



# **RCAS Commentary**

## **Can Manila Keep Its Balance?**

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## About RCAS

RCAS is a non-profit research organization focusing on the maritime issues and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a newly-established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng, Haikou, China. We, at the moment, have an international research team with resident/non-resident researchers from China and other Asian states.

RCAS seizes the opportunity that China is building Hainan Free-Trade Port in which the Hainan Island will become an important window for China's opening up to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to become a leading research institute and think tank on maritime affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. So far, RCAS focuses on the maritime disputes and maritime cooperation in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and various regional cooperation mechanisms such as BRI, LMC, RCEP and so on. It is committed to promoting the maritime cooperation, regional integration and academic exchanges in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has received a number of research funding from universities and foundations, and conducted research programs of the South China Sea(SCS) dispute, China-South/Southeast Asian relations, BRI in South/Southeast Asia, terrorism/anti-terrorism in Afghanistan, and so on. RCAS researchers have won various awards from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Hainan government.

RCAS has published nearly 10 books in Chinese and English, and more than 20 papers on SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, forthcoming); *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *International Pressures, Strategic Preference and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches*(2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988*(2021); *The Budding Indo-Myanmar Relations: Rising But Limited Challenges for China*(2019).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles and been interviewed in various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum(EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* and *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post(SCMP)* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN* and *Global Times* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the US, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places. Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

## Can Manila Keep Its Balance?

*Nian Peng*

Less than a month after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. made his first visit to China, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited the Philippines on Feb. 2. After the meeting with his Philippine counterpart, Defense Secretary Carlito Galvez, Austin announced the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the two countries. He also added that a great decision had been made by the Philippine government — another four military bases for the United States. Under the EDCA, the U.S. military will not only be able to rotate in the Philippines but also access Philippine bases and facilities.



▲ US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (right) pays a courtesy call to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Malacanang on Feb. 2, 2023 (Source: Manila Times)

From former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's suspension of the termination of the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in June 2020 to its restoration in July 2021, which was followed by the announcement of the Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership in November 2021, and then the resumption of the U.S.-Philippines

“*Balikatan*” military exercise in April 2022, improved U.S.-Philippines relations have swept away the previous slump and made great strides in the past two years.

During the 2022 presidential campaign, Marcos, the presidential candidate with the highest approval rating, said he would “maintain the country’s alliance with the United States ... [and that] the military agreement between the U.S. and the Philippines was mutually beneficial. The alliance is a special relationship, and the United States can do a lot to help the Philippines.”

In September 2022, Marcos visited the U.S. for the first time, less than three months after he assumed office, making an effort to restore U.S.-Philippine relations. Four and a half month later, Austin visited the Philippines to upgrade military ties. He aims to make the Philippines an important part of U.S. deterrence of China in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

The frequent engagement between the United States and the Philippines seems to confirm previous speculation that the foreign policy of the Philippines will inevitably take a turn with Duterte out of the picture. Scholar Joseph Ching Velasco said in his recent publication “*Examining the Philippines’ China policy: great powers and domestic politics*” that growing domestic divisions and lack of strong domestic support make it difficult to lay a solid foundation for the Philippines’ long-term China-friendly policy. Duterte’s pro-China foreign policy can only be seen as an exception rather than a pattern.

Actually, whether it’s Benigno Aquino III’s anti-China, pro-U.S. foreign policy or Duterte’s anti-U.S., pro-China policy, they are exceptions to previous Philippine foreign policy, not the traditional norm. The Philippines’ foreign policy will go back to normal, being neither anti-America nor pro-China, under Marcos Jr.

Now, Marcos is bringing the country’s diplomacy back to normal with the intent to balance China and the United States. On one hand, he doesn’t want to continue his predecessor’s hostile policy toward the U.S., as he hopes to maintain close relations for military cooperation. On the other hand, he wants to have friendly relations and close economic cooperation with China to attract Chinese investment to the Philippines and to advance economic recovery and infrastructure development.

However, against the backdrop of the intensified Sino-U.S. strategic competition and rising nationalism in the Philippines, Marcos is faced with enormous challenges in manipulating his

U.S.-China balancing act. For example, the military base mentioned during Austin's visit has aroused great concern in China, and the issue is extremely sensitive. People are worried about potential military operations jointly launched by the United States and its allies and partners targeting China. Therefore, the Philippines needs to accurately understand China's concerns over defense cooperation. In other words, if the Philippines wants its balancing act to work, it needs to delicately develop relations with the U.S. without provoking China.

So far, the Philippines has been clear-headed, emphasizing that its defense cooperation with the United States "does not target any specific third party." This is a key prerequisite for carefully maintaining balance.

Apart from that, how to effectively manage the South China Sea dispute and appease domestic nationalists are difficult problems for Marcos. On the one hand, the United States has attempted to pull the Philippines toward involvement in deterring China in the South China Sea by enhancing defense cooperation with the Philippine Navy. The Philippines, therefore, needs to draw a clear line between normal cooperation with the U.S. Navy and its involvement in any U.S. confrontation with China.

On the other hand, Philippine opposition parties use the South China Sea issue to mobilize nationalism, challenge the authority of the Marcos administration and pressure it to take a hard stance. So, the Philippine government has to calm domestic discontent while avoiding escalating tensions in the South China Sea.

Countries like the Philippines face difficulties in implementing a balancing act between great power rivals. As Marcos said at the recent Davos World Economic Forum, it "keeps you up at night, keeps you up in the day, keeps you up most of the time.... It's very dynamic. It's constantly in flux so you have to pay attention to it."

If there is the slightest mistake, the Philippines' U.S.-China balancing act will slip into dangerous imbalance.

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## About Author



Nian Peng is the Director at Research Centre for Asian Studies(RCAS), Haikou, China. He holds a Ph.D. in Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests are in the areas of China-Southeast/South Asia relations, Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) and maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. He authored/edited six books-*The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, forthcoming), *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Springer Nature, 2022), *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, 2021), *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic*(Springer Nature, 2021), *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Springer Nature, 2020) and *Leng Zhan Hou Yin Mian Guan Xi Yan Jiu [A Study on Indo-Myanmar Relations after the Cold-War]*(Shi Shi Chu Ban She [Current Affairs Press], 2017). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, *Dong Nan Ya Yan Jiu [Southeast Asian Studies]*, *Nan Ya Yan Jiu [South Asian Studies]* and *Nan Ya Yan Jiu Ji Kan [South Asian Studies Quarterly]*. He also contributes his perspectives to many think tanks and various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *East Asian Forum* in Australia, *The Diplomat* in the USA, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times* and *CGTN* in China.