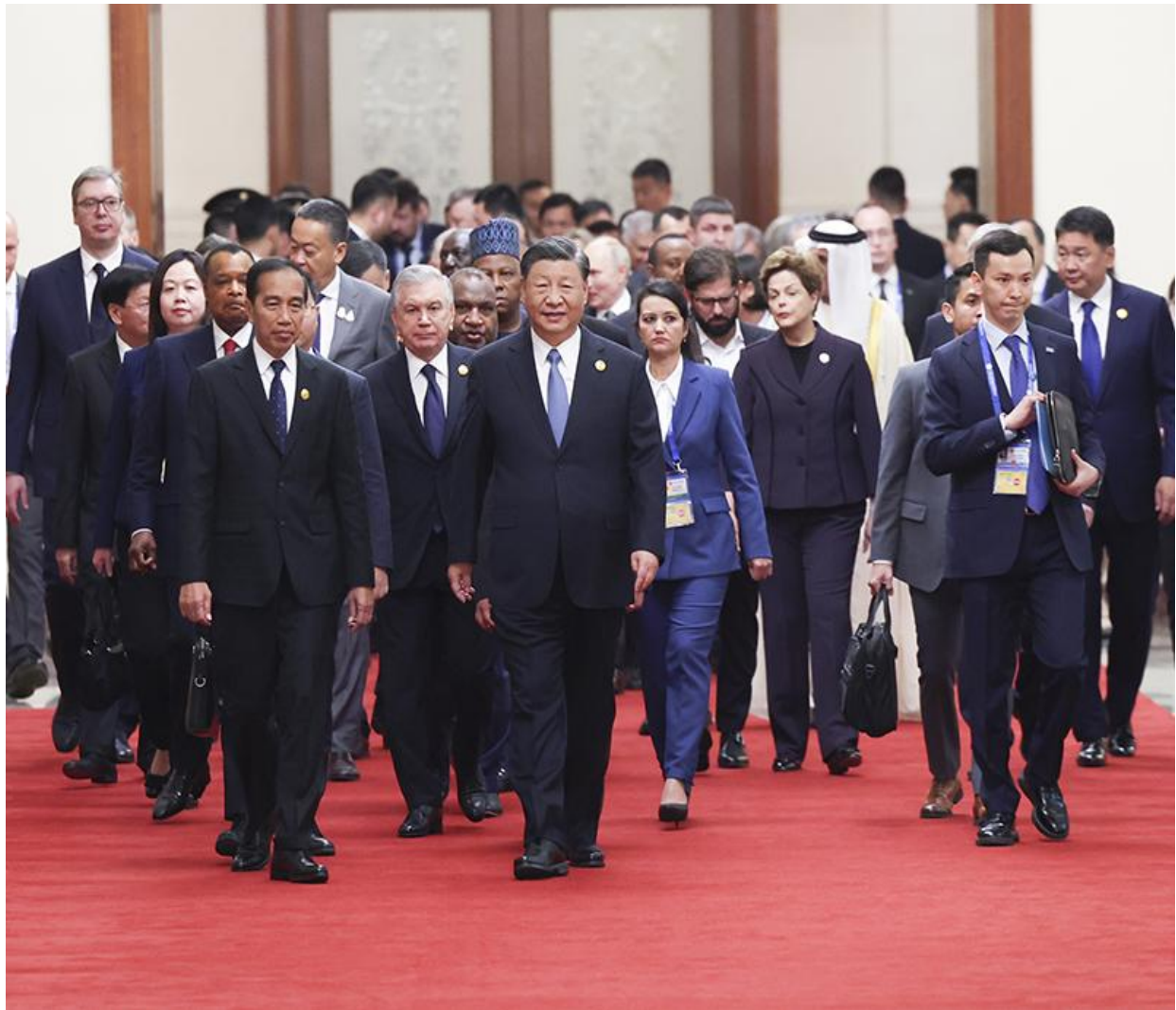


RCAS Annual Report

2023



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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.

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

Featured Publications

SPEKTRUM, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2023
p-ISSN: 1829 – 6580 , e-ISSN: 28095642
spektrumfsp@unwahas.ac.id

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN BANGLADESH: A MIXED METHODOLOGY APPROACH

Sujit Kumar Datta

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University of Chittagong, Chittagong-4331, Bangladesh.
And

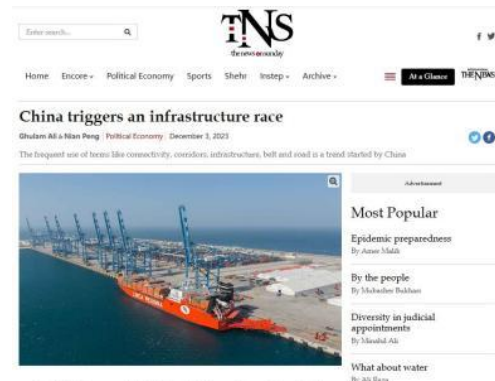
Non-resident Fellow at Research Centre for Asian Studies (RCAS), China.

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ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0000-0003-1298-1099>

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran kewirausahaan perempuan dalam proses pemberdayaan perempuan di Chittagong, Bangladesh. Studi ini meneliti hubungan antara bisnis perempuan dan pemberdayaan sosial perempuan. Sebanyak 160 responden diwawancarai selama fase pengumpulan data pertama (80 ibu rumah tangga non-usaha dan 80 ibu rumah tangga perusahaan). Berdasarkan kesimpulan penelitian ini, kewirausahaan memiliki pengaruh yang signifikan terhadap kemampuan perempuan dalam menentukan pilihan dalam keluarganya, khususnya di rumah. Selain itu, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa perempuan pengusaha memiliki kontrol yang lebih besar atas sumber daya dan aset mereka daripada non-pengusaha (ibu rumah tangga). Mereka juga memiliki lebih banyak mobilitas sosial,



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RCAS Event

Prof. Khadga K. C. Visited RCAS

RCAS, Jun. 1, 2023

On 31 May, Prof. Khadga K. C., Executive Director of Center for International Relations, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, visited RCAS. Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, gave a warm welcome to Prof. Khadga.



▲ Group photo between Prof. Khadga and Dr. Nian Peng

Prof. Khadga delivered a presentation at RCAS office on “Nepal’s Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy towards the US, India and China, and Nepal-China Economic Corridor”.

Prof. Khadga K. C. is a Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), China, as well as Professor & Executive Director, Center for International

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Relations, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He did MA in Political Science from Tribhuvan University in 1993 and did a second MA in IR, and Ph.D and Post-Doctoral Research at Nagasaki University, Japan under Japanese Government Scholarship from 2002-2009. He is on the editorial board of Journal of International Affairs and Journal of Asian Political Affairs (Bangladesh), and Policy Review-Journal (Nepal). His areas of interests are Modern Japanese political thought, foreign policy and diplomatic relations of Nepal and Japan, civil-military relations of Nepal, China-Japan relations, foreign aid to Nepal, and the South China Sea (SCS) and BRI. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/2232.html>)

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RCAS Event

RCAS Organized Seminar on Pakistan Politics and China-Pakistan Relations

RCAS, Jul. 27, 2023

On 26 July, RCAS Seminar on Pakistan Politics and China-Pakistan Relations was held in Haikou, China. Prof. Khalid Rahman, Chairman of Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Dr. Khurram Abbas, Research Fellow at Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), and Dr. Muhammad Azam, Assistant Professor at University of Sargodha participated in the meeting. Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, gave a warm welcome to the participants.



▲ RCAS seminar on July 26, 2023, Haikou, China

Prof. Khalid Rahman is an Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, as well as the Chairman&Professor of the Institute of Policy

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Studies(IPS) in Islamabad, Pakistan. He is one of the pioneers of the Institute. Initially he served as Director and later assumed position of Director General. His vast experience in research, training and management has contributed significantly into turning IPS a dynamic think-tank. He has conducted over 400 seminars and roundtables organized by the Institute. Masters in Economics. He has been involved in organizing both the research and training programs of the Institute. He is also invited by various research and training institutions as Master Trainer. The main focus of his research has been on the national and regional politics, Religious Education Institutions and China. He has 19 publications(written/Edited) and a number of papers to his credit. He is also editor of the IPS Journal "Policy Perspectives". He is on the boards of a number of social and development organizations and contributes frequently on current affairs.

Dr. Khurram Abbas is an Non-resident Fellow at the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies, as well as Research Fellow at Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Pakistan. He earned his PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS) from Centre for International Peace and Stability (CIPS), NUST, Islamabad. His area of interest includes, international security, Geo-politics of Persian Gulf and Arab Peninsula, Foreign Policy of Iran, civil resistance, Foreign Policy of China, India and Pakistan towards GCC and Iran. Dr. Abbas regularly delivers lectures in International and National universities as well as participates in National and International Conferences. He has three book chapters and twelve peer reviewed research articles in his credit. Dr. Abbas undertakes extensive research and regularly contributes in academic research journals and national/international dailies. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/2237.html>)

RCAS Event

RCAS Organized Seminar on Cambodian Politics and China-Cambodia Relations

RCAS, Jul. 30, 2023

On 29 July, RCAS Seminar on Cambodian Politics and China-Cambodia Relations was held in Haikou, China. Prof. Sorpong Peou at Toronto Metropolitan University, Dr. Chheang Vannarith, Member of Board of Directors at Asian Vision Institute, and Dr. Sovinda Po, Designated Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Royal University of Phnom Penh participated in the meeting. Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, gave a warm welcome to the participants.



▲ RCAS seminar on July 29, 2023, Haikou, China

Prof. Sorpong Peou is an Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, as well as Professor of Global Peace and Security Studies, Department of Politics and Public Administration, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada. He is a Member of Eminent Persons Group at the Asian Political and International Studies Association and a Fellow of McLaughlin College, York University. Previous

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positions include Interim Director, MA Program in in Public Policy and Public Administration; President of Science for Peace, based at the University of Toronto; Chair of the Department of Politics and Public Administration, Toronto; Chair of the Department of Political Science, University of Winnipeg (Manitoba); and Chair of the Advisory and Recruitment Committee for the Manitoba Chair of Global Governance Studies-a joint program between the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba. Prior to these academic appointments, he was a Professor of International Security at Sophia University in Tokyo (Japan), a Canada-ASEAN Fellow, and a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore). He has written extensively on peace and security issues.

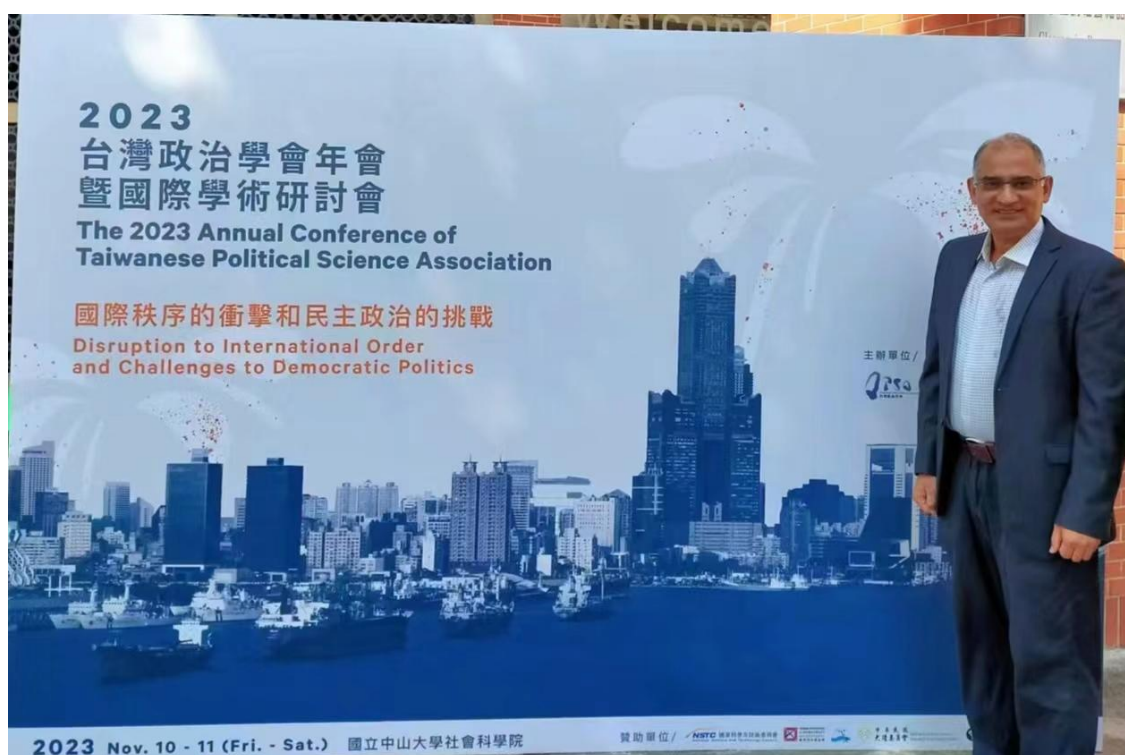
Dr. Po Sovinda is an Non-resident Fellow of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, as well as a Lecturer in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public (IISPP) and a Designated Director at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. His research agenda evolves the relationship between China and mainland Southeast Asia and the strategic use of minilateral institutions by both major powers and small states. His journal articles have appeared in *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *Asian Studies Review*, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies*, *Explorations: A Graduate Student Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, and *UC Occasional Paper Series*. His op-eds have appeared in *the Diplomat*, *East Asia Forum*, *New Mandala*, *the Interpreter*, *ASEAN Focus*, *IPP Review* and *Australian Outlook*. He is often quoted in the *Phnom Penh Post*, and the *South China Morning Post*, and also is interviewed by the *Wire (Australia)*, and the *Voice of America*. He received his PhD in Political Science from Griffith University, Australia. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/2238.html>)

RCAS Event

Ghulam Ali Presented Paper at the Taiwan Political Science Association's Annual Conference

RCAS, Nov. 13, 2023

Dr. Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), presented a paper at the Taiwan Political Science Association's Annual Conference, which was held at the College of Social Sciences, National Sun Yat-sen University (NSYSU), Kaohsiung, Taiwan, on 10-11 November 2023.



