



# RCAS Commentary

## **Will US-Philippines Dialogue Only Worsen South China Sea Tensions?**

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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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## Will US-Philippines Dialogue Only Worsen South China Sea Tensions?

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The United States and the Philippines are expected to conduct a “2+2” dialogue in Manila in March, involving US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, and their Philippine counterparts Enrique Manalo and Gilberto Teodoro Jr.



▲(L-R) Philippine Senior Undersecretary and Officer in Charge (OIC) of National Defense Carlito Galvez Jr., Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique A. Manalo, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III.

The Philippines will host the talks for the first time since the dialogue began in 2012, with three unambiguous messages likely to be conveyed.

First, Manila is trying to increase its bargaining chips in bilateral talks with China by deepening its diplomatic engagement and defence cooperation with the US.

The Marcos administration has attempted to strengthen its hand in South China Sea disputes with China, primarily by trying to involve other countries in its protests against Beijing while negotiating with it at the same time.

The more robust the ties that the Philippines builds with foreign powers, the more leverage it has in negotiations. Therefore, a reinforced relationship with the US via the “2+2” dialogue would be beneficial to Manila’s negotiations with Beijing.

Second, the US intends to bolster the Marcos administration’s stance towards China by offering substantial support. So far, the Philippines has been dealing with whether and how to continue its hard line against China, given the potential costs involved. The dialogue gives the US a chance to support Manila’s continued assertiveness in the region.

Third, last year’s “2+2” dialogue took place in April, not long before the annual Balikatan exercises between the US and Philippines militaries. Given their enhanced levels of strategic cooperation, both sides may discuss policy coordination on maritime activities, thus broadening the scope of their defence cooperation.

During last year’s meeting, Washington and Manila resolved to “modernise” their alliance and optimise mutual defence capabilities. This year’s dialogue comes as the Philippines continues its operations in disputed waters in the South China Sea.

Late last month, a small aircraft from the Philippines dropped off supplies for troops on a grounded vessel at Second Thomas Shoal, known as Renai Reef in China and Ayungin Shoal in the Philippines. Continuing resupply missions to troops on the beached vessel is likely to be a top priority for the Philippine military going forward.

Given this, Philippine officials are expected to highlight the Second Thomas Shoal issue during the latest dialogue with the US, and Washington is likely to advise on how to maintain the Philippines’ presence in the disputed reef. The two sides are also likely to discuss enhancing the Philippines’ maritime strength by upgrading and modernising its fleet, and holding more joint patrols and military exercises to counter what they see as Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

On January 17, Teodoro said the Philippines was planning to conduct “more robust” military activities with the US and its allies in the face of a “more aggressive” China. Even so, Washington could still curb Manila’s activities in the South China Sea.

The Biden administration's attention is currently divided between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and trying to keep Israel's war in Gaza from spilling over into the wider Middle East. As such, it is unlikely that the US would be eager to open another front. If there is to be any confrontation in the South China Sea, Washington would probably prefer the non-military kind.

Last November, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr raised the prospect of a separate code of conduct for the South China Sea with fellow claimant states Malaysia and Vietnam. More recently, he travelled to Vietnam to sign agreements that included establishing a joint coastguard committee to discuss common issues.

While consultations over the code of conduct might come up during the US-Philippines dialogue, a similar bilateral agreement between the two is unlikely any time soon. Manila and Washington have strengthened their policy coordination amid the consultations over the South China Sea code of conduct, as they seek to ensure their interests are protected.

For its part, China has expressed strong disapproval over what it sees as US intervention in code of conduct talks. It has repeatedly warned that it would see the presence of external actors in territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a hostile move and treat it as such.

In conclusion, next month's "2+2" Philippines-US dialogue is likely to advance defence cooperation between the two countries. Any resulting increase in Manila's assertiveness in the South China Sea could risk intensifying confrontation in the disputed waters.

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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. Email: [hkrcas@163.com](mailto:hkrcas@163.com).