

RCAS Bulletin

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May 5, 2024

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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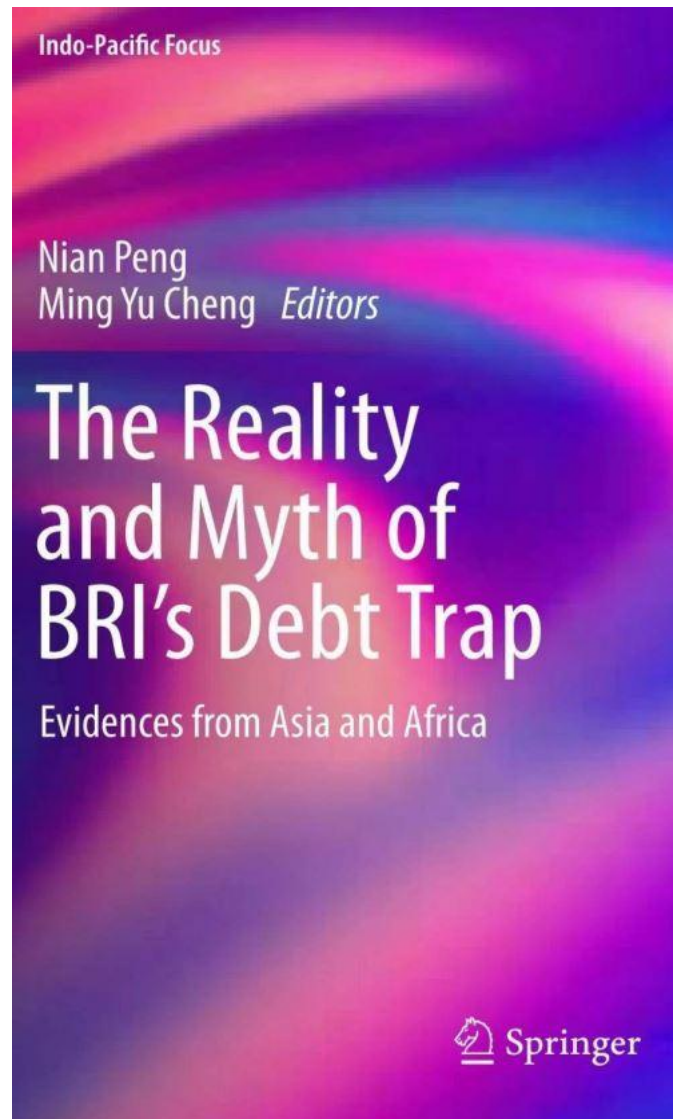
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RCAS Event

RCAS New Book is Published by Springer Nature!

RCAS is proud to announce that the new book-*The Reality and Myth of BRI's "Debt Trap": Evidences from Asia and Africa* is published by Springer Nature in April 2024. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, and Ming Yu Cheng, nonresident senior fellow of RCAS co-edited this book.



▲The title page of RCAS new book.

This edited book aims to present a well-balanced view on the heated debate about BRI's "debt trap" controversy within the route states by presenting compelling evidence from Asian and African countries.

It is contributed by the university scholars, think tank experts, and governmental officials from the concerned parties such as China, USA, South/Southeast Asia, and Africa to discuss this new topic from their perspectives.

It not only examines the origins and changes in external debt among the BRI route states before and after the launch of the BRI, but also analyzes the outcomes stemming from BRI projects.

The book covers 12 chapters, in which the first chapter briefly introduces the aims and scope of this book. The following 2 chapters look at Chinese and Indian perspectives on the "debt trap", respectively. The next 9 chapters examine the debt issue and BRI projects in Southeast Asian, South Asian, and African states, which mainly involve Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Nigeria, and give some useful policy suggestions to reduce the debt burden and promote the socioeconomic development in these countries.

This new book is part of the book series-*Indo-Pacific Focus*, which is co-edited by Nian Peng and Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of RCAS, with Springer Nature.

The series aim to conduct in-depth and dynamic studies on the new and emerging issues and the new trends of the contemporary geo-politics of the Indo-Pacific region. It covers the key economic, political, diplomatic, security, social and cultural issues in the Indo-Pacific region, mainly including the BRI, regional integration, multilateral cooperation, physical connectivity, economic corridor, debt issue, resource exploitation, great power rivalry, political development, maritime security, terrorism/counterterrorism, poverty reduction, ethnic and religious tensions, etc. It also predicts the possible directions of the future of the geo-politics and geo-economy in the IndoPacific region by incorporating the most recent developments. It tries to create a main platform for the Asian and African scholars to compete with the West-centered views on the mentioned topics by inviting experts from East Asia, South/Southeast Asia, Middle East and Africa to contribute books/chapters

The Springer Nature links:<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-97-1056-0>

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by HKCNA on China-Philippines Tensions

On 26 April, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from *Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA)* on the recent tensions between China and the Philippines. He analyzed the main effects of the AI fake news about Marcos Jr.'s order to the military on the SCS disputes on China-Philippines relations and the SCS situation.



