

Air Routes and Power Routes: How Aviation Shapes Geopolitics and Trade

Capt. Michael John P. Reyes

Dean, Mapua Laguna Institute of Aviation

A Boeing 777 arcs high above the Arctic, its flight path suddenly veering thousands of kilometers off its usual course. Just days after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Western nations closed their skies to Russian aircraft, and Moscow retaliated. Overnight, the familiar straight-line routes between Europe and Asia were shattered. Airlines scrambled to redraw flight plans, transforming 10-hour trips into marathon odysseys that burned extra fuel and stretched crews to their limits. The ripple effects touched millions of travelers and businesses worldwide. It was a dramatic reminder that the pathways of global aviation are not just technical trajectories; they are geopolitical lightning rods.

From historic Open Skies agreements that knit allies closer, to punitive airspace bans that isolate rogue states, air corridors have become instruments of diplomacy and economic influence. Flight paths are shaped as much by politics and power as by physics. The ability of an airplane to take off in one country and land in another rests on a web of treaties and negotiations. When relations are warm, skies open and commerce flows. When they sour, a nation's airspace can swiftly become a bargaining chip or a weapon. In an age of global interconnection and tension, the map of who flies where has become a barometer of international relations. Aviation routes carry not only passengers and cargo, but also the weight of diplomatic messages, economic clout, and humanitarian purpose.

Open Skies and Strategic Agreements

On any given day, thousands of aircraft crisscross the world along routes made possible by painstaking diplomatic accords. Unlike a road trip, no airline can simply “wing it” across borders. Every international flight exists because governments agreed to let it happen. These understandings, known as air service agreements, determine which airlines can fly which routes, how often, and under what conditions. Over the past few decades, a global movement toward Open Skies has transformed aviation into a powerful conduit for trade and tourism.

The United States led the charge in the 1990s, signing landmark Open Skies pacts that became templates for others. Since then, Washington has inked aviation deals with over a hundred nations, including many in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The logic is simple: more flights mean more commerce and closer ties. Airfares drop and options multiply when airlines are free to compete internationally. Business trips, family visits, and cargo shipments all become easier and cheaper. As one U.S. diplomat remarked, Open Skies “opens markets, creates jobs, and allows people in far-removed countries to interact and build businesses together.” In other words, it weaves economies closer while fostering goodwill among nations.

The European Union went even further by turning its once-fragmented national markets into a single aviation zone. Any EU airline can fly between any EU cities as easily as domestic routes. This freedom has bound Europe together and inspired broader regional partnerships. In 2022, the EU and ASEAN signed the world’s first bloc-to-bloc Open Skies agreement, linking two regions of more than a billion people. Under this pact, airlines from Southeast Asia and Europe can operate unlimited flights between any EU and ASEAN countries, creating unprecedented connectivity. For the Philippines, as an ASEAN member, this opens new horizons. A Filipino carrier could, for instance, fly from Manila to Paris

and beyond, while European airlines can connect Manila with multiple EU hubs more freely. Such sweeping agreements underscore how aviation aligns with diplomacy, deepening ties and interdependence.

Not every nation, however, is eager to open its skies. Some protect home airlines or prioritize security and sovereignty. Negotiating flight rights often becomes a delicate diplomatic dance, balancing national interests and commercial opportunity. Large markets like China and India long maintained tight limits on foreign flights. The absence of a full Open Skies treaty between the U.S. and China reflects mutual strategic caution. Yet even rivals recognize the value of air connectivity. In 2023, Washington and Beijing agreed to double the number of flights allowed between them, restoring routes cut during the pandemic and trade disputes. Chinese officials acknowledged that “direct flights are essential for increasing mutual visits and trade,” showing how even uneasy partners value the political and economic dividends of aviation.

Smaller nations also use air agreements to amplify their influence. The Philippines has gradually liberalized its air policies, adopting a “pocket open skies” approach that initially opened secondary airports to foreign carriers. More recently, Manila has negotiated expanded treaties with partners around the world. In 2024, the Philippines and South Korea signed a deal increasing weekly seat capacity on routes between them by 50 percent. This move caters to booming travel demand and strengthens cultural exchange. By 2025, Philippine regulators were finalizing code-sharing agreements with Japan and Korea to allow seamless one-stop connections from Manila to the United States via those countries. Each new route negotiated—whether a nonstop Manila-Delhi flight or an additional Dubai frequency—is effectively a handshake of diplomacy, signaling goodwill and promising economic uplift.

Airspace Disputes and National Power

If Open Skies represent cooperation, closed skies represent confrontation. Airspace is sovereign territory, and nations have never hesitated to wield that sovereignty as leverage when conflicts arise. The dramatic reshuffling of flight paths after Russia's invasion of Ukraine is one of the clearest recent examples. Within days, the European Union, the United States, and allies banned Russian aircraft from their airspace. The Kremlin retaliated by barring airlines from dozens of countries, sealing off the vast expanse of Russian sky to most Western carriers. An area spanning eleven time zones—long a convenient aerial highway between Europe and Asia—was suddenly off-limits.