▲ Ghulam Ali Presented Paper at the Taiwan Political Science Association's Annual Conference

His paper is titled, “Misplaced Emphasis: Reevaluating the Role of the Indian Factor in China-Pakistan Relations.” The paper argued that the Indian factor is overemphasized while discussing the China-Pakistan relationship, which has its own dynamics. The paper recommended studying the broad, multifaceted nature of this relationship to understand its enduring nature.

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Dr. Ghulam Ali is currently Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. Before joining RCAS, he was Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, PR China. He obtained his PhD from Monash University in Australia in 2013 and his Postdoc from Peking University, China.

He is the author, editor or coeditor of four books: *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Perspectives on Contemporary Pakistan: Governance, Development and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2020); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer, 2022); *China-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Analysis* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017). His articles have been published in SSCI-and Scopus-indexed journals such as *Issues&Studies*, *The Pacific Review*, and *Pacific Focus*. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/2249.html>)

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RCAS Event

Dr. Kesone Kanhalikham Visited RCAS

RCAS, Dec. 4, 2023

On 3 December, Dr. Kesone Kanhalikham, Deputy Head of Division of National University of Laos Council, Post Graduate Studies Office, visited RCAS. Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, gave a warm welcome to Dr. Kesone.



▲ Group Photo between Dr. Kesone and Dr. Nian Peng

Dr. Kesone delivered a presentation on China-Laos Railway and discussed with the participants on the great benefits from and main challenges in the China-Laos Railway. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/2256.html>)

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RCAS Event

Ghulam Ali Presented Paper at the Annual Conference of the Association of International Relations

RCAS, Dec. 6, 2023

Dr. Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), presented a paper at the annual conference of the Association of International Relations, held on 24 November 2023 in Chiayi, Taiwan.



▲ Ghulam Ali Presented Paper at the Annual Conference of the Association of International Relations

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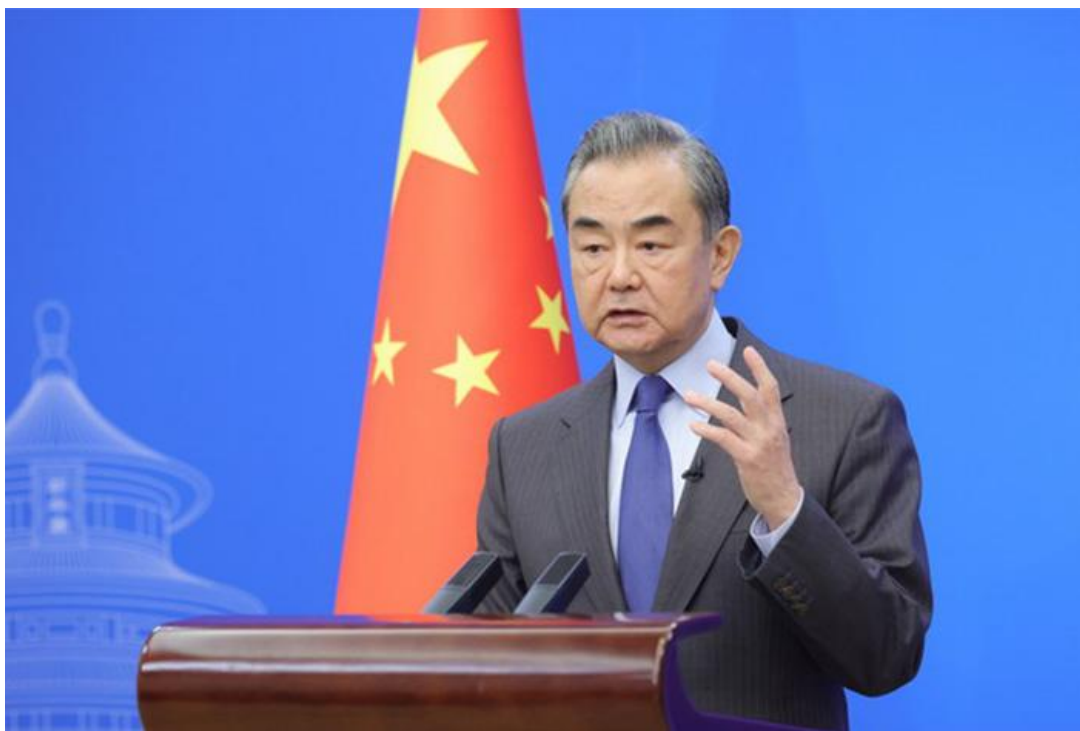
His paper is titled “Toward the Development of Global IR: Why Asian Perspectives Matter?”
(<http://www.rcas.top/event/2257.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Will China-ASEAN Relations Take a Turn for the Better Post-Pandemic?

Nian Peng, Jan. 6, 2023

Recently, at the 2022 Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi outlined six diplomatic tasks for his country in 2023. Among them, he emphasized that China "will stay committed to the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness and the policy of forging friendship and partnership in our neighborhood, and deepen friendship, mutual trust and convergence of interests with our neighbors."



▲ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivers a speech via video link to a foreign relations symposium on Dec.24, 2022 (fmprc.gov.cn)

In terms of geographical proximity and economic interdependence, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the top priority in China's neighborhood diplomacy. During the pandemic, ASEAN become China's largest trading partner, replacing the United States and the

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European Union. At the same time, ASEAN worked together with China to fight COVID-19. Following China's announcement that it would lift the quarantine policy for international arrivals on January 8, 2023, China-ASEAN relations will also take a turn for the better.

In my recently published book *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), I pinpointed the dual influence of the pandemic on China-ASEAN relations. During the initial stage of the pandemic, both economic links between China and ASEAN and the Chinese image in Southeast Asia was undermined. But in the long term, trade and investment cooperation among China and ASEAN states will return to normal and actually become closer. What's more, both sides have developed deeper mutual political trust after working together to fight the pandemic, which is beneficial to closer China-ASEAN relations.

Other scholars have pointed out that the pandemic caused anti-Chinese sentiment to rise, but it remains at controllable levels. In other negative impacts, border trade was blocked, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects were postponed and Chinese tourist flows were cut off by COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Now, China is opening its borders. The hope is that China can resume pre-pandemic (or greater) levels of cooperation with ASEAN on BRI infrastructure projects, border trade, the digital economy, and in other areas.

Nevertheless, the problems accumulated during the pandemic may not be so easily solved. After nearly three years of pandemic hassles, China and ASEAN both need to adjust their policies and accommodate a new normal characterized by a more intense geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between China and the United States.

As mentioned above, at the beginning of the outbreak, almost all the ASEAN countries took measures to restrict arrivals of Chinese tourists. Now that China has reopened its borders, will ASEAN countries immediately welcome them back?

After all, Japan and India immediately issued entry quarantine restrictions for Chinese tourists, and the United States, European Union, and United Kingdom are considering taking similar

measures. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that “COVID response measures need to be science-based and proportionate without affecting normal travel and people-to-people exchange and cooperation.”

It is evident that the politicization of the pandemic still lingers, although the epidemic is coming to an end. Given the growing China-U.S. rivalry in Southeast Asia, the entry management measures the ASEAN countries will introduce for Chinese tourists are of particular interest. So far, only Thailand and Cambodia have overtly affirmed that they would welcome Chinese tourists without any restrictions related to COVID-19.

To ensure the continuing implementation of BRI projects that were delayed at the beginning of the pandemic, China opened a “fast lane” for personnel exchanges and a “green channel” for equipment transportation with the participating states. As a result, few BRI projects were affected severely by COVID-19.

As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on December 26, “This year has seen steady progress and fruitful outcomes of Belt and Road cooperation.” Not only did five new states signed cooperation documents with China to jointly build the BRI, but a large number of landmark infrastructure projects have also been completed. This includes the test operation of Jakarta-Bandung, the first high-speed railway in ASEAN, and the formal opening of the first expressway in Cambodia.

However, the recent derailment on the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, which resulted in two deaths, is a reminder for China, that the importance of safety management in construction should not be underestimated. After all, the railway is a flagship project of the BRI in Southeast Asia, and carelessness will have a negative impact on the project.

It is high expected that the BRI will swell in the post-pandemic period, as the economic recovery of ASEAN countries creates strong domestic demand for infrastructure construction. Yet, China will face a series of challenges in expanding the BRI in Southeast Asia, including hiring local labor and meeting environmental standards, as well as facing the United States’ criticism and competition.

To prevent and control the cross-border spread of COVID-19, China temporarily suspended its border trade with the neighboring countries during the pandemic. It even built an electronic separation wall on the China-Myanmar border. This has led to a “cliff-like” decline in border trade and serious non-traditional security issues along the border.

After reopening the borders, border trade will tremendously increase in the short term. But case surges caused by imported infections and a sharp increase in border inspection pressures are also predictable challenges for both China and its ASEAN neighbors. After years of small numbers, are border authorities ready to cope with the tremendous growth of trade in a short time?

Finally, China and ASEAN nations will recover normal personnel exchanges, and the consultation on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea can be promoted through personal contacts. However, the external environment of the COC consultation remains troubled, as there is still some turbulence both from internal and external actors.

For instance, the United States recently publicized that China was undertaking land reclamation activities on uninhabited islands and reefs in the Nansha Qundao (Spratly Islands). In addition, in the new context of closer cooperation between the Philippines and the United States, the Marcos administration took a much more muscular posture towards the South China Sea dispute by saying it would never yield an inch of territory and threatening to conduct unilateral oil and gas exploitation in disputed waters.

More recently, Vietnam and Indonesia reached an agreement on the demarcation of their exclusive economic zones around the Natuna Islands. This may promote some ASEAN claimant countries to build alliances on the South China Sea disputes to resist China.

In conclusion, there will be opportunities for closer China-ASEAN relations now that China reopened its borders. In order to achieve that goal, all parties should prepare to accurately respond to various needs in the post-pandemic era, ensure the smooth implementation of the mega-projects within the BRI, and properly manage differences and disputes in the South China Sea. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2217.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, January 6, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/will-china-asean-relations-take-a-turn-for-the-better-post-pandemic/>.

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.

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RCAS Commentary

Berdimuhamedov's China Visit Pushes Forward

China-Central Asia Relations

Nian Peng, Jan.10, 2023

Turkmen President Sedar Berdimuhamedov paid a state visit to China from January 5 to 6, at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping. It was the first high-level exchange between China and a Central Asian country in the new year. During the visit, the two presidents announced the upgrading of the China-Turkmenistan relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, a new height for bilateral relations.