▲ the interview on the HKCNA page

The interview can be seen on the HKCNA page:

<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100660429&channel=4661>

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by HKCNA on Balikatan 2024 Drills

On 22 April, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from *Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA)* on the 2024 Balikatan Drills between the US and Philippine troops. He analyzed the main effects of the joint drills on China-Philippines relations and the SCS situation.



▲ the interview on the HKCNA page

The interview can be seen on the HKCNA page:

<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?channel=2813&id=100655539>.

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by HKCNA on US's Missile Deployment in Northern Philippines

On 18 April, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from *Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA)* on US's intermediate-range missile deployment in northern Philippines. He analyzed the main effects of the missile deployment on the China-Philippines relations and the SCS situation.



▲ the interview on the HKCNA page

The interview can be seen on the HKCNA page:

<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?channel=4661&id=100653284>

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by HKCNA on US-Japan-Philippine Summit

On 12 April, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from *Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA)* on the first US-Japan-Philippine Summit. He analyzed the main reasons and the future trends of Philippines' provocation against China in the SCS.



▲ the interview on the HKCNA page

The interview can be seen on the HKCNA page:

<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100648929&channel=4661>

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by Global Times on ASEAN's Views on the SCS Issue

The US Embassy in the Philippines is located in a coastal area in Manila, which boasts the most beautiful beaches and waterfront promenades. A local tour guide told the Global Times that the US Embassy in the Philippines is one of the largest embassies among US missions abroad. It is closely connected to the Philippine Navy located in South Harbor in Manila and the Philippine Coast Guard Headquarters.



▲ Philippine people protest against the continued presence of US troops in the country in front of the US Embassy in Manila on July 4, 2023. Photo: VCG

“The proximity means if there is any emergency, Americans can quickly escape under the protection of the Philippine military,” said the guide.

Under the current Philippine government, the US’ influence, which was once thought to be drifting away from the Philippines, is quickly coming back. Some Philippine analysts believe that the current Philippine government is creating friction in the South China Sea with the aim of boosting the presence of the US military in the Philippines. They believe that only by creating panic among the people can the US’ military return to the Philippines “naturally.”

However, the rapid transition from peace to turmoil in the Philippines has aroused strong dissatisfaction among Philippine politicians.

‘We oppose increasing US military presence’

Former president Rodrigo Duterte has expressed concerns about US military presence in the Philippines on multiple occasions, believing that it will put the country in a dangerous position. He has stated that it would be pretty naive or stupid for Filipinos to think that the Americans would only bring conventional warheads. But unfortunately, the Philippines granted the US wider access to military bases amid tensions with China in February.

The two countries not only plan to return the presence to Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Force Base, but also push an expansion reaching nine bases in total.

Ira Pozon, a Philippine lawyer, also the Legal Counsel to the former Philippine vice president, told the Global Times that the US' influence in the Philippines is deeply rooted, from the education system to the political system, with the Philippine parliament's bicameral system being modeled after that of the US. The names of many streets in the Philippines show the influence of the US and most Filipinos' understanding of China also comes from Western reports and narratives.

Pozon candidly said that the influence of the US on the Philippines has been strong since its founding. However, Filipinos have no intention of becoming enemies with China. On the contrary, they hope to become good, mutually understanding neighbors.

Rommel C. Banlaoi, the Chairman of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence, and Terrorism Research, told the Global Times that he believes it is one of the US' pieces of advice to the current Philippine government to pursue such kinds of confrontational action, especially in the context of what they call the “offensive transparency strategy” in the South China Sea.

“They have a way to give such kind of support to the Philippines. For example, as a result of President Marcos' decision to be closer with the US, the US decided to provide more military assistance funding to the Philippines, and the Philippine military can use this funding to train anybody to protect our interests in the South China Sea,” he said.

Rommel C. Banlaoi is a renowned analyst on the South China Sea row, and was assigned to help advise the president on security matters in 2022. His experience has seen the Philippine government shift from neutrality to a clear bias toward the US.

“There are people opposing those decisions of increasing US military presence in the Philippines and I am one of them. The US wants to have a greater role in the area. We don't want to take sides with the US or China, but to take the side of our interests. Because of the decision of the current president to be closer to the US, we are becoming isolated from the ASEAN. Many ASEAN member states do not like what we are doing because it is running counter to the principle of the ASEAN of promoting the region as a zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality. The Philippines is no longer neutral because the Philippines has decided to become part of US strategy in the Pacific,” said Banlaoi.

