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Nian Peng: Upgraded Philippines-US Military Cooperation May
Cause a Setback in China-Philippines Relations

Nian Peng: Qin's Indonesian Tour Sped Up China-ASEAN Relation

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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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RCAS Commentary

Upgraded Philippines-US Military Cooperation May Cause a Setback in China-Philippines Relations

Nian Peng

More than one month after the announcement that the United States would be granted access to four more military bases in the Philippines, the U.S. started rehabilitating the runway of the Basa Air Base in Pampanga on March 20. The Philippines' fast-growing defense cooperation with the United States may lead to the relations between China and the Philippines going backwards.



▲ America's military bases in the Philippines. (Times)

The U.S.-funded rehabilitation of the runway inside the Philippines' Basa Air Base started on March 20, with an expected total cost of \$25 million. Secretary of the U.S. Air Force Frank Kendall and Philippine Department of National Defense Officer-in-Charge Carlito Galvez Jr. led the groundbreaking ceremony together. Kendall said: "The rehabilitation is a manifestation of our Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), a key pillar of the U.S.-Philippine alliance. The two countries' relations are at a turning point."

Galvez added that the implementation of the EDCA is now in full swing and he hopes that the United States will consider more EDCA projects to strengthen the Philippines capabilities in defending national sovereignty.

The EDCA was originally drafted in 2014, granting the United States access to five military bases in the Philippines. During U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's Philippine tour in February 2023, the agreement added four additional sites for use by U.S. forces, though the locations of the new sites wasn't revealed at that time.

Reuters quoted a retired Philippines general as saying that the bases requested by the United States are located in Isabela, Zambales, and Cagayan provinces, all of which are near the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

On March 22, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., told a news conference without elaborating that, under the expanded EDCA, U.S. forces would be allowed access to bases "scattered around the Philippines"-including in the northern Philippines, which is near the Taiwan Strait, and western Palawan province, which faces the South China Sea. Marcos underscored that the moves were meant to boost the country's coastal defense, though it was criticized by the local governments in the northern Cagayan province.

From the Chinese perspective, the location of these four sites is very targeted, with three of them near the Taiwan Strait and one facing the South China Sea. It demonstrates that the United States, which has been keeping close tab on the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, is preparing for possible military conflicts in these troubled waters. Meanwhile, by giving wider access to U.S. troops, the Philippines has made it very clear that if military conflicts were to break out in the region, it will stand with the United States.

The rehabilitation project at Basa Air Base means that the U.S. Air Force can take off from the Philippine base and go to Taiwan or the South China Sea, which is much closer than taking off from Guam military base. Also, the U.S. Army can store weapons and ammunition in Philippine bases, greatly shortening the logistics supply line and improving combat efficiency during the wars.

If there is a conflict, the command system of the United States and the Philippines is relatively sound, and the four bases can help the U.S. military and the Philippines to respond quickly in a short period of time during the wars.

In addition, the current joint military exercises between the United States and the Philippines appear to be aimed at seizing disputed reefs and islands controlled by China.

Next month's annual military exercise, known as Balikatan, will be the largest joint Philippine-U.S. military exercise in history, with about 17,600 military personnel expected to take part in the drills. Both Austin and Galvez welcomed the upcoming exercises and further discussed plans for joint maritime activities in the South China Sea.

In fact, since Marcos came to power, the defense cooperation between the Philippines and the United States has made a major breakthrough. The United States is trying its best to pull the Philippines into its anti-China camp.

The expanded EDCA and the military drills between the Philippines and the United States will thus take a toll on the relations between China and the Philippines.

The recent intensification in the territorial and maritime disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea can be attributed to the historic shift of the Philippines' role in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. At least in the security domain, the Philippines is the most deeply integrated Southeast Asian country in the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Moreover, there is a possibility that the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines will patrol the South China Sea in the near future, as the Philippines wants more enhanced military cooperation with the United States and its allies to strengthen Manila's hand in dealing with China in the South China Sea.

Frankly speaking, it is understandable for the United States and the Philippines to develop military relations, as they are traditional security allies. Nonetheless, the Philippines should be aware of China's bottom line. If the Philippine-U.S. defense cooperation is highly targeted, especially if it involves the Taiwan Strait, China will definitely consider it an unfriendly act and take counteractions.

