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Nian Peng: What Does China Expect From Malaysia Relations
Under Anwars?

Nian Peng: The Large-scale US-Philippine Military Exercise
Revealed Marcos Jr.' Policy Adjustment toward China

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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

What Does China Expect From Malaysia Relations

Under Anwar's?

Nian Peng

Following Malaysia's general election last November, the chairman of Pakatan Harapan (PH) Anwar Ibrahim was officially sworn in as the nation's 10th prime minister. Anwar was able to form government through a partnership between PH and Barisan Nasional (BN), and the public holds high expectations for the new prime minister. But it remains to be seen whether he can keep his unity government actually united, as PH and BN have been in opposition to each other historically.



▲ Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim visited China on March 29, 2023.

([businesstoday.com.my](https://www.businesstoday.com.my))

As if that weren't enough, Anwar is faced with big challenges in managing Malaysia's foreign affairs amid the intense China-U.S. power competition in Southeast Asia.

Soon coming to power, Anwar visited Malaysia's Southeast Asian neighbors, including the Philippines, Indonesia, and Cambodia, and traveled to Saudi Arabia to consolidate the traditional friendship with the Muslim states.

But China was Anwar's next destination after his Southeast Asia tours and trip to the Middle East. He attended the Boao Forum for Asia on March 28, the first stop on a four-day trip in China. It is clear that Anwar wants to push forward China-Malaysia relations by taking full advantage of the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Malaysia this year, and next year's 50th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic ties between the two countries.

From a Chinese perspective, Anwar is seen as a strong advocate for a liberalized, multicultural, and diverse society, with a focus on foreign economic cooperation and regional stability. His premiership will provide more opportunities for the booming development of Sino-Malaysian relations.

For example, on his visit, Anwar led a business delegation including the minister of international trade and industry, the minister of transport, and the minister for local government development to visit China. That showed his intention to promote the trade and investment cooperation with China.

All the main political parties in Malaysia maintain friendly disposition toward China, laying a solid foundation for the advancement of Sino-Malaysian ties.

For instance, when contesting the election, Anwar's Pakatan Harapan coalition, led by Parti Keadilan Rakyat, didn't use the so-called "China threat" as a bargaining chip to win votes. Fellow governing partner BN, Malaysia's long-ruling political coalition, represented by UMNO, has long been committed to a friendship policy toward China, and sees China as an economic partner instead of a strategic threat. The political parties representing the Chinese community in Malaysia, including Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), have been cooperating with China in different fields, such as trade investment, culture, and education. Also, the political parties in East Malaysia seek close economic ties to China to reduce their dependence on West Malaysia.

All of the above demonstrate that China-Malaysia relations are going to see good opportunities with Anwar in office. However, it is not safe to assume that relations will develop smoothly.

On the internal level, the fast-growing Malaysian Islamic Party and its religious nationalism are giving rise to nationalist sentiment, which could take its toll on China-Malaysia relations.

First of all, Malaysian nationalists are concerned that Chinese investment and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could weaken the political power of the Malays. Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) and other nationalist factions have criticized former Prime Minister Najib Razak for giving too much economic profit to China. Such sentiments contributed to the suspension of three major Chinese-funded projects, including the construction of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) under the PPBM and PH coalition government. The former government also banned the publication of pro-BRI comic books due to highly controversial content.

In spite of the resumption of the ECRL project a few months later, negative perceptions toward the BRI-it is associated with corrupted officials-are imprinted on the Malaysian society. Therefore, corruption allegations will be the main weapon used by opposition parties to attack the government, and the BRI projects may become a potential target of the factionalism in Malaysia.

In addition, right-wing nationalists even fear that too much investment from China will strengthen the political status of the Chinese community in Malaysia. Hence, Malaysia will be under China's thumb. The IRIS, a Malaysian nationalist think tank, has long held a hostile stance toward Malaysian Chinese and China.

Finally, Malay nationalists complain that China is acting arbitrarily in the South China Sea dispute, and thus press the government to take harder position in maritime issue. PPBM and Muslim political parties have also condemned China on its treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

At the external level, the United States has enhanced defense cooperation with its allies and partners in Southeast Asia through arms trade and military exercises, so as to counter China's rise. Washington has also increased its trade and investment connections with the Southeast Asian nations by implementing the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, aiming to compete with the BRI. With increasing pressure from Washington to take sides between the United States and China, it becomes more and more difficult for Malaysia to continue with its balancing approach.

