



RCAS Commentary

South China Sea: Return to Dialogue Vital for China-Philippines Ties

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About RCAS

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

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

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

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

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Vital for China-Philippines Ties

Nian Peng

With China-Philippines relations at a crossroads, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Philippine counterpart, Enrique Manalo, during a December 20 telephone call, that “faced with the choice of what path to follow, the Philippines must act with caution”. He added: “China has always been committed to resolving disputes through dialogue and consultation and jointly safeguarding maritime stability.”



▲Filipino Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo listens during a bilateral meeting in Manila, Philippines, 30 October 2023. EFE-EPA FILE/FRANCIS R. MALASIG.

Wang also emphasised that, should the Philippines misjudge the situation, persist in its course or collude with external forces to foment trouble, China would “defend its rights in accordance with law and respond resolutely”.

Wang’s statement conveyed two explicit messages. First, it served as a warning to the Philippines that any escalation or persistence in provocation in the South China Sea

would not be tolerated. China will respond with full vigour and take all necessary countermeasures.

Water cannon attacks, for instance, criticised by the Philippines as a dangerous manoeuvre, might become customary in disputed waters should the Philippines persist in increasing tensions or attempt to involve external actors in maritime disputes.

The second message is that Beijing will strengthen its relations with other claimant states and Asean members such as Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia-leaving the Philippines to fight a lonely battle.

China has been drawing closer to these three countries as part of efforts to foster a community with a shared future. There were three significant state visits: Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Beijing in March, Indonesian President Joko Widodo in Beijing in October, and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Hanoi in December. Importantly, these high-level diplomatic engagements occurred after tensions erupted between China and the Philippines in February.

Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have all expressed their willingness to work with China towards the maintenance of peace and stability in the South China Sea.

It is worth noting that these three countries have neither responded to the Philippine proposal for a separate code of conduct in the disputed waters nor become part of the Philippines' recent provocative actions against China. This is significant because all three also have separate contesting claims with China.

It is evident that the other claimants harbour no intention of provoking China in the South China Sea. Instead, they are committed to fostering economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement with China, aiming to advance economic growth and social stability within their respective territories.

In addition, positive trends have emerged in China-US relations in recent months, exemplified by the China-US summit in San Francisco in November and restoration of full military communication in December. The underlining of non-confrontation and non-conflict as foundational principles for China-US relations also underscores expectations that both countries will pragmatically manage their competition, preventing tensions from escalating.

Against this backdrop, the Philippines' aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea would be discouraged by the United States to some extent. As Manalo said during his call with Wang, he hoped to manage disputes in a way that is acceptable to both sides, to relieve tensions and prevent conflict in the South China Sea.

More recently, in an interview with Japanese media, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr pointed out that despite US assistance, the maritime dispute with China is “a purely Filipino concern” and that Manila considers it “a Philippine problem and we intend to solve that problem ourselves”.

Perhaps the Philippines has come to realise the serious consequences of US military involvement in the South China Sea and is trying to keep some distance between itself and the US in its territorial disputes with China.

Notably, China has not closed the door to dialogue. If the Philippines is willing to return to the right track and jointly manage maritime disputes, China can reopen consultation with the Philippines.

In response to Wang’s advice on dialogue, Manalo said he hoped to strengthen dialogue with China in good faith, give full play to the role of communication mechanisms in maritime issues between the two countries, and jointly seek solutions to problems, according to the Chinese readout. In his short official statement, Manalo described his conversation with Wang as a “frank and candid exchange”.

Both sides also agreed to soon hold a meeting of the bilateral consultation mechanism on the South China Sea.

While the phone call between the two foreign ministers was significant in breaking the ice, improved bilateral ties will depend on the outcome of the coming dialogue between the two sides.

Despite the thaw, several Philippine actions continue to concern China, such as the activation of a newly installed Japanese-made radar system by the Philippine navy on the day of the phone call, to monitor vessel activities in the South China Sea. At the ceremony, Philippines’ defence minister Gilberto Teodoro strongly refuted China’s criticism that the Philippines had provoked tensions.

It would appear that while the Philippines is worried about growing tensions with China, it is not softening its position on the South China Sea to avoid appearing weak.

To conclude, it is too early to say if China-Philippine relations will improve as a result of the Wang-Manalo phone call. Factors including factionalism within Marcos Jr’s cabinet and the role of the US could affect the Philippines’ China policy, putting relations on an uncertain trajectory. Hopefully, both sides can minimise internal and external interferences, and expedite the normalisation process.

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About Author



Nian Peng is the Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. He holds a Ph.D in Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests are in the areas of China-Southeast/South Asia relations, Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) and maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. He authored/edited four books-*Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Springer Nature, 2022), *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Springer Nature, 2021), *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Springer Nature, 2021), *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Springer Nature, 2020). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, etc. He also contributes his perspectives to many think tanks and various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *East Asian Forum* in Australia, *The Diplomat* in the USA, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times*, *CGTN*, *World Affairs* in China.