▲ Turkmen President Sedar Berdimuhamedov met with Chinese President Xi Jinping (Xinhua News Agency)

In recent years, China has increased engagement with Central Asian states sharply, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Last year, Xi visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in his first trip

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abroad since the pandemic began; now the Turkmen president is the first Central Asian leader (and the second foreign leader overall) received by China in 2023. The frequent exchanges between the head of states reflect that China attaches greater importance to Central Asia, which has undertaken an ever more significant role in China's neighborhood diplomacy, especially after the Russia-Ukraine war.

China has forged comprehensive strategic partnerships with all the Central Asian states. China established a comprehensive strategic partnership with Kazakhstan in 2011 and later elevated it to a permanent comprehensive strategic partnership, This was followed by Uzbekistan in 2016, Tajikistan in 2017, and Kyrgyzstan in 2018. Turkmenistan is the last country in Central Asia to develop such ties with China.

At the regional and multilateral level, China proposed the establishment of a China-Central Asia (C+C5) cooperation mechanism, a new format of multilateral cooperation between China and Central Asian countries outside the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). With the support of Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries, the first "C+C5" summit is expected to be held this year.

At the same time, China has signed cooperation agreements under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with all the Central Asian states to strengthen synergy between the BRI and their own national development strategies. Physical connectivity such as cross-border railways, gas and oil cooperation, trade, and investment are crucial in the BRI agreements.

It is noteworthy that a cross-border railway was mentioned in the China-Turkmenistan talks, following on increased attention to the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project, brought up by Xi during his visit to Uzbekistan last year. As Turkmenistan borders Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Caspian Sea, the China-Turkmenistan railway will be an extension to the CKU rail line. It's hoped the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan (CKUT) railway becomes a reality in the coming years.

Running west to Iran and south to Afghanistan, the CKUT railway will be a Eurasian transportation artery and a main rail line connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Given ambitions for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to be expanded into

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Afghanistan, if the CKUT can also be extended to Afghanistan, a railway network would be established linking China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This is strategically significant to energy cooperation between China and Central Asian and South Asian countries, as well as the economic ties between them. On one hand, the cross-border rail line will make it easier to transport petroleum and natural gas, fostering more pipeline construction. Notably, China reached an oil exploitation deal with Afghanistan in recent days. On the other hand, the imbalance in trade between the countries along the line may also be redressed, considering the increased exports to China from Central and South Asia. The cross-border rail line could thereby inject political and economic vitality to China-Central Asia-South Asia trilateral relations.

At the same time, South Asia in particular has been one of the main arenas of terrorist attacks targeting Chinese workers and interests. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the wider region has witnessed waves of domestic protests and violence against governments, and leading to the ouster of incumbent ruling parties in some states such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Moreover, the economic depression and even economic crisis partially caused by the pandemic and the complex geological conditions in the area are also the main obstacles to the construction of cross-border railways in the region.

There are some difficulties for China to make the vision of a cross-border railway in Central and South Asia a reality. It's worth bearing in mind that difficulties do not necessarily derail such projects. Despite unstable domestic politics and the great technical difficulties of building railways in the Himalayas, in December China initiated a feasibility study for the China-Nepal cross-border railway. Therefore, a long railway across China, Central Asia, and South Asia may still be feasible in the future, and it could substantially change both geopolitics and geoeconomics in the region. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2218.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, January 10, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/berdimuhamedovs-china-visit-pushes-forward-china-central-asia-relations/>.

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.

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RCAS Commentary

Politicization of the Pandemic Raises Alarm for China

Nian Peng, Jan.27, 2023

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, China has become a main focus of the pandemic fight in the world. The western countries, represented by the US, in particular, always deflect blame on China's anti-pandemic measures. During the early days of the pandemic, the United States clamored to trace the original source of the coronavirus disease and pointed the finger at China. After China implemented the dynamic Zero-COVID policy, the United States accused China for violating human rights and pressured it to loosen the anti-COVID policy.



▲ Pandemic fight between China and the United States

Now, China eventually abandoned the controversial Zero-COVID policy and suddenly reopened the borders in early 2023. Yet, not only had the United States not support China's new open policy aiming at normalizing the social order and people-to-people exchanges, but imposed curbs on travelers from China. Followed by the United States, other Western countries, mainly including Italy, the UK, France, Spain, also took similar actions. Italy is the first Western country that imposed restrictions for Chinese tourists and called on traveling restrictions from EU.

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The anti-pandemic policy taken by the West to limit the entrance of Chinese tourists has caused rising resentment in China. On one hand, it refreshed the Chinese painful memory of the West's criticism of the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in Wuhan three years ago. On the other hand, it frustrated the Chinese tourists who expected to travel abroad.

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that for all countries, COVID response measures need to be science-based and proportionate without affecting normal personnel exchanges. In fact, other Western countries such as Portugal, Switzerland and Poland didn't take new entry restrictions on the travelers arriving from China. Even Italy, the first European country imposes mandatory COVID tests for travelers from China, confirmed that no new COVID variant has been found from Chinese tourists.

So far, both the World Health Organisation(WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control(ECDC) have not detect new COVID variant from Chinese tourists. And more important, the core indicators of the Omicron such as virus toxicity and mortality weakened so much, which would not affect the public health in the West which has developed herd immunity to Omicron. So, at least for now, there is no need to overestimate the pandemic threat from China.

Instead, new COVID variant called XBB with higher toxicity and mortality has been found in the United States and imported to China recently. Initially, China has not imposed new restrictions on the arrivals from the United States as few XBB have been detected in local communities. But as more XBB have been found, China introduced new COVID-19-related travel measures for individuals arrived from foreign countries who are required a negative nucleic acid test issued within 48 hours. Moreover, China has retaliated against Japan and South Korea because the two countries launched discriminatory policy towards the Chinese tourists. So, will there be more strict traveling limitations on foreigners if a new round of pandemic caused by XBB happened in China(although Chinese health officials said possibility of this is low) or more discriminatory policy on Chinese travelers issued by the West?

Except the pandemic threat, the China-US relations are troubled with the epidemic prevention policy. The U.S. President Joe Biden repeatedly raised concern about China's handling of its

COVID-19 outbreak after the WHO said Beijing was under-reporting virus deaths. Soon after that, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning refuted that China has shared relevant information and data with the international community, including the WHO and the United States, in an open, transparent and responsible manner. She also called on the United States avoiding remarks and actions that politicize the epidemic. More recently, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin required the United States to share pandemic related data with WHO and international community. So, what will be the next step of the United States to squash China and how will China to response to it?

The ongoing China-US rivalry on pandemic raises the alarm for China. The country still has a long way to compete for international discourse on the pandemic. At the beginning of the outbreak, because of the poor response from the local government and the media public opinion aphasia from the state, China was criticized heavily by the West, particular the United States.

After China finally gave up the disputed Zero-COVID policy and normalized the personal exchanges with the world, it is still not be trust and continued to be blamed by the West. It is evident that there will be a transition period after China reopens its borders, in which the West will gradually accomodate to China's normalization. In that case, China needs to strengthen domestic pandemic prevention and control, enhance transparency of the pandemic, cautiously implement retaliation policy, and more importantly, improve the skills of the discourse of the pandemic and public opinion struggle with the West. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2221.html)

The article was first published at RCAS, Hong Kong, Jan.27, 2023, http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2221.html.

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RCAS Commentary

Can Manila Keep Its Balance?

Nian Peng, Feb.6, 2023

Less than a month after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. made his first visit to China, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited the Philippines on Feb. 2. After the meeting with his Philippine counterpart, Defense Secretary Carlito Galvez, Austin announced the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the two countries. He also added that a great decision had been made by the Philippine government-another four military bases for the United States. Under the EDCA, the U.S. military will not only be able to rotate in the Philippines but also access Philippine bases and facilities.



▲ US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (right) pays a courtesy call to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Malacanang on Feb. 2, 2023(Manila Times)

From former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's suspension of the termination of the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in June 2020 to its restoration in July 2021, which was followed by the announcement of the Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership in November 2021, and then the resumption of the U.S.-Philippines

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“Balikatan” military exercise in April 2022, improved U.S.-Philippines relations have swept away the previous slump and made great strides in the past two years.

During the 2022 presidential campaign, Marcos, the presidential candidate with the highest approval rating, said he would “maintain the country’s alliance with the United States ... [and that] the military agreement between the U.S. and the Philippines was mutually beneficial. The alliance is a special relationship, and the United States can do a lot to help the Philippines.”

In September 2022, Marcos visited the U.S. for the first time, less than three months after he assumed office, making an effort to restore U.S.-Philippine relations. Four and a half month later, Austin visited the Philippines to upgrade military ties. He aims to make the Philippines an important part of U.S. deterrence of China in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

The frequent engagement between the United States and the Philippines seems to confirm previous speculation that the foreign policy of the Philippines will inevitably take a turn with Duterte out of the picture. Scholar Joseph Ching Velasco said in his recent publication “Examining the Philippines’ China policy: great powers and domestic politics” that growing domestic divisions and lack of strong domestic support make it difficult to lay a solid foundation for the Philippines’ long-term China-friendly policy. Duterte’s pro-China foreign policy can only be seen as an exception rather than a pattern.

Actually, whether it’s Benigno Aquino III’s anti-China, pro-U.S. foreign policy or Duterte’s anti-U.S., pro-China policy, they are exceptions to previous Philippine foreign policy, not the traditional norm. The Philippines’ foreign policy will go back to normal, being neither anti-America nor pro-China, under Marcos Jr.

Now, Marcos is bringing the country’s diplomacy back to normal with the intent to balance China and the United States. On one hand, he doesn’t want to continue his predecessor’s hostile policy toward the U.S., as he hopes to maintain close relations for military cooperation. On the other hand, he wants to have friendly relations and close economic cooperation with China to attract Chinese investment to the Philippines and to advance economic recovery and infrastructure development.

However, against the backdrop of the intensified Sino-U.S. strategic competition and rising nationalism in the Philippines, Marcos is faced with enormous challenges in manipulating his U.S.-China balancing act. For example, the military base mentioned during Austin's visit has aroused great concern in China, and the issue is extremely sensitive. People are worried about potential military operations jointly launched by the United States and its allies and partners targeting China. Therefore, the Philippines needs to accurately understand China's concerns over defense cooperation. In other words, if the Philippines wants its balancing act to work, it needs to delicately develop relations with the U.S. without provoking China.

So far, the Philippines has been clear-headed, emphasizing that its defense cooperation with the United States "does not target any specific third party." This is a key prerequisite for carefully maintaining balance.

Apart from that, how to effectively manage the South China Sea dispute and appease domestic nationalists are difficult problems for Marcos. On the one hand, the United States has attempted to pull the Philippines toward involvement in deterring China in the South China Sea by enhancing defense cooperation with the Philippine Navy. The Philippines, therefore, needs to draw a clear line between normal cooperation with the U.S. Navy and its involvement in any U.S. confrontation with China.

On the other hand, Philippine opposition parties use the South China Sea issue to mobilize nationalism, challenge the authority of the Marcos administration and pressure it to take a hard stance. So, the Philippine government has to calm domestic discontent while avoiding escalating tensions in the South China Sea.

Countries like the Philippines face difficulties in implementing a balancing act between great power rivals. As Marcos said at the recent Davos World Economic Forum, it "keeps you up at night, keeps you up in the day, keeps you up most of the time. ... It's very dynamic. It's constantly in flux so you have to pay attention to it."

If there is the slightest mistake, the Philippines' U.S.-China balancing act will slip into dangerous imbalance. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2223.html)

The article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, Feb.6, 2023, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/can-manila-keep-its-balance>.