Western airlines had to find new, longer routes via Turkey or the Arctic, extending travel times by hours. For airlines, this meant higher fuel costs; for passengers, longer and pricier journeys; and for the planet, significantly higher emissions. The political impact was equally powerful. Europe's airspace ban underscored its unity against Moscow, while Russia's counter-ban sought to impose costs on its rivals. Chinese and Middle Eastern airlines, still free to traverse Russian skies, gained a competitive advantage with shorter, cheaper flights. Geography and politics intertwined, redrawing the commercial map of Eurasia.

Elsewhere, airspace disputes often mirror diplomatic tensions. In South Asia, Pakistan and India have used overflight rights as bargaining tools during standoffs. When relations soured in 2019, Pakistan closed its skies to Indian carriers for months, forcing costly detours. In the Middle East, Qatar's 2017 rift with its neighbors led to a blockade that banned Qatari aircraft from regional airspace. Qatar Airways had to fly long loops through Iranian airspace, an inconvenient but vital workaround that also highlighted Iran's opportunistic diplomacy. Likewise, when Belarus forced down a commercial jet in 2021 to arrest a dissident journalist, Europe swiftly barred Belarusian aircraft, isolating the country overnight.

Even in peacetime, airspace control can carry symbolic weight. China has used flight designations and air defense zones to assert claims in contested regions. Any attempt to impose an Air Defense Identification Zone over the South China Sea, for instance, could complicate flight routes for many Southeast Asian carriers. The mere prospect underscores how control of the air is an expression of power. Closing airspace can cripple economies dependent on aviation, while granting access can strengthen alliances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many nations sealed borders for health reasons, countries like the Philippines experienced firsthand how fragile air connectivity can be. For an island nation, grounded flights meant isolation and economic paralysis. Governments worldwide learned a lesson: maintaining air routes—or controlling them—can be as critical as defending land or sea.

Aviation as a Tool of Soft Power and Humanitarian Reach

Not all uses of aviation in geopolitics are coercive. Aircraft can also serve as ambassadors of goodwill. Connectivity itself is a form of soft power, and nations often use aviation to project prestige and generosity. Airlines such as Emirates, Qatar Airways, and Singapore Airlines have become icons of their countries' identities. Every new route, every state-of-the-art aircraft, and every world-class service experience acts as a flying billboard for the nation behind it. These carriers don't just move people; they broadcast messages of prosperity, modernity, and hospitality.

Aviation's soft power was most visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. As vaccines rolled out, airplanes became global lifelines. Billions of doses and tons of medical supplies were flown across continents in one of history's largest logistical efforts. China dispatched fleets of cargo aircraft delivering its Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines to developing nations, earning diplomatic goodwill in Asia and Africa. The United States and its

allies launched parallel missions through the COVAX program, using commercial and military airlifts to distribute Western-made vaccines. When Philippine Air Force cargo planes carried donated doses from partners like the U.S. and Japan, they became symbols of solidarity and relief. Each flight delivered more than medicine—it carried a message of friendship and cooperation.

Aviation has long played this humanitarian role. The Berlin Airlift of 1948–49, when Western pilots supplied a blockaded city for nearly a year, remains one of the most enduring symbols of air diplomacy. In the Philippines, international air assistance has been a lifeline after natural disasters. Following Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, C-130s and cargo jets from dozens of countries ferried aid into devastated Tacloban. The sight of aircraft bearing foreign flags unloading food and relief supplies left deep emotional impact. As one local official remarked, “Each plane that lands with help feels like a handshake from a friend.” Such missions demonstrate how airpower, used benevolently, can transcend borders and politics.

Beyond crisis response, everyday aviation fosters understanding. Direct flights enable student exchanges, cultural ties, and tourism. When new air routes are launched between distant nations, they often coincide with trade missions or state visits. This “air diplomacy” bridges not just geography, but perception—showing that people are welcome, businesses are trusted, and connections are valued. Even military flights can serve soft power when deployed for good. U.S. and Japanese aircraft delivering aid in the Pacific, or Philippine planes evacuating workers from conflict zones, demonstrate compassion and capability in equal measure. In many ways, the airplane has become a vessel of humanity as much as a machine of technology.

The Philippine Position in the Global Air Network

Sitting at the crossroads of the Pacific and Southeast Asia, the Philippines is both a beneficiary and a participant in the geopolitics of the air. With over 7,000 islands, the country depends on aviation for domestic cohesion and international engagement. Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport has long been a busy gateway, yet for years, infrastructure and policy constraints kept the country from achieving hub status. Nearby cities like Singapore and Bangkok raced ahead. Today, however, the Philippines is catching up. With liberalized air policies and new infrastructure, it is poised to reclaim its strategic potential.

