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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, in 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>.

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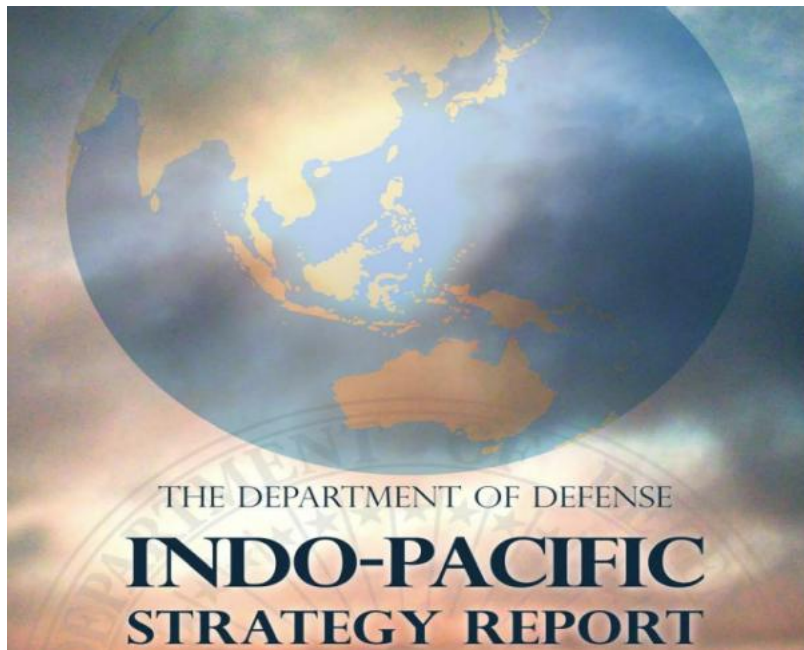
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RCAS Commentary

US Strategy Won't Deter China's Rise

Nian Peng

After Joe Biden took office, US's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (IPS)-which was officially proposed by former President Trump in November 2017-showed an new trend. This recent trajectory includes expanding overseas military bases to deter China's rise at sea, competing against its BRI infrastructure construction and decoupling China's supply chain in the Indo-Pacific region.



▲ The Department of Defense's New Indo-Pacific Strategy(Source: USNI News)

At present, the U.S. military focuses on building a "fire circle" of military deterrence against China around the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea (SCS) and the Indian Ocean. In the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. military has formulated a draft joint operational plan with Japan for Taiwan's "emergency". More recently, additional four military bases open to the U.S. army during U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's Philippine tour in February. It was speculated that these bases

are located in the Luzon Island near Taiwan and the Palawan Island around the SCS, though the locations were not disclosed by the Philippine and the U.S. officials.

In the SCS, the U.S. military has resumed joint military exercises with the Philippines and sped up military cooperation with Vietnam. Starting around late last month, the US Navy and Marines Corps have conducted drills in the SCS amid heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing over the Chinese balloon incident. It is the second time that the US aircraft carrier USS Nimitz hold military exercise in the SCS in this year. In the Indian Ocean, the U.S. military held joint exercises with the Indian and Indonesian navies.

In addition, the U.S. military has consolidated maritime cooperation with the above-mentioned countries through arms sales, military aid and defense agreements. At the same time, allies such as Japan and Australia are also invited by the US to form a free and democratic alliance containing China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, this containment fence is imperfect. In fact, Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia do not welcome the US to build military bases and facilities against a third country on their territory, nor do they want to be deeply get involved in the fierce strategic competition between China and the United States.

Although the Philippine government allows the U.S. troops to rotate in its military bases, it refuses permanent/quasi-permanent American garrison in the country. Ricardo Saludo, the former chairperson of the Philippine Civil Service Commission, even openly criticised President Ferdinand Marcos Jr for recently letting American ships, subs, planes and missiles use AFP(Armed Forces of the Philippines) bases.

Vietnam has limited its defense cooperation with the US under the “Four Noes” principles, i.e., “no alliances with foreign powers, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil, no allying with one country to counter another, not using force or threatening to use force in international relations”.

Indonesia has not allowed the US military to use its military bases until now. As Hugh White, a former Australian security and defence official said in his recent interview with the New York Times, “Militarily, access to the Indonesia bases will be an important asset of the US military

amid the ‘Taiwan war’, but it is impossible”. Indonesia’s neutrality complicates Washington’s expanding efforts in Asia to counter China, he added.

When the IPS was first put forward, former US Secretary of state Mike Pompeo announced that it would provide \$113 million for new technologies, energy and infrastructure construction in the Indo-Pacific region. After Mr Biden assumed office, he proposed a grand initiative of “Rebuilding a Better World”-which emphasises that developed democracies will cooperate in providing support for infrastructure construction in developing countries to cope with the infrastructure financing gap of more than \$40 trillion, and promoted its connection with the “Blue Dot Network”-which is a mechanism to certify infrastructure projects that meets robust international standards.

These initiatives are claimed by the US as alternative options of BRI for the Indo-Pacific states, but they are far from materialized. Due to the debt default and a recession warned the U.S. Treasury Department in early January, it is highly doubt that whether the US can fulfill the promise and finance the much-needed Indo-Pacific infrastructure projects.

The BRI has made remarkable progress even during the pandemic, for instance, more BRI cooperation agreements, more trade, investment, employment in BRI route states. According to Chinese Commerce Ministry, up until January 2023, more than 200 cooperation agreements on jointly building BRI were signed by China and 151 states and 32 international organizations; by the end 2022, China’s cumulative investment in BRI route states are 397.9 Billion RMB, which creates 421,000 employment positions. Additionally, a number of BRI infrastructure projects has been constructed, mainly includes the China-Laos railway, the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed Railway and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway.