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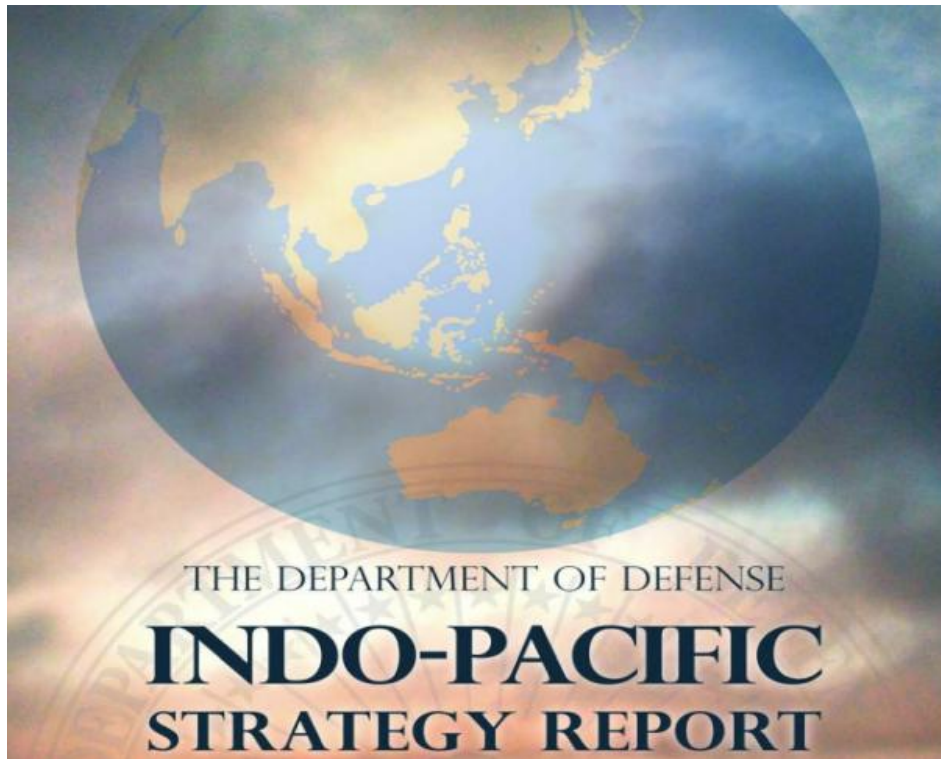
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RCAS Commentary

US Strategy Won't Deter China's Rise

Nian Peng, Feb.22, 2023

After Joe Biden took office, US's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (IPS)-which was officially proposed by former President Trump in November 2017-showed an new trend. This recent trajectory includes expanding overseas military bases to deter China's rise at sea, competing against its BRI infrastructure construction and decoupling China's supply chain in the Indo-Pacific region.



▲ The Department of Defense's New Indo-Pacific Strategy (USNI News)

At present, the U.S. military focuses on building a "fire circle" of military deterrence against China around the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea (SCS) and the Indian Ocean. In the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. military has formulated a draft joint operational plan with Japan for Taiwan's "emergency". More recently, additional four military bases open to the U.S. army during U.S.

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Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's Philippine tour in February. It was speculated that these bases are located in the Luzon Island near Taiwan and the Palawan Island around the SCS, though the locations were not disclosed by the Philippine and the U.S. officials.

In the SCS, the U.S. military has resumed joint military exercises with the Philippines and sped up military cooperation with Vietnam. Starting around late last month, the US Navy and Marines Corps have conducted drills in the SCS amid heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing over the Chinese balloon incident. It is the second time that the US aircraft carrier USS Nimitz hold military exercise in the SCS in this year. In the Indian Ocean, the U.S. military held joint exercises with the Indian and Indonesian navies.

In addition, the U.S. military has consolidated maritime cooperation with the above-mentioned countries through arms sales, military aid and defense agreements. At the same time, allies such as Japan and Australia are also invited by the US to form a free and democratic alliance containing China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, this containment fence is imperfect. In fact, Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia do not welcome the US to build military bases and facilities against a third country on their territory, nor do they want to be deeply get involved in the fierce strategic competition between China and the United States.

Although the Philippine government allows the U.S. troops to rotate in its military bases, it refuses permanent/quasi-permanent American garrison in the country. Ricardo Saludo, the former chairperson of the Philippine Civil Service Commission, even openly criticised President Ferdinand Marcos Jr for recently letting American ships, subs, planes and missiles use AFP(Armed Forces of the Philippines) bases.

Vietnam has limited its defense cooperation with the US under the "Four Noes" principles, i.e., "no alliances with foreign powers, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil, no allying with one country to counter another, not using force or threatening to use force in international relations".

Indonesia has not allowed the US military to use its military bases until now. As Hugh White, a former Australian security and defence official said in his recent interview with the New York Times, “Militarily, access to the Indonesia bases will be an important asset of the US military amid the ‘Taiwan war’, but it is impossible”. Indonesia’s neutrality complicates Washington’s expanding efforts in Asia to counter China, he added.

When the IPS was first put forward, former US Secretary of state Mike Pompeo announced that it would provide \$113 million for new technologies, energy and infrastructure construction in the Indo-Pacific region. After Mr Biden assumed office, he proposed a grand initiative of “Rebuilding a Better World”-which emphasises that developed democracies will cooperate in providing support for infrastructure construction in developing countries to cope with the infrastructure financing gap of more than \$40 trillion, and promoted its connection with the “Blue Dot Network”-which is a mechanism to certify infrastructure projects that meets robust international standards.

These initiatives are claimed by the US as alternative options of BRI for the Indo-Pacific states, but they are far from materialized. Due to the debt default and a recession warned the U.S. Treasury Department in early January, it is highly doubt that whether the US can fulfill the promise and finance the much-needed Indo-Pacific infrastructure projects.

The BRI has made remarkable progress even during the pandemic, for instance, more BRI cooperation agreements, more trade, investment, employment in BRI route states. According to Chinese Commerce Ministry, up until January 2023, more than 200 cooperation agreements on jointly building BRI were signed by China and 151 states and 32 international organizations; by the end 2022, China’s cumulative investment in BRI route states are 397.9 Billion RMB, which creates 421,000 employment positions. Additionally, a number of BRI infrastructure projects has been constructed, mainly includes the China-Laos railway, the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed Railway and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway.

In March last year, Shanghai, one of the main center of China’s supply chain, went into an epidemic lockdown, which undermined China’s advanced position in the global supply chain massively. The Western media seized the chance to tout how Vietnam and India would catch up

or even replace China in the global supply chain. Late last year, Susan Burns, the new U.S. consul general in Ho Chi Minh City, said Vietnam had become a critical part in the U.S. supply chain.

Recently, the United States and India announced the “Key and Emerging Technologies Initiative”, aiming to strengthen the military, technology and supply chain cooperation and compete with China in military equipment, semiconductors and artificial intelligence. Before that, The leaders of Quad announced the ‘Quad Semiconductor Supply Chain Initiative’ at the September 2021 summit, designed to map capacity, identify vulnerabilities, and bolster supply-chain security for semiconductors and their vital components. So clearly, the United States is accelerating the pace of wooing allies and partners to decouple from China in the supply chain.

Yet, it is not easy to reach goals. On the one hand, the global supply chain is the result of long-term independent and autonomic allocation of market resource. Once formed, it is relatively stable and cannot be easily changed by a single country, even the super power like the United States. Despite the country can enhance its position in global supply chain through industrial subsidy and foreign support, it is still a long and challenging process.

On the other hand, both Vietnam and India are at the low position of the global supply chain, focusing on the rough machining of raw materials, processing with supplied materials and OEM. Natural resources and agricultural products still account for a large share in export commodities in these developing countries, and the proportion of manufactured goods is relatively low.

In addition, the poor infrastructure, complicated regulatory procedures, different industrial standard and rules and weak technology innovation capability are compost of the main obstacles for India and Vietnam to take on a big role in the reconstruction of the US supply chain. India and Vietnam will struggle to decouple from China’s supply chain, as both depend on Chinese economy. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2224.html)

The article was first published at Bangkok Post, Thailand, Feb.22, 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2512196/us-strategy-wont-deter-chinas-rise>.

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RCAS Commentary

Qin's Indonesian Tour Sped Up China-ASEAN Relation

Nian Peng, Mar.8, 2023

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.

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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. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2226.html)

The article was first published at The Jakarta Post, Indonesia, Feb.27, 2023, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/02/27/qins-indonesian-tour-sped-up-china-asean-relations.html>.

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RCAS Commentary

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

Nian Peng, Mar.25, 2023

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

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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

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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. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2227.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Mar.25, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/upgraded-philippines-us-military-cooperation-may-cause-a-setback-in-china-philippines-relations/>.

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RCAS Commentary

What Does China Expect From Malaysia Relations Under Anwar?

Nian Peng, Mar.30, 2023

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
(business today.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. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2229.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Mar.30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/what-does-china-expect-from-malaysia-relations-under-anwar%ef%bc%9f/>.

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RCAS Commentary

Is Vietnam teaming up with the US against China?

Nian Peng and Yuan Yuan Jia, Jul.4, 2023

On 25 June, the USS Ronald Reagan began a six-day port call in Vietnam, becoming only the third American aircraft carrier to dock in the country since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Previously, the USS Carl Vinson and USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carriers visited Vietnam in 2018 and 2020 respectively.



▲ Sailors gesture on the USS Robert Smalls guided missile cruiser, which is part of the carrier group accompanying the US Navy's USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, at Tien Sa Port in Danang, Vietnam, on 25 June 2023 (Nhac Nguyen/AFP)

Prior to the visit, Vietnam and China had their latest marine confrontation near the Vanguard Bank of the South China Sea, so some Chinese media outlets have labelled the port call as an attempt by Vietnam to use the US as leverage against China.

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However, at the same time, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh went to China on an official visit. During his time there, both countries agreed to manage their differences over their South China Sea dispute. Thus, it is not entirely accurate to say that Vietnam is joining hands with the US against China.

Vietnam's balancing act

In 2014, the US lifted its arms embargo against Vietnam. Since then, it has been actively seeking military cooperation with Vietnam and port calls by its aircraft carriers is an important part of this. To the US, the ideal scenario would be for its aircraft carriers to visit Vietnam annually as testament of its military cooperation with Vietnam. But, this proposal from the US put Vietnam in a difficult spot.

On the one hand, Vietnam is wary of cooperating with the US for fear of giving it an opportunity to interfere in Vietnam's domestic affairs. On the other hand, it also has to consider China's reaction. In the current climate of a growing strategic rivalry between the US and China, Vietnam should avoid being caught in the middle.

This explains the lukewarm response and subsequent refusal by Vietnam to the US's suggestion of a port call by the USS Ronald Reagan in 2022. Of course, the most important reason for its refusal then was China publicly accusing the US of disrupting the peace in the South China Sea, so Vietnam did not want any misunderstandings from China, which could further heighten tensions in the region, by hosting an American aircraft carrier then.

However, the entry of Chinese research and coastguard vessels into Vanguard Bank and its neighbouring waters this May ignited the latest maritime flare-up between Vietnam and China, increasing tension in their bilateral ties. This presented an important opportunity for the US to make its presence felt. By sending an aircraft carrier on a port call to Vietnam as a show of support, the US hopes to reboot its stagnant military ties with the country.

From Vietnam's point of view, acceding to the US's request for a port call now and using this to show China that it is rebooting its military cooperation with the US can help it to relieve both internal and external pressures without amounting to it standing up to China.

Furthermore, prior to the visit by the American aircraft carrier, China's Qi Jiguang training ship did a port call on Vietnam and tensions between the two countries have gradually settled. As such, the port call by the USS Ronald Reagan is unlikely to cause a misunderstanding with China. To avert this, a spokesperson from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised that the visit is a routine friendly exchange that is beneficial for regional and even international peace, stability, cooperation, and development.

Stumbling blocks for greater US-Vietnam military cooperation

While the visit by the USS Ronald Reagan marks the formal restart of military cooperation between the US and Vietnam following the Covid-19 pandemic, the future of this bilateral arrangement will not be smooth sailing.

When the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Vietnam in April this year, he officiated the groundbreaking ceremony for a new embassy which cost US\$1.2 billion with much fanfare. This was an attempt by the US to show its commitment to further bilateral ties and persuade Vietnam into upgrading bilateral relations to that of a "strategic partnership" at the tenth anniversary of their comprehensive partnership.

However, Vietnam is concerned that doing so will open the door for the US to intervene in its domestic affairs, fuelling political instability in the country. The unrest in its Dak Lak province in recent weeks has compounded Vietnamese fears. In fact, its Ministry of Public Security has openly accused the US of inciting the unrest. Undoubtedly, this incident is a major setback to American efforts to upgrade its bilateral relationship with Vietnam and the fallout is expected to persist for a lengthy period.

Additionally, Vietnam also has to consider the impact of its relationship with the US on its ties with China. Simply put, the pace and level at which its relationship with the US develops is closely related to its bilateral ties with China. As pointed out by many political analysts, Vietnam needs to maintain a careful balance between China and the US. This equilibrium hinges on the competition and collaboration between the two titans and the state of Vietnam's internal affairs.

A delicate balance

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At the minimum, so long as the strategic rivalry between China and the US has not eased off, Vietnam will continue to walk its tightrope of balancing them both. This explains the official visit by its prime minister to China during the period that the USS Ronald Reagan was docked in Vietnam. Vietnam hopes that developing its ties with the US will not sour its relationship with China, much less lead to any misunderstanding or miscalculation by its northern neighbour.

