

RCAS Commentary

U.S. Intrusions Will Roil Disputed Waters

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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.

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On Dec. 4, the U.S. littoral combat ship USS Gabrielle Giffords entered the disputed waters surrounding Ren'ai Reef, a hot spot of recent China-Philippines tensions in the South China Sea.



▲The USS Gabrielle Giffords (top) patrols in the South China Sea in October with U.S. and Japanese destroyers. Navy photo.

This was the first time that a warship of the United States openly challenged China's sovereignty in the area since the escalation of tensions between China and the Philippines in early 2023. By doing so, the U.S. sent a clear message to China that it has not abandoned its unwavering support for the Philippines, particularly in terms of military assistance, despite the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Although the U.S. is aware of the high risk of expanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the broader Middle East, and it can foresee Russia's ultimate victory in the war with Ukraine if Western assistance is cut off, it has not shifted its focus away from the South China Sea. Instead, it has intensified its military exercises and deployments with allies and partners in the region to create friction between China and its neighbors without directly confronting Beijing.

Despite claiming to be the most reliable U.S. ally in the South China Sea, the Philippines fears that the U.S. might reduce or abandon its assistance because of the

expansion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; therefore, Manila must provoke trouble in the region to continue receiving U.S. support.

The day before the U.S. entered the disputed waters around Ren'ai Reef, the Philippine Coast Guard claimed a significant increase in Chinese maritime militia vessels near the Niu'e Reef (Whitson Reef). In response, it deployed two warships to "patrol, challenge, and monitor" the Chinese vessels. Ironically, on Nov. 20, it was announced in the Philippines that more than 40 fishing boats would be sent with supplies to Ren'ai Reef.

Given that a large number of civilian vessels have entered the disputed waters of the South China Sea, this may potentially lead to collisions, or even confrontations, between the Coast Guard and fishing boats. The involvement of civilian vessels could be a significant trigger for clashes and should therefore be avoided by both China and the Philippines.

The Philippine Navy recently established a new monitoring station on its occupied Zhong'ye Island to improve surveillance of Chinese ships and aircraft. It is believed that the Philippines will share intelligence on Chinese Navy activities around Zhong'ye Island with the U.S. Navy through this station, ensuring America's continued military support.

At the same time, the U.S. intends to deter China from changing the status quo by increasing military activities in the disputed waters. As discussed before, the U.S. has to fight on many fronts, including the Middle East and Russia, which could weaken its advantages in the maritime disputes. The U.S. worries that China might take this significant opportunity to advance its interests in the South China Sea, particularly by recovering Ren'ai Reef militarily.

In the near future, the U.S. will not only enhance its military presence there — not only to bolster its deterrence of China but to foster coordination and cooperation with allies and partners. The objective is to establish a U.S.-led alliance aimed at curbing China in the South China Sea.

On Nov. 27, following the conclusion of joint maritime exercises with the U.S. and Australia, Romeo Brawner Jr., the chief of staff of the Philippine armed forces, declared that the Philippines planned to conduct additional joint multilateral military exercises with other allies in the South China Sea in the future. He added that several countries were interested in staging maritime and aerial drills with the Philippine Navy in both bilateral and multilateral arrangements.

Soon after that, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro and his French counterpart, Minister Sebastien Lecornu agreed to initiate talks on the Visiting Forces

Agreement on Dec. 2. France would be the fourth country, following the U.S., Australia and Japan, to get access to military facilities in the Philippines.

Involving countries outside the region in South China Sea disputes would not only exacerbate and broaden the tension but also degrade China's relations with Japan, Australia and France.

To conclude, U.S. involvement at Ren'ai Reef would escalate tensions in the South China Sea and undermine fragile U.S.-China relations. Tensions will only ease if U.S.-China relations substantially improve. Therefore, the top priority for both powers should be to continue their engagement with regard to mitigating confrontation. Both sides should maintain self-restraint even during maritime crises, carefully utilizing deterrence power and consolidating non-conflict measures.

Fortunately, we have seen positive trends in China-U.S. relations in recent months, such as the China-U.S. summit in San Francisco in November and the talks on resuming communication between the two armies in December. We hope both sides will take pragmatic steps to manage their competition to prevent preventing South China Sea tensions from escalating..

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About Author



Nian Peng is the Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. 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 four books-*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). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, etc. 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, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times*, *CGTN*, *World Affairs* in China.