In March last year, Shanghai, one of the main center of China’s supply chain, went into an epidemic lockdown, which undermined China’s advanced position in the global supply chain massively. The Western media seized the chance to tout how Vietnam and India would catch up or even replace China in the global supply chain. Late last year, Susan Burns, the new U.S. consul general in Ho Chi Minh City, said Vietnam had become a critical part in the U.S. supply chain.

Recently, the United States and India announced the “Key and Emerging Technologies Initiative”, aiming to strengthen the military, technology and supply chain cooperation and compete with China in military equipment, semiconductors and artificial intelligence. Before that, The leaders of Quad announced the ‘Quad Semiconductor Supply Chain Initiative’ at the September 2021 summit, designed to map capacity, identify vulnerabilities, and bolster supply-chain security for semiconductors and their vital components. So clearly, the United States is accelerating the pace of wooing allies and partners to decouple from China in the supply chain.

Yet, it is not easy to reach goals. On the one hand, the global supply chain is the result of long-term independent and autonomic allocation of market resource. Once formed, it is relatively stable and cannot be easily changed by a single country, even the super power like the United States. Despite the country can enhance its position in global supply chain through industrial subsidy and foreign support, it is still a long and challenging process.

On the other hand, both Vietnam and India are at the low position of the global supply chain, focusing on the rough machining of raw materials, processing with supplied materials and OEM. Natural resources and agricultural products still account for a large share in export commodities in these developing countries, and the proportion of manufactured goods is relatively low.

In addition, the poor infrastructure, complicated regulatory procedures, different industrial standard and rules and weak technology innovation capability are compost of the main obstacles for India and Vietnam to take on a big role in the reconstruction of the US supply chain. India and Vietnam will struggle to decouple from China’s supply chain, as both depend on Chinese economy.

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<https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2512196/us-strategy-wont-deter-chinas-rise>.

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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.

RCAS Commentary

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.

The article was first published at China-US Focus, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/can-manila-keep-its-balance>.

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RCAS Commentary

Politicization of the Pandemic Raises Alarm for China

Nian Peng

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, China has become a main focus of the pandemic fight in the world. The western countries, represented by the US, in particular, always deflect blame on China's anti-pandemic measures. During the early days of the pandemic, the United States clamored to trace the original source of the coronavirus disease and pointed the finger at China. After China implemented the dynamic Zero-COVID policy, the United States accused China for violating human rights and pressured it to loosen the anti-COVID policy.



▲pandemic fight between China and the United States(Source: Internet)

Now, China eventually abandoned the controversial Zero-COVID policy and suddenly reopened the borders in early 2023. Yet, not only had the United States not support China's new open policy aiming at normalizing the social order and people-to-people exchanges, but imposed curbs

on travelers from China. Followed by the United States, other Western countries, mainly including Italy, the UK, France, Spain, also took similar actions. Italy is the first Western country that imposed restrictions for Chinese tourists and called on traveling restrictions from EU.

The anti-pandemic policy taken by the West to limit the entrance of Chinese tourists has caused rising resentment in China. On one hand, it refreshed the Chinese painful memory of the West's criticism of the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in Wuhan three years ago. On the other hand, it frustrated the Chinese tourists who expected to travel abroad.

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that for all countries, COVID response measures need to be science-based and proportionate without affecting normal personnel exchanges. In fact, other Western countries such as Portugal, Switzerland and Poland didn't take new entry restrictions on the travelers arriving from China. Even Italy, the first European country imposes mandatory COVID tests for travelers from China, confirmed that no new COVID variant has been found from Chinese tourists.

So far, both the World Health Organisation(WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control(ECDC) have not detect new COVID variant from Chinese tourists. And more important, the core indicators of the Omicron such as virus toxicity and mortality weakened so much, which would not affect the public health in the West which has developed herd immunity to Omicron. So, at least for now, there is no need to overestimate the pandemic threat from China.

Instead, new COVID variant called XBB with higher toxicity and mortality has been found in the United States and imported to China recently. Initially, China has not imposed new restrictions on the arrivals from the United States as few XBB have been detected in local communities. But as more XBB have been found, China introduced new COVID-19-related travel measures for individuals arrived from foreign countries who are required a negative nucleic acid test issued within 48 hours. Moreover, China has retaliated against Japan and South Korea because the two countries launched discriminatory policy towards the Chinese tourists. So, will there be more strict traveling limitations on foreigners if a new round of pandemic caused by XBB happened in China(although Chinese health officials said possibility of this is low) or more discriminatory policy on Chinese travelers issued by the West?

Except the pandemic threat, the China-US relations are troubled with the epidemic prevention policy. The U.S. President Joe Biden repeatedly raised concern about China's handling of its COVID-19 outbreak after the WHO said Beijing was under-reporting virus deaths. Soon after that, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning refuted that China has shared relevant information and data with the international community, including the WHO and the United States, in an open, transparent and responsible manner. She also called on the United States avoiding remarks and actions that politicize the epidemic. More recently, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin required the United States to share pandemic related data with WHO and international community. So, what will be the next step of the United States to squash China and how will China to response to it?

The ongoing China-US rivalry on pandemic raises the alarm for China. The country still has a long way to compete for international discourse on the pandemic. At the beginning of the outbreak, because of the poor response from the local government and the media public opinion aphasia from the state, China was criticized heavily by the West, particular the United States.

After China finally gave up the disputed Zero-COVID policy and normalized the personal exchanges with the world, it is still not be trust and continued to be blamed by the West. It is evident that there will be a transition period after China reopens its borders, in which the West will gradually accomodate to China's normalization. In that case, China needs to strengthen domestic pandemic prevention and control, enhance transparency of the pandemic, cautiously implement retaliation policy, and more importantly, improve the skills of the discourse of the pandemic and public opinion struggle with the West.

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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.