Amid the continued gloom in the global economy, the prospects for Vietnam's economy are also not encouraging, so the country needs to focus on its domestic issues so as to maintain social stability. Vibrant trade and stable ties with China will help in this. Of course, Vietnam will also gladly utilise American economic resources to develop its economy, which is why it is a part of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework helmed by the US, so long as doing so does not undermine its political and social stability.

To summarise, while the port call by the USS Ronald Reagan signals a reboot in military cooperation between the US and Vietnam, it does not amount to Vietnam joining hands with the US against China and is unlikely to impact bilateral relations between Vietnam and China. For Vietnam, the key to its dream of becoming a strong nation lies in having stable ties and close economic cooperation with the major powers. Teaming up with the US to counter China will put it in the dangerous situation of taking sides in the rivalry between the two and ultimately shatter its dream. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2234.html)

The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, Jul.4, 2023, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/vietnam-teaming-us-against-china>.

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RCAS Commentary

Is the Philippines Ready for a Taiwan Conflict?

Nian Peng, Aug.19, 2023

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

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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. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2243.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Aug.19, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/is-the-philippines-ready-for-a-taiwan-conflict/>.

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RCAS Commentary

India's Growing Involvement in the South China Sea Disputes

Nian Peng, Nov.10, 2023

India's increasing involvement in the South China Sea under Prime Minister Narendra Modi-including India's offer to provide helicopters to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) amidst the rising tensions between Manila and Beijing-has raised China's concerns. Beijing is wondering whether India can be a new "troublemaker"-a label generally applied to the United States-in the South China Sea.



▲ Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (center) attends the 4th India-Philippines Joint Commission, Nov. 6, 2020 (The Diplomat)

India has indeed enhanced its military and diplomatic engagement with claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam, and it's likely that India will further expand its presence in the South China Sea and thus impose rising pressures on China. But it is difficult to image India becoming a major player in the South China Sea disputes in the short term.

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India's Increasing Involvement

Through expanding defense cooperation with claimant states and changing its previous “neutral” stance on the 2016 arbitral tribunal award on the South China Sea, India has greatly deepened its involvement in the disputes under Modi.

In May 2019, the Indian Navy, for the first time, conducted joint exercises with the U.S., Japanese, and Philippine navies in the South China Sea. One year later, the Indian Navy held military exercises with the navies of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Australia, and Indonesia in August 2021. In May 2023, India for the first time sent warships to participate in a two-day joint exercise with the navies of seven ASEAN states in the South China Sea.

India has also significantly increased its military sales and assistance to the Philippines and Vietnam. In January 2022, India reached a deal with the Philippines for the export of 100 BrahMos supersonic anti-ship missiles. In June 2023, Vietnam became the first country to receive a fully operational light missile frigate from India.

This month, as tensions spiked between China and the Philippines over confrontations in the South China Sea, India announced that it would offer the Philippines at least seven helicopters that would be used for the rescue and humanitarian efforts of the PCG during natural disasters. While the primary focus is on boosting search and rescue capabilities, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was quick to point out that the helicopters would be “a big contribution for the PCG’s maritime operations” in general.

In July 2016, after the arbitral tribunal announced its ruling in a case brought by the Philippines regarding China’s behavior and claims in the South China Sea, India said only that it took note of the award. This was likely meant to avoid taking sides, as China has consistently rejected the award as “illegal” and refused to recognize the tribunal’s standing.

However, at the India-Philippines Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held at the end of June this year, India abandoned its previously cautious stance. Instead, India and the Philippines underlined the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for adherence to international law, especially UNCLOS and the arbitral award, in the joint statement. This is the first time that India has

proposed abiding by the award, indicating a significant shift in India's "neutral" stance on South China Sea disputes.

The Reasons for the Shift

Strategic interests, freedom of navigation, and oil and gas resources are the three factors determining India's expanded involvement in the South China sea. Geographically, Southeast Asia serves as a backyard for India and a gateway to the Indian Ocean. Given the rising tensions in the South China Sea, India is worried that the tensions might escalate into wars that would threaten its dominance in the Indian Ocean. As a result, India has attempted to increase its presence in the South China Sea to prevent tensions from spilling into the Indian Ocean, the traditional sphere of influence for India.

Additionally, India perceives the South China Sea as a foothold to push forward Modi's "Act East Policy" and leverage to balance China's expansions in the Indian Ocean and its offensives along the Sino-Indian border.

As half of its foreign trade passes through the Malacca Strait, free and secure navigation in the South China Sea is the key to India's trade security. Any conflicts in the South China Sea could threaten the free navigation in the world's busiest maritime transportation line and thus jeopardize India's trade ties with the Southeast Asian states as well as its economic security. This is another reason why India intervened in the South China Sea issue, although it has no maritime disputes with China or ASEAN countries.

India has conducted oil and gas exploration with Vietnam in the South China Sea since the early 2000s, although it has been criticized by China for doing so. India's motivations for oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea are twofold: First, to diversify its sources of oil imports, and second, to reinforce its military presence in the South China Sea in the name of energy cooperation.

Externally, the United States is a "pull factor" that encourages India to become involved in South China Sea disputes. New Delhi and Washington have many common interests. Both are pillars of

the Quad, which aims to contain China's rise. Both are concerned about China's dominance in the South China Sea, and both have similar positions on the South China Sea disputes.

Moreover, the strategic confrontation between China and the United States and the border tensions between China and India provide a significant opportunity for a closer relationship between India and the U.S. Hence, the United States' efforts to promote cooperation with India in the South China Sea can be seen as mutually beneficial. Thus U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said in June 2023 that the United States and India would establish a greater partnership on the South China Sea issue.

Future Trends

In the near future, India's presence in the South China Sea will be further expanded in three ways. First, due to fast-growing trade and investment connections and defense cooperation with the ASEAN states, India would have a stronger motivation to embolden its regional ambitions through the South China Sea issue. This would complicate and "internationalize" the South China Sea disputes.

Second, India would continue to offset China's advantages in the Sino-Indian border by manipulating the South China Sea issue. In fact, India has increased its involvement in the South China Sea sharply since the May 2020 clashes with China in Galwan Valley. Given the fragile peace in the border and the cool bilateral relationship, India is likely to utilize the South China Sea issue to restrain China's strengths in the border.

Third, India would receive help from the United States to intervene in South China Sea disputes. Actually, the U.S. has pressured India to become involved in the South China Sea issue through the Quad on one side and induced India's interference in South China Sea disputes by supporting India in border disputes with China on the other side. As there will be ongoing confrontation between China and the United States as well as cool relations between China and India in the next few years, India would not hesitate to seize the opportunity to gain benefits from Washington and simultaneously disrupt China's rise through cooperating with the U.S. on the South China Sea issue.

To conclude, India is likely to increase its involvement in the South China Sea by various means, which will cause some alarm in China. However, there are limits on India's influence in the disputes. Unlike the United States, India lacks strong alliances and a military presence in the South China Sea, which will necessarily limit its direct involvement. Moreover, the top priority of Indian leaders and generals is maintaining dominance over the Indian Ocean, rather than replacing China in the South China Sea.

Finally, even though India has increasingly stood with the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea disputes, it has largely avoided provoking China. India's greater cooperation with the U.S. on the South China Sea issue would be restricted by New Delhi's traditional nonaligned posture and high strategic autonomy. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2246.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Nov.10, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/indias-growing-involvement-in-the-south-china-sea-disputes/>.

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RCAS Commentary

China-Afghanistan Relationships:

A Tale of Strategic and Economic Compulsions

Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri, Nov.12, 2023

People's Republic of China (PRC) has always been cautious and selective about her relationships with the neighboring, regional and extra regional states. Owing to the unique political system, strategic culture and social fabric, China has always dealt with the other states as per her requirements of security paradigm, national interests and prospective opportunities of cooperation. China-Afghanistan bilateral relationships have been a combination of all the above-mentioned policy compulsions during the last few decades.



▲ Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, political chief of Afghanistan's Taliban in Tianjin, July 28, 2021 (Xinhua/Li Ran)

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The perpetual instability and uncertain situations in Afghanistan have severe impacts on the internal situations of the neighboring countries. China also shares a border with Afghanistan in the northern province of Badakhshan through Xinjiang province. China has been facing issues of instability and freedom struggle in the Xinjiang province since long due to the presence of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM tried to establish an independent state for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province. During the first tenure of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, popularly known as Taliban, ETIM was driven out of China and got refuge in Afghanistan where Taliban provided them with sanctuaries in 1998. Upon the Chinese insistence, the then Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Umar assured China of not letting Afghan land to be used against any state including China, and forbidden ETIM from attacking China from Afghan land.

During the first tenure of Taliban government (1996-2001), although China had not officially recognized their government, yet media reports suggest that she maintained interactions with them, as high-level Chinese delegations including scholars and diplomats have visited Afghanistan for cooperation in development sector, resuming direct flights between Urumqi and Kabul, repairing of worn out or damaged power grid stations and humanitarian assistance. As soon as in October 2001, the US under the shadow of NATO invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban government, the US installed Hamid Karzai as new Afghan president and China officially recognized Afghanistan's new government. In December 2002, China was one of the six neighboring states of Afghanistan, who signed the Kabul Declaration meant for maintaining good-neighborly relations with the Hamid Karzai government. She pledged 150million USD for assisting the Karzai regime in the coming five years. China also provided about 197million USD to the Afghan government in the period between 2002-13. All these commitments were part of China's Official Development Assistance (ODA) package for Afghanistan. The Peoples Republic signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and good-neighborly relations with Afghanistan in 2006, but tried to remain out of Afghanistan's affairs during the presence of NATO and confined herself to a limited role of investment in the development projects and security affairs. China, through various development firms have got 30-year mining project in Mes Aynak region of Logar province in 2008 and Amu Darya Oil basin project in 2011.

Moreover, when Barrack Hussain Obama won the presidential elections in the US and announced his intentions of withdrawing NATO forces from Afghanistan; China decided to explore new avenues in Afghanistan and accelerated her engagements with the Afghan authorities especially in security affairs. She provided assistance to the Afghan security forces and helped in training the Afghan National Army. The American government during that period started negotiations with the Afghan insurgents and resistance forces led by Taliban. China fully supported the initiative and provided assistance and facilitations along with Pakistan to bring Taliban to the negotiating table. China was the first country who announced a country-specific special envoy for Afghanistan, followed by the US, Russia and Pakistan. She was present as an observer in Pakistan's hosted and facilitated Murree Peace Talks in July 2015. China was an integral part of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), meant for bringing Taliban to the negotiating table and reach out to a negotiated settlement before withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. China also hosted various meetings of Afghan Taliban in the cities of Urumqi, Tianjin and Beijing. The other regional states also have a considerable say in Afghan affairs especially the future of Afghanistan, so Russia also started Moscow Process for playing her role in resolving the Afghan conflict through negotiated settlement, where China was also present as an active actor in the region. Apart from political engagements, in 2016, China offered over 70million USD, military equipment, and vehicles to Afghanistan for helping her military. China was present in Doha Peace Agreement between Taliban and the US on February 29, 2020 at Doha Qatar. She also hosted a high-profile meeting of about nine Taliban leaders in July 2021 in Tianjin, just one month before the Taliban took over control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. In the aforementioned meeting Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi termed Taliban as a political reality and critical military group that is expected to play a crucial role in the restoration of peace, and reconstruction process in Afghanistan. Few days before the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, while responding to a question, Chinese spokesperson of the foreign ministry announced that China was ready to work with the Taliban and continue good-neighborly and friendly relations with Afghanistan.

China also took the initiative of starting Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue among Chinese, Afghan and Pakistan's foreign ministers. The last session of Trilateral Foreign Ministers

Dialogue was held in Islamabad in May 2023, where counterparts of the three countries met and discussed various issues pertaining to Afghanistan. China has now sent a dedicated diplomat to Afghanistan without formally recognizing the Taliban government, which shows China's commitment and seriousness about Afghan affairs. As China has to deal with all the regional states for ensuring regional connectivity for materializing BRI in its letter and spirit, so she has to look into Afghan affairs with a keen eye and ensure peace, stability and harmony among various stakeholders. She has announced extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, which will definitely mean a lot for Afghanistan in the economic and regional connectivity perspective. She is engaged in various developmental projects, construction, widening and carpeting of roads and bridges in Afghanistan for making it an economically stable and interconnected for realizing the potential of Afghanistan as a hub of transit trade. These economic projects will definitely help the land-locked country to benefit from the ports of Gwadar and port Qasim in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran.