In that regard, the recent declaration by the Chinese embassy in Manila that the Philippines-U.S. military cooperation could "seriously harm Philippine national interests" is a clear warning to the Philippines.

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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

Qin's Indonesian Tour Sped Up China-ASEAN Relation

Nian Peng

Recently, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang went to Indonesia for a state visit. This was his first outbound visit after Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's China visit amid Chinese New Year. This is also Qin's first visit to a neighboring country after he took his new post as foreign minister. So clearly, the strategic significance of Indonesia in China's neighbor diplomacy has sharply increased.



▲ Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang (left) speaks with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi during a press briefing in Jakarta, on Feb. 22, 2023. (AFP/Adek Berry)

During the visit, Qin met with President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo and the coordinator for cooperation with China and Coordinating Maritime Affairs and Investment Minister Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, respectively.

Qin jointly hosted and chaired the fourth meeting of the Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) between China and Indonesia with his counterpart. He also visited the ASEAN Secretariat and met with the secretary-general. After the meeting, a joint declaration was released by both sides, in which bilateral and multilateral cooperation are highly stressed.

Therefore, it can be concluded Qin’s visit to Indonesia not only focuses on consolidating bilateral relations between China and Indonesia, but also aims to upgrade China-ASEAN relations to a higher level.

At the bilateral level, this year marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the China-Indonesia comprehensive strategic partnership. The two sides need to plan ahead for the next 10 years so as to expand and deepen bilateral cooperation. In practice, the new diplomatic team led by Wang Yi and Qin Gang needs to push forward China-ASEAN relations amid intense China-United States strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific region, in which Indonesia has become a major “breakthrough” for China’s new round of “diplomatic offensives” in Southeast Asia.

Additionally, there will be some uncertainties in Indonesia’s foreign policy after the presidential elections next year. Hence, China hopes to engage with the top officials of Indonesia and plan for the next decade of bilateral relations, so as to reduce the negative impact of political changes on bilateral ties.

Qin’s meeting with Luhut demonstrated that both sides want to promote Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation and thus to lay a solid economic foundation for a stable bilateral relationship. In recent years, China and Indonesia made remarkable progress in BRI cooperation, especially the successful trial operation of the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway.

Actually, in the process of publicizing BRI infrastructure construction achievements, China listed the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway and the China-Laos Railway as two landmark BRI projects in Southeast Asia.

Given the considerable political turmoil that Myanmar has experienced over the past few years, the ambitious expectations for BRI cooperation between China and Myanmar, with the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor in particular, have to be reduced, whereas cooperation under BRI between China and Indonesia is expected to accelerate in the near future.

During the pandemic, China took the lead in cooperating with Indonesia in vaccine research and development, and supported Indonesia in establishing a regional vaccine-production center in Southeast Asia. Indonesia is the first country to approve the use of Chinese mRNA vaccines in Southeast Asia. Through close anti-pandemic cooperation, Indonesia quickly became China's primary partner in anti-epidemic cooperation in Southeast Asia, as well as in construction of the Health Silk Road in the world.

Chinese scholars believe anti-pandemic and public health cooperation between China and Indonesia can add some new impetus to build a common community with a shared future between the two countries.

More importantly, China expects to speed up the building of a community with a shared future with ASEAN via the successful construction of a China-Indonesia community with a shared future.

From a multilateral perspective, this year marks the 10th anniversary of China's proposition of a common community with a shared future for China and ASEAN, as well as the 20th anniversary of China's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). As the rotating chair of ASEAN this year, Indonesia has become a top priority in China's multilateral diplomacy toward Southeast Asia. As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin pointed out, China looks forward to advancing the building of a peaceful, safe and secure, prosperous, beautiful and amicable home through FM Qin's visit to Indonesia, as well as deepening China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership.

On one hand, Indonesia identified ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth as the theme of ASEAN this year. China is a primary and indispensable partner of ASEAN in promoting economic recovery and economic growth after the pandemic. Robust China-Indonesia economic cooperation can help Indonesia and ASEAN to achieve this goal.

On the other hand, ASEAN economic growth is affected by geopolitical competition in the region, especially the intense South China Sea (SCS) dispute. Since Indonesia offered to accelerate the consultation on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS, China is looking forward to achieving more consensus with Indonesia during/after Qin's visit, so as to conclude the COC consultation as early as possible and thus to maintain peace and stability in the SCS.

The article was first published at The Jakarta Post, Indonesia,

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