To conclude, warm China-Malaysia relations, thriving economic cooperation in particular, could be witnessed during the Anwar era, but the anti-Chinese sentiment led by the Malay nationalists and U.S. pressure are the main challenges.

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/what-does-china-expect-from-malaysia-relations-under-anwar%ef%bc%9f/>.

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.

RCAS Talk

The Large-scale US-Philippine Military Exercise Revealed Marcos Jr.' Policy Adjustment toward China

Nian Peng

On April 11, the United States and the Philippines held a joint military exercise called “Balikatan”, which reached a record high between the two countries from participating forces to exercise subjects. This military exercise will last until April 28.



▲General view during the opening ceremony of the annual Philippines-U.S. joint military exercises or Balikatan, at the Armed Forces of the Philippines headquarters, in Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines, April 11, 2023. (REUTERS)

The exercise drew high attention from China as the Philippines and China have territorial disputes over the South China Sea and the Philippines is also the closest Southeast Asian country to the Taiwan Strait where a fierce competition was conducted between China and the United States .

Nian Peng, director of the Research Centre for Asian Studies (RCAS) in Haikou, China, said that this upgraded US-Philippine military exercise is a clear sign that the United States is

preparing for the possible military conflicts in the future. The United States has exercised its ability to cooperate with its allies in a local conflict.

In a largely peaceful environment, why can military exercises stir up all countries?

“In fact, after the World War II, there is no real peace. Although there is no conflicts between great powers, proxy conflicts, regional conflicts and local conflicts come one after another.” Nian Peng explained that if a region already has territorial disputes and ideological opposition, military exercises will stimulate the security situation. And the most common purpose is to deter by force. This refers to showing strong force through military exercises to deter other countries from provoking disputes and suppressing their intentions.

“The signal transmitted by the military exercise is that the military cooperation between the United States and the Philippines has recovered from the stagnation of the Duterte era and developed very rapidly. This trend and speed have beyond China’s acceptable limits.” Peng said.

After 2000, the Philippine presidents had to face the relationship with China and the United States-the Philippines was once colonized by the US, so it had strong historical ties and strategic interests with the US; As a maritime neighbor, China may be extremely important for poverty reduction and economic development in the Philippines.

Benigno Aquino III, who was elected in 2010, initiated arbitration on sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled that China lost the case, and China-Philippine relations dropped to a freezing point.

Duterte, who took office in 2016, took a very different path. He shelved disputes in the South China Sea and actively developed relations with Beijing. Duterte put forward “Build, Build, Build”, many of which were carried out under China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). During his tenure, Duterte once suspended the important Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States.

Nian Peng said that in the Philippines, many scholars believe that Aquino III’s pro-American and anti-Chinese policy will not work, and Duterte’s alienation from the United States is also not feasible. But Marcos Jr., who just took office, has balanced the relations and moved closer to the United States without alienating China.

In January this year, besides ASEAN countries, Marcos Jr. chose China for his first visit. The two countries signed a joint statement saying that they agreed to establish direct communication channels between the foreign ministries on the South China Sea to peacefully handle disputes; China also promised to invest US \$22.8 billion in the Philippines.

While escalating military cooperation with the United States, Marcos Jr. also emphasized that Philippine military bases accessible to the United States will not be used for any aggressive operations, and stressed that cooperation with Washington is aimed at enhancing Philippine defense capabilities. “If they don’t intend to attack us, they don’t have to worry because we won’t fight them.”

“But Marcos Jr. did not fully estimate that the military cooperation with the United States is the most sensitive to China and has a great impact on China-Philippine relations.” Peng added that the United States is constantly provoking China in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, so China is extremely sensitive and worried about the purposeful military cooperation between its neighbors and the United States. When this negative emotion accumulates to a certain extent, it will be transmitted to bilateral relations and adversely affect the normal exchanges between the two countries, especially economic and trade cooperation.

In other words, for the Philippines, the balance between China and the United States is a “risky strategy”. Marcos needs to accurately control the small space between the upper limit of military cooperation with the United States and the bottom line acceptable to China. A slight carelessness may not be worth the loss.

*The article was partially translated from the BBC Chinese News,
<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-65345018>.*

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.