To cut it short, China-Afghanistan relationships have always been driven by the security concerns of China and are now shifting towards her gigantic economic projects meant for ensuring regional connectivity and transforming Afghanistan and the region to economic hub. She has been working on transformation of Afghanistan's agricultural sector, establishment of industrial park in the outskirts of Kabul, initiated 'Pine-nut Corridor', and helping Afghans to find alternatives to opium production. China has been open to all for helping Afghanistan, first in overcoming the country's security matters, developmental projects, restoring peace and stability and now leading the economic projects there. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2247.html)

The article was first published at RCAS, Hong Kong, Nov. 12, 2023, http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2247.html.

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RCAS Commentary

The Limits of the Expanding Indonesia-US Partnership

Nian Peng, Nov.22, 2023

Two months after the upgrading of U.S.-Vietnam relations, the White House announced on November 13 that the United States and Indonesia had decided to elevate their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. It was the latest achievement in Washington's effort to expand its network of partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region and thus deter China's rising influence in Southeast Asia.



▲ U.S. President Joe Biden meets with Indonesian President Joko Widodo, Nov.13, 2023 (Internet)

Since the implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States has made serious efforts to improve relations with strategically important countries that have territorial disputes with China. Thus far, the U.S. has not only restored its alliance with the Philippines, which had frayed under the previous Duterte administration, but also brought the country into its anti-China camp under the Marcos administration. In September this year, the U.S. successfully upgraded its

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relationship with Vietnam to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the most significant victory of Washington's diplomatic offensive in Southeast Asia after the pandemic.

Indonesia, often viewed as the de facto leader of ASEAN and entangled in a dispute with China over an exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea, has become an additional focal point for U.S. diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Its newfound courtship of Indonesia culminated in President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's visit to the White House and the relationship upgrade in mid-November.

The United States has several strategic objectives in deepening ties with Indonesia. First, by fostering a robust relationship with Jakarta, Washington could strengthen its ties with ASEAN to influence its perspective amid intensifying China-U.S. competition. As U.S. President Joe Biden stated, the United States and Indonesia are bound by a shared commitment to ASEAN centrality and the common principles outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. Since Indonesia played a key role in proposing and advancing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. has sought to enhance the strategic links between the two strategies by elevating its relationship with Indonesia.

Second, the U.S. aims to expand its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region by strengthening security cooperation with Indonesia, thereby countering China's growing military influence. Already, the United States has expanded the number of military bases in the Philippines to which the U.S. military has access from five to nine. While Vietnam and Indonesia are not U.S. allies, and are unlikely to accede to hosting U.S. bases, Washington is expanding defense ties with these partners in other ways. While Indonesia has not agreed to host a military base for U.S. troops, it has accepted the United States' proposal to contribute \$3 million to fund a maritime training center in Batam, the largest city in the Riau Islands province of Indonesia.

Moreover, the United States also announced that it would hold the Indonesia-U.S. Security Dialogue and the Indonesia-U.S. Bilateral Defense Dialogue in the near future to keep up with China, which established foreign minister and defense minister dialogues with Indonesia during Jokowi's China tour in October 2023.

Third, the United States aims to enhance the maritime capabilities of China's rival claimants in the South China Sea. While Indonesia and China do not have competing claims to any maritime features in the region, Indonesia has objected to Chinese activities in what it claims as its exclusive economic zone near the Natuna Islands, part of Riau Islands province.

Following bilateral talks at the White House, the United States pledged to mobilize more than \$5 million in assistance through the Maritime Security Joint Work Plan to enhance Indonesia's maritime awareness and maritime law enforcement. The U.S. has sought to bolster the maritime reconnaissance and patrol capabilities of South China Sea claimants, thereby supporting their efforts against China in the region. Against this backdrop, China must increase its strategic expenditures associated with maintaining stability and national sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Nonetheless, Indonesia would not completely join the U.S. camp for many reasons. First and foremost, Indonesia's deeply rooted philosophy of strategic autonomy restrains its alignment with Washington. Indonesia has not only reaffirmed that it would not "take sides" between China and the U.S. but also committed to guaranteeing the centrality of ASEAN in the great power rivalry.

Indonesia also does not want to be a victim of the China-U.S. competition. In contrast, it employs a hedging approach that involves maintaining contact with major countries while attempting to strike a balance between them. By adopting this approach, Indonesia can optimize its advantages while avoiding the pitfalls of big power rivalry. This rationale was behind both Indonesia's decision to enhance its relations with the United States in November and its comprehensive strategic collaboration with China in October.

Indonesia, in contrast to the Philippines, has refrained from implementing offensive strategies that would intensify hostilities in the South China Sea. Instead, it has advocated for stability and tranquility in the region.

Moreover, Indonesia and the U.S. hold divergent stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict. As a majority Muslim country, the Indonesian government sent a clear message to the world that it stands with the Palestinians. Although the Indonesian government is unlikely to confront the

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United States' pro-Israel policies, the new wave of anti-American sentiments in Indonesia triggered by the recent Israel-Hamas conflict that started on October 7, would not allow the Indonesian government to strengthen relations with the U.S. further, at least for the time being.

To conclude, the United States' earnest efforts to win Indonesia over has seen demonstrable results, but even so no one should expect Jakarta to join in efforts to contain China. Indonesia would maintain a delicate balance between the two great powers and avoid being caught in the China-U.S. tension due to its high strategic autonomy. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2252.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Nov.22, 2023,

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/the-limits-of-the-expanding-indonesia-us-partnership/>.

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RCAS Commentary

The Significance of the Maiden GCC-ASEAN Summit

Ghulam Ali, Nov.28, 2023

On October 20, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) convened their maiden summit in Riyadh, with the world's attention focused on the gory conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.



▲ The Maiden GCC-ASEAN Summit, Oct. 20, 2023 (Internet)

The GCC was founded in 1981 and currently comprises six countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. ASEAN was established in 1967 and currently consists of 10 countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia.

Contacts between the two blocs date back to 1990, and they held their first ministerial meeting in 2009, but had to wait a long time for summit-level cooperation.

The GCC and ASEAN have significant economic ties. Their combined gross domestic product is nearly \$6 trillion, accounting for almost 6 percent of the world's total. At present, the trade

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volume between the two regions is worth \$110 billion, with GCC countries exporting 9 percent of their total goods from ASEAN, and ASEAN products making up 6 percent of their total imports, though this trade volume arguably falls short of its potential. The GCC claims to have invested over \$14 billion in the ASEAN region, with the UAE accounting for the majority-75 percent-of these investments.

The significance of last month's summit can be gauged from the fact that both blocs began preparing two months in advance. On August 15, a preparatory meeting was held in Riyadh with the participation of the GCC Secretary-General and the ambassadors of ASEAN countries. This summit was significant for a number of reasons.

The first and most obvious is that the summit reflects the two blocs' desire to diversify their diplomatic and trade partnerships. While the majority of member countries of both blocs have strong ties with the United States, the security role of the U.S. has reduced, particularly in the Middle East, prompting these states to explore new diplomatic avenues.

From this growing cooperation, the GCC can potentially benefit from ASEAN's economic vitality and global network of relationships, while ASEAN can potentially receive assurances of an uninterrupted supply of Middle Eastern oil and gas. The joint statement issued at the end of the summit reflects a basic unanimity of views on regional issues.

Second, the summit notably steered clear of the U.S.-China rivalry and geopolitical questions, primarily focusing on economic cooperation, investments, and future technologies, and took place regardless of tremors in both regions. The Gulf States' decision to proceed with the summit despite the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict two weeks earlier demonstrated their determination to advance their national agendas in pursuit of greater regional and global roles. Although the Palestine issue remains significant for the Gulf States, they have avoided allowing the recent outbursts to affect their long-term goals.

Third, the summit stands to benefit both blocs. The accession of all GCC states to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) was a diplomatic success for ASEAN. At the same time, ASEAN's issuance of a separate statement on Gaza proved successful for the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, as many quarters of the Islamic world have expected a strong response from Riyadh.

This was especially noteworthy given that ASEAN's member states have divergent stances about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, and are strong supporters of the Palestinian cause. Singapore and the Philippines have good relations with Tel Aviv, while other countries maintain a low-level relationship. The ASEAN statement condemned violence against civilians and demanded a ceasefire and the supply of humanitarian assistance. Above all, the statement called for the two-state solution proposed by the United Nations in 1967. Indonesia, which holds the current chairmanship of ASEAN, and Malaysia, the host of the next GCC-ASEAN in 2025, played a key role in the statement. The statement was considered a triumph for the Gulf States as it aligned with their official position and "internationalized" the issue.

In addition, ASEAN endorsed Saudi Arabia's bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, while the GCC expressed its cooperation to implement the four priority areas of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP): maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development goals, and economics.

Fourth, both blocs prepared a 2024-2028 cooperation framework that aims to enhance the integration of their regional markets, including efforts to implement "sustainability and decarbonization, digital transformation, small and medium enterprises, public-private sector engagement, and people-to-people ties."

Fifth, the summit came on the heels of the G-20 meetings, where the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was agreed to. ASEAN's westernmost member states are geographically close to India, the starting point of the IMEC. By joining the corridor, ASEAN countries can potentially further deepen their links with the GCC.

Sixth, participating leaders, in particular the summit's co-chairs, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman and Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, will gain political advantages. For Mohammed bin Salman, the summit added another feather to his cap. Jokowi will also hope that it will provide momentum ahead of the 2024 Indonesian elections, in which his son is running as a vice-presidential candidate, prompting accusations about a revival of dynastic politics in Indonesia.

Finally, the summit underlines both regions' growing recognition of each other and a symbolic step toward a more multilateral world. Unlike other regional initiatives such as the Quad and the

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U.S. “Indo-Pacific” strategy, which were externally imposed or had clear geopolitical goals, the GCC-ASEAN confluence stems from two sides’ natural desire for mutual cooperation. It follows a historical path that traces the two regions’ centuries of economic, trade, and cultural ties. History, geography, mutual interests, and shifts in global power politics are bringing both regions closer. A convergence of Asia and the Gulf, the “Gulf-Asia,” is now emerging as an alternative global power center. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2253.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Nov.27, 2023, <http://thediplomat.com/2023/11/the-significance-of-the-maiden-gcc-asean-summit/>.

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RCAS Commentary

No, China Is Not Intervening in Myanmar's Civil War

Nian Peng, Dec.6, 2023

In late October, three ethnic rebel groups in Myanmar known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance-Kokang's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Arakan Army, initiated Operation 1027 against the junta. In the weeks since, they have successfully seized control of hundreds of security outposts and three government-controlled areas in northern Myanmar. The MNDAA, in particular, has advanced and encircled the junta-aligned town of Laukkai, situated merely five kilometers from the border with China.



▲Fighters from the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) march at a ceremony marking the 59th anniversary of the Ta'ang National Revolution Day in Tangyang Township, northern Shan State, 22 January 2022 (Photo: Mar Naw)

This conflict reflects a perpetuation of the ethnic tensions in northern Myanmar over recent decades, specifically concerning the control of Kokang territory-a strategically significant area in

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the northern part of Shan State with a Mandarin-speaking population. The MNDAA held control of Kokang until 2009, when the Myanmar military seized it. In February 2015, the MNDAA launched an unsuccessful attack to reclaim the territory, setting the stage for the current conflict. Despite the MNDAA's justification for Operation 1027 as being partly a crackdown on a recently exposed mega telecom scam operations in Laukkai, its underlying objective is to regain control of Kokang.

Although the junta has military advantages in terms of the number of soldiers, weapons, and equipment at its disposal, it has suffered great losses in the fighting against the rebels. Considering the overall economic downturn in Myanmar since the pandemic and the nationwide anti-military movements, particularly those led by insurgencies such as the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) under the National Unity Government, it is unlikely that the junta can launch a large-scale counterattack in a very short time. However, frequent air strikes remain possible. Hence, the conflicts in northern Myanmar are unlikely to conclude in the next few weeks.

Affected by the conflict, a large number of refugees are flocking to Yunnan's border. This situation has resulted in increased living costs and poses high risks to the social stability of local regions of Yunnan. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that four Chinese citizens were killed in air strikes during the Myanmar military's fighting with the MNDAA in 2015. Therefore, China must closely monitor the ongoing fight in northern Myanmar and take preventive actions to avoid air strikes and minimize the risk of Chinese casualties.

