacy, alliance consolidation, and normative assertion. This cooperative action demonstrates that smaller maritime nations, when united by shared values and legal principles, can play a decisive role in defending navigational freedoms and maritime sovereignty. While the MCA reflects a growing convergence among like-minded Indo-Pacific actors, it also intensifies the strategic contestation in the South China Sea, where China’s narrative diplomacy seeks to recast lawful cooperation as provocation. In this contested environment, Malaysia’s position is emblematic of strategic ambiguity, a deliberate posture that allows it to assert maritime rights while avoiding overt alignment with any major power bloc. Although Malaysia has not publicly endorsed the MCA, its quiet military modernization, increased patrols near the Luconia Shoals, and reaffirmation of its sovereign rights under UNCLOS suggest a hedging strategy that balances sovereignty assertion with economic pragmatism (Kuik, 2024; Ministry of Defence Malaysia, 2024). This calibrated stance enables Malaysia to maintain diplomatic flexibility while reinforcing its commitment to a rules-based maritime order. As such, Malaysia’s response, *measured yet resolute*, aligns with and reinforces the broader regional momentum toward legal coherence and multilateral engagement. The Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA), therefore, should not be viewed solely as a tactical manoeuvre, rather it represents a strategic inflection point that signals the gradual consolidation of a more resilient and legally anchored maritime architecture in Southeast Asia, one that Malaysia, through its deliberate and understated assertiveness, continues to influence and shape.

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Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, and

United States conduct multilateral maritime cooperative activity.

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