



RCAS Talk

Philippines Joins Japan-led Military Drills for The First Time Aiming to Boost Confidence against China

Nian Peng

Director, The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS)

November 15, 2023

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 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); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

Philippines Joins Japan-led Military Drills for The First Time

Aiming to Boost Confidence against China

Nian Peng

Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA) (Wang Fengling, November 13, 2023)- The Philippines is included as an observer for the first time in the Japan-led annual military exercises that began on November 11 off Japan's coast. These exercises are jointly conducted by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), and US Navy.



▲ Picture of the Japanese aircraft carrier JS Izumo.

The annual exercise is a biannual naval training event led by JMSF, which also includes the United States (US), Australia and Canada. Approximately 30 navy ships and 40 warplanes from the four countries are participating in the joint exercises in an effort to improve the multinational joint combat capability. The Japanese press reported that this year's annual exercise is the largest joint military exercise since the establishment of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force in 1954.

Notably, high officials from Philippine naval forces also joined the exercise as observers for the first time. Since the beginning of this year, the joint military drills

conducted by the US and the Philippines have all been in the South China Sea (SCS). Therefore, it is seen as a major breakthrough for Manila to participate in the military exercise off Japan's coast.

In addition to JMSDF, the Philippines has shown interest in participating in the QUAD. This would further boost its confidence in countering China in the SCS. Analysts posit that the Philippines intends to upgrade its cooperation with Japan and Australia to the same level as that of the US.

Nian Peng, Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), said that the annual exercise is prepared for actual combat and is by no means just symbolic. The Philippines participating in this annual exercise starting as an observer has two key implications. First, it will boost its confidence in confronting China in the SCS and will pave the way for its full integration into QUAD. Second, Manila can receive help from Japan, Australia and other US allies if the US is scrambling with other domestic and international issues and thus abandons its close ally, the Philippines. Third, and most importantly, the Philippines is trying to link the SCS disputes with issues concerning the East China Sea (ECS) and the Taiwan Strait to constrain China and reduce pressure it faces in the SCS.

The US and Japan are thrilled to have the Philippines as an observe the naval drills this year. Vice Admiral of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, Karl Thomas, stated, "The more that our navies work together, the more multilateral our operations and our exercises are, the greater the security for this region." Vice Admiral of Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Akira Saito, told reporters that the Philippines is a very important country for us, and we are looking to coordinate with their navy at every possible opportunity. Last week, Japan said it would provide radar systems to the Philippines to bolster its security. The two countries also announced the start of negotiations for "reciprocal military access" agreement.

Nian Peng pointed out that the Japan-Philippines cooperation is far less than that of the US-Philippines but is rising rapidly. Analysts expected that the “Visiting Forces Agreement” between Japan and the Philippines would be on par with the US-Philippines cooperation in the next one or two years. The Philippines envisages raising its cooperation with Japan and Australia to a level close to or even equal to that of the US.

Nian Peng said that the US has military deployment to the northeast, southeast and southwest of China, such as South Korea and Japan in Northeast Asia, the Philippines in Southeast Asia, and Australia in Oceania, which is called the island chain strategy. The US is trying to weave a tighter web to create greater deterrence against China.

Parallel with this, the Kamandag (Cooperation of the Warriors of the Sea) military drills are being conducted by the US, the Philippines, South Korea, the UK, and Japan from November 9 to 20 in the SCS, including Luzon Island, Palawan Island, Batan Island, and the Zamboanga Peninsula. The Batan islands are located in the northern tip of the Philippines and are only 98 kilometers away from Taiwan. According to some analysts, these military drills are a “maritime exchange” organized by the US. As the joint exercises become more frequent and involve more participants, more countries will join the strategic layout of the US military deterrent.

Nian Peng stated that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Ukraine-Russian war take up so much effort from the US. Washington is concerned about China’s ‘aggressive’ “change of status quo” in the SCS. The frequent military exercises conducted by the US are aimed at maintaining the intensity of military activities in the region, deterring Beijing and maintaining heat and tension in the SCS region. The Asia-Pacific version of NATO is already in the process of formation. The US still has several measures to take, including connecting cross-regional allies in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia and raising the level of cooperation among allies to the same level to ensure the

coordination of combat effectiveness in wartime.

Nian Peng added that the tension in the Asia-Pacific region will still exist in the future, especially the risk of collision or scratch between China and the Philippines around Ren'ai Reef (Second Thomas Shoal). Additionally, the probability of sudden accidents is very high, but it will not rise to regional military conflicts. This is most ideal for the US, which not only avoids the risk of war but also achieves the purpose of deterring China and containing China's rise.

▲This interview is translated from the Chinese edition Wang Fengling, "Philippines joins Japan-led military drills for the first time aiming to boost confidence against China", *HKCNA*, November 13, 2023, <http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100520753&channel=2813>.