On November 25, the Chinese People's Liberation Army announced that it would commence actual combat training on the border with Myanmar. The training areas include the cities of Mangshi and Ruili, and Gengma County, and other locations in southern Yunnan, focusing on testing the combat capabilities of the troops in the war zone, such as rapid mobility, border sealing and control, and fire strikes. The exercises aim to prepare for emergencies and safeguard national sovereignty, border stability, and the safety of people's lives and property.

China's military exercise has drawn significant attention from the West, with claims that China is supporting the Three Brotherhood Alliance in its attacks on Myanmar's junta. The purpose of

such propaganda is to fuel anti-China sentiment in Myanmar and sabotage China-Myanmar relations.

There is no truth in such speculations. China has consistently pursued a policy of non-interference in Myanmar's internal affairs and has never intervened militarily in the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. Instead, it has committed to promoting peace talks between the junta and the ethnic armed groups and providing humanitarian assistance to Myanmar refugees.

The purpose of the recent military drill, which concluded on November 28, was to deter both the junta and ethnic armed groups from escalating tensions. It serves as a practical exercise aimed at securing the border in the event of escalated conflict, particularly cross-border air strikes or artillery attacks that could pose a threat to China's national security.

The Chinese government has collaborated with the junta instead of the ethnic armed groups to jointly combat telecom scams. Therefore, the assertion that China is assisting ethnic armed groups in cracking down on telecom fraud is incorrect, although China does not oppose their efforts in this regard. It is clear to Beijing that the genuine intention of the ethnic armed groups is to regain lost territories, extending beyond the goal of combating telecom fraud.

Finally, China deems it unworthy to interfere in the civil war in Myanmar, as doing so could result in the loss of trade and investment and undermine cordial relations with Myanmar. In fact, traffic and logistics on the two main roads, from Lashio to Muse and Lashio to the Qingshui River, have been completely cut off since the outbreak of the conflict in October. Moreover, approximately 120 cargo trucks, which carried a substantial amount of daily necessities, clothing, and building materials across the China-Myanmar border, were destroyed by drone strikes in Muse on November 23. Given that the trade volume from Yunnan to northern Myanmar constitutes half of the trade share between China and Myanmar, both sides would incur significant economic losses if border trade were to be suspended due to the civil war in Myanmar.

More importantly, amid claims that Beijing has been supporting anti-junta forces, pro-military groups in Myanmar last month staged protests against China in Yangon. China is concerned that its substantial strategic and economic assets could be undermined due to escalating anti-China

sentiment in Myanmar. Therefore, China aims to avoid interfering in the civil war in Myanmar to quell the growing wave of anti-Chinese sentiments in the country.

To conclude, China is more a victim than a beneficiary of the current ethnic conflicts in northern Myanmar. China desires a ceasefire agreement between the junta and the ethnic armed groups, as well as peace and stability in the border region. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2258.html)

The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, Dec.5, 2023,

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/no-china-is-not-intervening-in-myanmars-civil-war/>.

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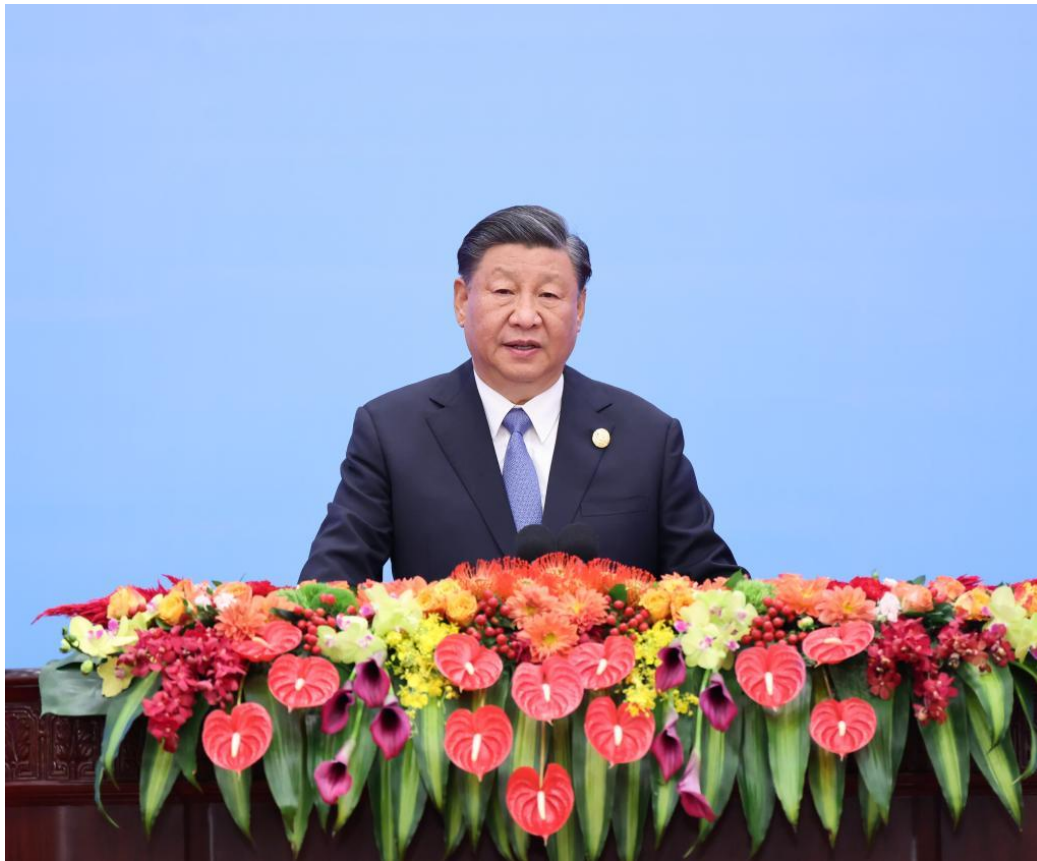
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RCAS Commentary

China Triggers An Infrastructure Race

Ghulam Ali&Nian Peng, Dec.18, 2023

In October 2023, China convened the third Belt and Road Initiative Forum in Beijing. In addition to over two dozen world leaders, hundreds of executives, financial experts and CEOs attended. Since its inception in 2013, extensive discourse has surrounded BRI-related topics. What appears to have lagged behind is an exciting global race among major powers to start more infrastructure projects.



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping attends the opening ceremony of the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation and delivers a keynote speech at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, capital of China, Oct 18, 2023 (Photo/Xinhua)

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China is different in many ways. A recent article in the East Asia Forum, while commenting on the world economy, remarked that “China and the rest of the world seem to be living in two different universes.” While most of the world has been grappling with the challenge of inflation, “China is cutting interest rates to avoid deflation.” Put simply, the cost of living is increasing globally but decreasing in China.

China’s geopolitical strategies also differ from traditional paradigms that most people are familiar with. Traditionally, great power competition has led to arms races and military alliances, diverting resources from development to war preparations. However, China is dragging its rivals into an infrastructure race.

On the sidelines of the G20 summit held in New Delhi in September 2023, eight signatories from India, the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the EU, France, Germany, and Italy signed a memorandum to build the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor.

The IMEC, primarily pushed by the US in response to the BRI, connects half of the world population and 40 percent of the global economy. It will improve economic development through enhanced rail, road and maritime connectivity. Analysts are calling it a ‘game changer,’ a term earlier used when Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US first launched Build Back a Better World in 2021. At the next session of the G7 in Germany in June 2022, the member countries, led by the US, started the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. The project aims to mobilise \$600 billion to fund infrastructure projects in developing nations by 2027.

Under the PGII, the US and the EU, in collaboration with the African Development Bank and the Africa Finance Corporation, signed an MoU to develop the Lobito Corridor and the Zambia–Lobito railway, which will together form a link across Africa through a number of large mineral deposits. The State Department called the project “the most significant transport infrastructure that the United States has helped develop on the African continent in a generation.”

In December 2021, the EU unveiled its \$340 billion Global Gateway investment plan, calling it a “true alternative” to the BRI and a trusted brand.

In addition to megaprojects, some countries have started small-scale initiatives as well. For instance, Japan has started the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and Partnership for Quality

Infrastructure. The rivalry between China and Japan is especially fierce in Southeast Asia. India, apart from participating in these projects, has started its own regional connectivity initiatives.

Although the geopolitical aspects of these projects are frequently featured in the media, organisations such as McKinsey and the Asian Development Bank consider them partners rather than rivals. The ADB estimates that there is a \$26 trillion investment gap globally. Even the combined investment of all these projects will be insufficient to address the infrastructure gap. Therefore, not only are all these investments directed in the right path, but even more are needed to bridge the existing infrastructure gap.

What is even more significant is the fact that regardless of who is financing, these projects will fill the infrastructure gap and will bring opportunities to everyone. Unless something is specifically mentioned, roads, railways, ports, etc, could be utilised by all. Being in close proximity to the areas where investment is focused and being the world's largest trader, China will surely benefit from the resultant development of these megaprojects as much as any other country.

In recent times, the frequent use of terms like connectivity, corridors, infrastructure, belt and road is a trend started by China. Although geopolitical rivalries continue, for the first time in great power politics, a significant portion of capital is being allocated to infrastructure and connectivity. China has triggered a global race to build infrastructure across the world. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2260.html)

The article was first published at The News, Pakistan, Dec.3, 2023, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1134533-china-triggers-an-infrastructure-race>.

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RCAS Commentary

Civil Society Should Not Get Involved in the South China Sea Disputes

Nian Peng, Dec.18, 2023

Since Ferdinand Marcos Jr came to power in June 2022, the Philippines has escalated tensions in the South China Sea (SCS), thus becoming a big “troublemaker” in the region in the eyes of China. Domestically, the Marcos administration has not only adopted a more assertive position on SCS disputes but also engaged civil society in these disputes. On the international front, Manila has strengthened its military alliance with the US and expanded its coalition against China by aligning with disputants in the SCS.



▲ From left, French ambassador to the Philippines Marie Fontanrl, French Minister for the Armed Forces Sebastien Lecornu, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodor, and Philippine under Secretary of National Defense Irineo Espino pose for photo prior to a joint press conference at a hotel in Manila, Philippines on Saturday Dec. 2, 2023. (Ted Aljibe/Pool Photo via AP).

On 27 November, following the conclusion of joint maritime exercises with the US and Australia, Romeo Brawner Jr, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, declared that the Philippines planned to conduct additional multilateral military exercises with other allies in the SCS 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.

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On 2 December, Philippine Defence Secretary Gilbert Teodoro and his French counterpart, Minister Sébastien Lecornu, agreed to initiate talks on the Visiting Forces Agreement. France would be the fourth country, followed by the US, Australia and Japan, that get access to the Philippine military facilities.

This indicates that Manila aims to expand the network of allies and partnerships it has established in pursuit of geopolitical interests in opposition to China in the SCS. Consequently, tensions in the SCS are anticipated to escalate in the next year. Earlier, when meeting with US military officers in Hawaii, Marcos Jr said that the Philippines is seeking to strengthen cooperation with countries with “similar values”, such as the US, Australia, Japan and South Korea.

Due to increasing internal factionalism, the Marcos government has employed provocative anti-China rhetoric and strengthened the influence of the pro-America camp within the Cabinet. The intention is to send a clear message to China that the Philippines is determined to steadfastly protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity in the contested waters and would not back down.

Parallel to this, the Marcos government is trying to win public opinion by following the American narrative of “the unprofessional operation of Chinese aircraft and vessels”. For instance, it criticised the Chinese fighter jets that “orbited” above the flight path of the Super Tucanos of the Philippines during the latter’s joint air patrol with Australia in the SCS.

Through these policy measures, Manila intends to further consolidate the negative image of China’s “aggression” in the SCS, both in Philippine society and the international community, and to “throw the pot” (甩锅 or shift blame) to China in the event that two coastal guard forces of two countries clash.

However, the Philippine government’s encouragement of its civil society to become involved in SCS disputes is dangerous as it would increase the risk of clashes between the Philippine civilian vessels and the Chinese coast guard in the disputed waters.

In fact, Marcos Jr has failed to take the requisite measures to mitigate tensions with China in the SCS after his informal talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC summit in November 2023. Instead, he disagreed with Chinese statements that the Philippines had agreed to

remove their ship from Ren'ai Reef, and went on to support resupplying operations at the reef, and encouraged Philippine civil society and organisations to be involved in SCS conflicts.