The Philippines' participation in the ASEAN Single Aviation Market was a turning point. This regional Open Skies framework allows carriers across Southeast Asia to operate more freely within the bloc. For the Philippines, it has meant an explosion of new connections at secondary gateways such as Cebu, Davao, and Clark. Tourism to island destinations surged, and regional trade benefited. The policy also nurtured homegrown success stories like Cebu Pacific, which expanded internationally under liberalized conditions. Each route that links the Philippines more closely to its neighbors strengthens its economic integration and diplomatic influence.

On the global front, the Philippines balances its aviation ties among major powers. Its air links with the United States remain vital, connecting Filipino communities abroad and reinforcing historic alliances. Relations with China, meanwhile, have oscillated. During periods of tension, such as the 2012 Scarborough Shoal dispute, Chinese travel agencies curtailed group tours to the Philippines, and charter flights dropped sharply—a quiet but effective form of economic pressure. When relations warmed later, those flights resumed in full, demonstrating how easily tourism and connectivity can be politicized. The lesson was clear: air routes can serve as tools of both friendship and leverage.

Infrastructure investments aim to make the Philippines more resilient and competitive. The New Manila International Airport in Bulacan, under construction, promises to handle up to 100 million passengers annually and incorporate renewable energy systems. Clark International Airport, once a U.S. military base, has transformed into a modern logistics hub and regional gateway. FedEx has re-established its Asia-Pacific hub there, underscoring the Philippines' logistical potential. If managed strategically, these facilities could position the country as a mid-Pacific connector linking Northeast Asia, Oceania, and North America.

Aviation's strategic role extends beyond commerce. Under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States, Philippine air bases now host allied aircraft for joint training, disaster response, and humanitarian missions. This arrangement effectively places the Philippines within a wider air corridor of defense and relief operations across the Pacific. When American cargo planes fly in aid after typhoons, or when Philippine jets participate in regional exercises, they reinforce the nation's standing as a trusted partner and humanitarian actor.

In essence, the Philippines exemplifies the dual nature of aviation: economic enabler and diplomatic instrument. Its skies have witnessed both cooperation and tension, aid and assertion. As it upgrades its infrastructure and policies, the challenge will be balancing national interests with global openness. In a region where airspace politics are increasingly complex, the Philippines' choices about who flies where will echo beyond tourism and trade—they will shape its role in the balance of power.

When Flight Paths Follow Unity

From Open Skies treaties to closed airspaces, from cargo lifelines to diplomatic airlifts, aviation has become a stage on which nations play out

their ambitions, rivalries, and humanitarian commitments. The graceful arcs on a flight map often trace the invisible contours of politics on the ground. A newly inaugurated route can symbolize peace; a banned corridor can signify protest. Every landing and takeoff is the product of dialogue, compromise, and trust.

In an interconnected world, the sky is more than a void between points on a map—it is shared territory where the ideals of cooperation and coexistence are constantly tested. As global tensions rise and technology advances, the politics of air routes will only grow more intricate. Yet, as the Philippine experience shows, aviation remains one of humanity's greatest unifiers. The same airplanes that carry diplomats and executives can also carry medicine and hope. If nations continue to see the sky as a place to connect rather than divide, every flight will remain a quiet act of diplomacy, keeping horizons open for trade, understanding, and peace.

References

1. AeroTime. (2023, September 12). Air Service Agreements: The diplomatic dance that keeps aviation moving.
2. Shepardson, D. (2023, August 11). US, China agree to double weekly flights between countries. Reuters.
3. Yerushalmy, J. (2025, June 24). Flying in the new age of conflict – the hotspots diverting flights and leaving pilots blind. The Guardian.
4. Sharipzhan, M., Dubrovsky, A., & RFE/RL's Russian Service. (2025, July 30). Skies In Turmoil: Military Conflicts Remapping Global

Aviation. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

5. BusinessWorld News. (2025, June 8). The Philippines is working on code-share deals to expand US services. BusinessWorld Online.
6. Reuters. (2025, October 3). India and China to resume direct flights after five-year freeze.
7. Edge Davao. (2012, May 15). Scarborough Shoal rift affects chartered flights.
8. USC Center on Public Diplomacy. (2011, March 30). Celebrating the Negotiation of Agreements Between the U.S. & 100 Open Skies Partners.
9. European External Action Service. (2022, June 17). Landmark EU–ASEAN agreement to connect 1.1 billion people.
10. Eno Center for Transportation – Burnley, J. (2017, August 8). Ensure Fair and Free Competition Under All of Our Open Skies Agreements.