

# Philippines, Australia to sign strategic partnership deal

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Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese speaks during the bilateral meeting with Indonesia's President Joko Widodo on the sidelines of the 43rd Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia. - REUTERS PIC

**MANILA:** The Philippines and Australia will shore up their security and economic alliance Friday with the signing of a strategic partnership, as the countries seek to counter China's growing regional influence.

The agreement was expected to be finalised after a meeting between Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Manila.

Albanese's visit, which marks the first bilateral talks by an Australian prime minister in Manila in 20 years, follows a series of trips by senior members of his government to the archipelago nation since Marcos took office in 2022.

China's growing assertiveness on Taiwan and militarisation of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea have spurred Canberra, as well as Washington, to deepen defence cooperation with longstanding ally Manila.

Without mentioning China, Marcos thanked Albanese for his "strong support" for the Philippines as it seeks to fend off maritime claims that are "not valid."

"To have friends like you and partners like you especially on that subject is very gratifying and encourages us to continue down that path," Marcos told Albanese at the start of talks.

Albanese described the two countries as "great friends" and expressed hope that his visit would help take the relationship "to an even higher level."

Beijing claims almost the entire sea, ignoring an international ruling that its stance has no legal basis.

The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have overlapping claims to parts of it.

Philippine ex-president Rodrigo Duterte pivoted away from his country's traditional security partners towards China, but the Marcos administration has sought to reverse that stance.

Australian and Filipino troops last month held a major joint exercise near the contested waters. The event was watched by Marcos, his defence minister Gilberto Teodoro and Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles.

At the time, Marcos hailed the drills as "an important aspect of how we prepare for any eventuality."

Teodoro and Marles also issued a joint statement indicating their commitment to plan "bilateral joint patrols in the South China Sea."

Those exercises came after a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands was blocked by China Coast Guard vessels using water cannon on August 5, triggering a diplomatic spat and international outrage.

Under a strategic partnership, the countries will seek to expand cooperation in a range areas from defence and security to climate change and education.

Human Rights Watch called on Albanese to also "seriously" discuss human rights during his talks with Marcos, including pushing for an end to the deadly drug war started by Duterte.

Thousands of people were killed in the anti-narcotics campaign which sparked an international investigation into alleged human rights abuses.

The crackdown has continued under Marcos, with a Philippine monitoring group recording nearly 400 deaths.

"The Australian government should recognise that it would be a mistake to deepen defense and security ties with the Philippines while ignoring human rights concerns," Australia director for Human Rights Watch Daniela Gavshon said in a statement issued ahead of the talks.

"A security partner that routinely violates basic human rights will ultimately provide little safety and security for anyone."--AFP