With the government's support, on 20 November, the Philippine civil society announced that more than 40 fishing boats would be dispatched to deliver supplies to Ren'ai Reef. Clearly, the Marcos administration is trying to put some pressure on China, as the latter can be caught in a dilemma of how to properly expel these fishing boats without undermining the basis of public opinion for bilateral relations.

However, the Philippine government's encouragement of its civil society to become involved in SCS disputes is dangerous as it would increase the risk of clashes between the Philippine civilian vessels and the Chinese coast guard in the disputed waters. In the worst-case scenario, civilian casualties could occur, thus escalating tensions; on the other hand, any maritime standoff or military conflict between the Philippines and China in the SCS would increase anti-China sentiment in Philippine society or anti-Philippines sentiment in Chinese society and therefore undermine bilateral ties.

It is concluded in light of the aforementioned that the Marcos government should not encourage Philippine civil society to engage in SCS disputes to avoid escalation and deterioration of the Philippine-China relationship. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2261.html)

The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, Dec.11, 2023,

<https://www.thinkchina.sg/civil-society-should-not-get-involved-south-china-sea-disputes>.

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RCAS Commentary

India's Transnational Death Squad Startled Western Nations

Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, Dec.20, 2023

India's leading intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, has been involved in the assassination of Kashmiri and Sikh activists living in Canada and the United States. Admittedly, it's an open secret about the RAW's sponsored death squads' unbridled terrorist activities in Pakistan. Ironically, the Western nations did not reprimand India's intelligence agency's death squad killing of Pakistanis, Kashmiris, and Sikhs.



▲ Security personnel outside the High Commission of Canada in New Delhi. Both India and Canada have expelled a diplomat as part of escalating tensions over the death of a Sikh activist in British Columbia in June.

Arun Sankar/AFP via Getty Images

The Pakistani law enforcement agencies arrested RAW's chief operator, a serving Commander in the Indian Navy, Kulbhushan Yadav, during a counter-intelligence operation on March 3, 2016. He was managing terrorist activities in Baluchistan. Jadhav confessed that "India is providing support to militants and Baloch separatists to take subversive and terrorist attacks in

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Pakistan. It is also trying to disrupt and sabotage through terrorist activities and provocation of Baloch militants against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Islamabad appraised the United Nations about the Indian intelligence agencies' involvement in terrorist acts in Pakistan. However, the international community has shown little concern for India's apparent disregard for the rule of law in Pakistan. Similarly, the international community kept quiet over the Indian Naval officers' involvement in sabotaging doings in Qatar. Nonetheless, it seems complicated to ignore the violation of the sovereignty of Canada, European nations, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

RAW is encountering criticism internationally due to its criminal activities in Europe, Canada, and the United States. In September 2023, Prime Minister Justin Pierre James Trudeau claimed RAW killed a Sikh leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. Since then, the gruesome act of RAW has strained ties between Canada and India.

Last month, the United States charged RAW agents with attempting to assassinate an American citizen in New York. Will the United States' revelation of a plot to kill a Sikh activist impair the bilateral relationship between New Delhi and Washington?

The American Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen said investigators had "foiled and exposed a dangerous plot to assassinate a U.S. citizen on U.S. soil." On November 28, the United States charged Nikhil Gupta, an Indian national, arrested in the Czech Republic in June 2023 for paying \$100,000 to a hit man to assassinate a prominent Sikh activist and U.S. citizen on its soil. Nikhil paid the hitman a \$15,000 advance to carry out manslaughter Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, general counsel for the New York-based Sikh activist group Sikhs for Justice.

Interestingly, to cover up RAW's criminal plot, the Indian government charged Gurpatwant Singh Pannun under anti-terror legislation for alleged threats to Air India. Meanwhile, Pannun proclaimed that he asked Sikhs to boycott the airline. Indeed, asking for an airline boycott does not qualify as a terrorist act.

The United States issued a warning to the Indian government over the involvement of RAW in the assassination plot of an American citizen. However, due to India's relevance in its

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geostrategic calculation in Asia-Pacific and China's containment policy, Washington has refrained from taking stern action. Can the United States approve India's state terrorism and state-sponsored killing on foreign soil?

Legally speaking, obviously not, or at least does not permit it on its soil. Even though the United States had carried out targeted assassinations on foreign soil—including strikes against those designated as terrorists or involved in terror plots. For instance, the Obama administration carried out the killing of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011, and the Trump administration authorized the assassination of Iranian Gen. Qassem Suleimani in Iraq in 2020.

New Delhi's response to Prime Minister Trudeau's claim was arrogant and irritating. Instead of reining in RAW, abiding by the rule of law, and diplomatically ensuring the aggrieved party respects the sovereignty of Canada in the future, the Indian officials, while denying the involvement of their intelligence agency in the killing of Najjar, accused Canada of a "safe haven for terrorists." Moreover, they asked Canada to substantially reduce its diplomatic staff in New Delhi and temporarily suspend issuing visas to Canadian citizens.

Significantly, India's response to the accusation from the United States was muted and rational. Instead of angry denials, India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi tried to appease the Americans by stating that U.S. officials "shared some inputs about the nexus between organized criminals, gun-runners, terrorists and others. The inputs are a cause of concern for both countries, and they have decided to take necessary follow-up action."

The illegitimate assassination activities of RAW in foreign countries alarm about the probability of Pakistani political leaders being hit during the 2024 general election campaign to create a political crisis in the country. Notably, RAW has already sponsored and conducted such criminal acts in Pakistan.

In September 2023, Karachi police claimed the involvement of RAW in the killing of the administrator of a seminary in Karachi's Gulistani-Jauhar. On October 11, 2023, Punjab Inspector General of Police Dr Usman Anwar categorically claimed that "rogue nation's hostile

intelligence agency” was involved in the killing of Maulana Latif and his security guard in Daska mosque during Fajr prayers.

The Indians justified the killing of Latif by claiming that he had guided four terrorists to carry out a terror attack at the Pathankot airbase in 2016. RAW was also suspected in the killing of a Jamaatud Dawa-linked person in Azad Jammu and Kashmir’s Rawalakot area on September 8, 2023. These recorded incidents prove that the RAW death squad murdered religious leaders to unleash sectarian clashes in the country. Hence, it could use its death squad to create political instability in Pakistan.

To conclude, the Indian government has been involved in an extra-judicial killing of the Kashmiri and Sikh leaders in the Indian illegally occupied Kashmir and the Indian Punjab. Its intelligence agencies had also killed the freedom movement leaders in the foreign countries. Similarly, RAW recently killed Nijjar and attempted to kill Pannun in Canada and the United States, respectively, because they advocated for the creation of an independent Sikh state known as Khalistan. The condemnation and stoppage of such gruesome actions of RAW by the United Nations is imperative for the respect of the state’s sovereignty and international security. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2264.html)

The article was first published at WE News, Pakistan, Dec.4, 2023, <https://en.wenews.pk/indias-transnational-death-squad-startled-western-nations/>.

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RCAS Commentary

U.S. Intrusions Will Roil Disputed Waters

Nian Peng, Dec.23, 2023

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,

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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

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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. (http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2265.html)

The article was first published at China US Focus, Hong Kong, Dec.21, 2023, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/us-intrusions-will-roil-disputed-waters>.

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RCAS Talk

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

May.1, 2023, BBC Chinese News

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.

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Nian Peng, director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), 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

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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. (<http://www.rcas.top/Bulletin/2231.html>)

The article was partially translated from the BBC Chinese News, May.1, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-65345018>.

RCAS Talk

ASEAN Won't Take Sides!

Jul.15, 2023, Hong Kong China News Agency

The Indonesian Foreign Minister, as the host, stressed in his opening speech at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Jakarta on July 11 the need for ASEAN to maintain unity and centrality, and conveyed a clear message that ASEAN will never serve as a proxy for great power competition. The interviewed experts pointed out that ASEAN countries are reluctant to take sides and are trying to shape a benign competition among major powers in the region. The United States and Japan want to confront China through inveigling or alienating ASEAN members. This scheme will not come true.



▲ the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 11-14 July 2023, Jakarta, Indonesia.

At the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 11, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marsudi, the rotating presidency of ASEAN, said that ASEAN must maintain its credibility to maintain its unity and central position. Only with unity can ASEAN cope with challenges and foresee future. She also said, "We need to convey that ASEAN will never be a proxy of great power competition."

Nian Peng, Director of the Hong Kong Research Centre for Asian Studies (RCAS), was interviewed by *Hong Kong China News Agency* on the 12th. He pointed out that the Indonesian Foreign Minister's speech represented the mainstream view of ASEAN. Under the current

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intense great power rivalry, ASEAN conveyed several messages: Firstly, in recent years, there has been an escalation in competition between China and the United States. In that case, the United States has constantly pressured ASEAN to join the anti-China camp, which has marginalized ASEAN in regional affairs, therefore, ASEAN should strengthen its central position. Secondly, ASEAN tries to guide and shape a benign competition among major powers in the region, easing the external environment and avoiding being trapped in a situation where they had to choose sides. This is aimed at preserving long-term peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Thirdly, amidst the escalating risks of conflict between major powers, ASEAN has set the firm stance of upholding a nuclear-free zone.

On the same day, Marsudi also presided over the meeting of the Committee of Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone. She stressed that ASEAN wants to make Southeast Asia a nuclear-free zone with a very strong political will.

In this regard, Nian Peng explained that ASEAN had the exact same feeling about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and the United States provided weapons to Ukraine. So, ASEAN worries about the escalating risk of military conflict in Southeast Asia considering the current tensions in the Taiwan Strait. In addition, the United States and the Philippines have rapidly promoted military cooperation recently. The United States has also deployed nuclear weapons in Europe and anti-missile systems in South Korea. ASEAN countries are worried that the United States will plunge the whole Southeast Asia into a nuclear war. “At present, it is almost impossible for the United States to deploy nuclear weapons in ASEAN countries other than the Philippines. Indonesia has already rejected, while Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, which have military cooperation with the United States, limit their cooperation to normal activities without targeting third countries.”

In addition to the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, Indonesia will hold a series of meetings. Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Japanese Foreign Minister Lin Fang will attend relevant meetings.

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Before attending the meeting, the United States and Japan expressed their intentions through the media. According to US media reports, Blinken will focus on the South China Sea and cooperate with ASEAN member countries. The aim is to push back against what they perceive as China's "harmful, coercive, and irresponsible behavior" that is on the rise. According to Japanese media reports, Lin Fang's visit is to deepen relations with emerging market countries in the "global south" and encourage ASEAN countries to align closer with Japan. It aims to position Japan as a bridge between ASEAN and the G7, collectively constraining China.

Nian Peng pointed out that the United States and Japan work together on containing China through deepening security and economic cooperation with ASEAN. In terms of security, the United States hypes the "China threat" through the South China Sea dispute. However, except the Philippines, which actively follows the United States, other member countries focus on economic development and are unwilling to intensify conflicts in the South China Sea. Japan hopes that ASEAN and G7 will be closely tied, thus reducing its economic dependence on China. ASEAN will certainly welcome the economic support of G7 members, but it is unwilling to engage a zero-sum game in economic cooperation. ASEAN countries have a big vision with enough rationality and determination.

Despite the United States hypes up the South China Sea dispute ahead of the meeting, ASEAN appears to be relatively cautious on this matter. The first joint military exercise of ten ASEAN countries in the South China Sea, which will be held in September, was originally scheduled to be held in the North Natuna Sea, where Indonesia and China have overlapping economic waters. After Western media hype, Indonesia directly changed it to the undisputed exit location of the Straits of Malacca.

Nian Peng believes that it shows that ASEAN countries have different views on the military exercise. These countries are unwilling to intensify great power competition over the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN countries prefer not to pick sides and still hope to become a coordinator between major powers, maintaining ASEAN's unity as a whole and avoiding being drawn into great power competition. The United States and Japan want to confront China

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through inveigling or alienating ASEAN members. This scheme will not come true.
(<http://www.rcas.top/Bulletin/2236.html>)

This article was translated from the Chinese edition which was first published at Hong Kong China News Agency, <http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100411671&channel=2813>.

RCAS Talk

Philippines Joins Japan-led Military Drills for The First Time

Aiming to Boost Confidence against China

Nov.15, 2023, Hong Kong China News Agency

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

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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.
(<http://www.rcas.top/event/2250.html>)

▲ *This interview was translated from the HKCNA, November 13, 2023,
<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100520753&channel=2813>.*