



# **RCAS Commentary**

## **Is the Philippines Ready for a Taiwan Conflict?**

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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>.

# Is the Philippines Ready for a Taiwan Conflict?

*Nian Peng*

The Philippine government said in its National Security Policy 2023 to 2028, adopted on August 14, that the escalating tension in the Taiwan Strait is a “major concern” that could affect the country.



▲ Filipino soldiers walk along a beach in Calayan Island on June 30, 2023. (The Philippine Star)

According to the *Philippine Star*, the document added, “Any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably affect the Philippines given the geographic proximity of Taiwan to the Philippine archipelago and the presence of over 150,000 Filipinos in Taiwan.”

Such expressions of concern are not new. One month ago, Philippine Defense Chief Gilbert Teodoro Jr. stated that the Philippine government is closely monitoring the threat of an invasion

of Taiwan by China and preparing for possible contingencies. Teodoro further explained that the Philippines was preparing for “all contingencies,” not merely a flashpoint between China and Taiwan. He also clarified that these preparations are a multi-agency effort, not only focused on the defense side.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has also spoken about the Taiwan issue. In February, Marcos said in an interview with Nikkei Asia that it would be difficult for the Philippines to avoid getting involved in a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, considering its geographical location.

The Philippines is the closest country to Taiwan among the five Indo-Pacific allies of the United States. After Marcos took office in May last year, the Philippines has deepened military cooperation with the United States dramatically, by expanding U.S. access to four new military bases. One of those, the base in Cagayan province, is only about 400 kilometers away from Taiwan.

China is increasingly alert to the Philippines’ involvement in the Taiwan issue. Moreover, as Philippine-U.S. defense cooperation has rapidly developed under Marcos, China is also worried about the military intervention of the United States and Philippine in any contingency in the Taiwan Strait. As China’s most popular newspaper, *the Global Times*, concluded in May, “given the unequal relationship between the Philippines and the US, there is a high risk that the Philippines will be able to do nothing when the US wants to break its word and drag the country into the Taiwan question.”

China has sought to deter the Philippines from getting involved in the Taiwan issue. In April, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian warned the Philippines that the United States intends to interfere in the Taiwan issue through the new sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Although Marcos has framed the deals with the United States as a defensive measure to shore up the Philippines' national security, Beijing still claimed Manila was meddling with its internal affairs by granting the U.S. access to Philippine military bases.

There is a new round of tensions in the Taiwan Strait as William Lai, a candidate for the 2024 election in Taiwan, transited the United States on either side of his Paraguay tour in August. At the same time, the maritime standoff between the Philippines and China in Second Thomas Shoal (Ren'ai Reef) has escalated.

From the Chinese perspective, the Philippines' focus on the Taiwan issue is an attempt to attract more U.S. military assistance and consolidate its tough position toward the South China Sea disputes. Due to its limited military capacity, it is difficult for the Philippines to strengthen its defense power in both the South China Sea and its northern reaches near the Taiwan Strait at the same time. However, if the Philippines can get increased support from the United States, it could enhance its military power at minimal cost – thus freeing up resources to increase Manila's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

As National Security Policy 2023 to 2028 noted, in order to achieve a credible defense capability, the Philippines will strengthen the mutual defense treaty with the United States. Teodoro, the Philippine defense minister, said on July 20 that the United States has promised to further enhance the military capabilities of the Philippines and both sides have cooperated on establishing a “credible deterrent posture.”

It is worth noting, however, that this approach faces opposition from within the Philippines. Even the president's sister, Senator Imee Marcos, questioned the extent and focus of Philippines-U.S. military cooperation under the EDCA, explicitly asking, “Why are we doing all the military exercises in Luzon a stone's throw ... away from Taiwan?”

More recently, former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte finished his China tour on July 17, during which he expressed a hope to bring China-Philippine relations back toward “friendly cooperation.” As of early August Duterte was a top suggestion to be nominated as special envoy to China, but eventually the hawkish ex-Foreign Affairs Secretary Tedoro Locsin Jr. was given the position. Evidently, Duterte’s goodwill toward China stood in contrast to the actions of the current administration, which continue to prioritize the Philippine-U.S. relations and hyping the disputes between the Philippines and China.

Obviously, there is a clear split among the Philippine elites, over both China policy in general and the Taiwan issue specifically. Duterte insisted that the Philippines should avoid intervening in the Taiwan issue; otherwise, the Philippines will become a main target of attacks in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait. However, the hardliners, the Philippine military in particular, decided to take steps to strengthen the defense force and enhance deterrence toward China-both in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

At present, there are few U.S. troops and new weapons deployed in the added military bases in the northern Philippines, so the risk of the military intervention by the Philippines and the United States in the Taiwan Strait is still at a low level. Nonetheless, the fast-growing Philippine-U.S. defense cooperation has already raised the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, as both sides have signed an agreement for the military cooperation in the next five to 10 years.

More important, China worried that the Philippines would achieve some consensus on the Taiwan issue with the United States in return for more U.S. backing in the South China Sea tensions.

If there are new military deployments in the northern Philippines in the near future, whether defensive or offensive, tensions would be escalated in the Taiwan Strait and the Philippines

would become a target in any conflict. It is very important for the Philippines to avoid becoming involved in the Taiwan issue and instead maintain strategic autonomy in the great power rivalry.

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## About Author



Nian Peng is the Director at Research Centre for Asian Studies(RCAS), 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, *The Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times* and *CGTN* in China.