“The Philippines cannot be a truly proud, independent nation if we continue to rely on the US,” Banlaoi stressed. “Our current government is heavily reliant on the US to advance our position in the South China Sea and that kind of reliance is truly hurting Philippines-China relations and is making it difficult to settle our disputes in the South China Sea.”

Similar concerns are shared among current senior government officials as well.

On March 25, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed Executive Order No. 57. It's reported that the Executive Order was signed two days after the water cannon warning by the China Coast Guard against Philippine vessels near Renai Jiao, section 7 of which authorizes the National Maritime Center to “accept donations, contributions, grants, bequests, or gifts from domestic or foreign sources.”

Philippine Senator Imee Marcos warned her brother, President Marcos Jr, against the Executive Order, which she said would welcome a “Trojan horse of foreign interference.” “Emotion rather than reason has prevailed in our maritime conflict with China and is leading us down a dangerous path that will cost us more than just Filipino pride,” she said in a statement on April 1, the Daily Tribune reported.

Imee Marcos reiterated that putting the lives of Filipinos in danger is a “gross irresponsibility and must be avoided at all costs.” She also advocated for a proper dialogue with China.

Former Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo also said during the Boao Forum for Asia 2024 on March 27 that the Philippine government and people do not want war, and China is very important to Philippines.

‘Confronting with China would be very bad for us’

During the visit, *Global Times* reporters noticed that symbols of China-Philippines friendship are still visible everywhere in Manila.

When asked about the must-visit places for Chinese tourists in Manila, locals recommended the St. Augustine Church, the oldest Catholic church in Manila. On either side of the church's entrance are several Chinese-style stone lions, clear proof that Chinese workers participated in the construction of the church. They are considered by many Filipinos to be symbols of China-Philippines friendship.

In addition, the “China-Philippines Friendship Gate” archway at the entrance of Manila Chinatown with distinct Chinese characteristics and the Manila Bridge built by China for the Philippines still hold a place in the hearts of locals.

However, *Global Times* reporters could also clearly feel that under the guidance of the current Philippine government, the Philippine media establishment has dissolved the friendly atmosphere between China and the Philippines. This has increased public sentiment for the two sides to engage in dialogue, rather than introducing risks from external sources.

Philippine college student Yuan Ross Rama told the *Global Times* that he feels the growing confrontation between the two governments and hopes that the two governments will peacefully resolve the dispute through dialogue. Ordinary people do not want to take sides between the two major powers, as ultimately it is the interests of the people and fishermen that will be harmed. Local tourism industry practitioners are also worried about the deterioration of China-Philippines relations. A local tour guide named Ryan told the *Global Times* that “the deterioration of bilateral relations has had a direct impact on me. In the first three months of this year, I received fewer Chinese tour groups than in a typical month.”

He said that if there were no Chinese people doing business in the Philippines, the Philippine economy would incur huge losses. “Chinese people are very good at trade, which is exactly the ability that the Filipino people lack.”

According to Ryan, during former president Duterte’s tenure, there were relatively fewer people begging on the streets of Manila or making a living by wiping cars in the dense traffic. But now these people can be seen frequently. “I can’t say that the wealth gap in the Philippines was much wider now, but at least at that time the government would set up some relief agencies to help them. Now, the Philippine government chooses to confront rather than cooperate with China, which is very bad for us.”

‘Manila’s role as US pawn receives no regional support’

The Philippine government’s unilateral actions have not just sparked concern among its own people. Scholars from many ASEAN countries have also told the *Global Times* that they are worried that their own countries will be forced to take sides, or that current tensions will affect their bilateral cooperation with China.

“We are concerned that the worsening China-Philippines relations will have a negative impact on the projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Malaysia and the cooperation mechanism proposed by China in Southeast Asia,” Ong Tee Keat, former Malaysian minister of transport, told the *Global Times*.

Any military posture and provocative remarks made by any party under the instigation of external forces should not be allowed to undermine the overall mutually beneficial partnership between China and the ASEAN, said Ong Tee Keat.

There’s no necessity for the ASEAN to appoint a spokesperson that represents an external power, including the US, Dato’ Abdul Majit bin Ahmad Khan, president of the Malaysia-China Friendship Association, and also former Malaysian ambassador to China, told the *Global Times* in a recent interview.

“There has always been the intention of the ASEAN, China, and also other countries to ensure that the South China Sea remains a region of peace and stability. It's in our interest that things should not get toxic, because then it will affect our development efforts and the harmonious relationship that we have built over the past years. I believe all ASEAN member countries and China want to see peace in the region so that we can pursue development for our people,” said Majit.

Malaysia’s Prime Minister, on March 4, spoke up in defense of ties with China and rebuffed alleged pressure by the US and its allies on regional nations to take sides in the West’s strategic rivalries with Beijing, the *South China Morning Post* reported. Anwar Ibrahim also said the risk of conflict in the South China Sea had been exaggerated.

Peng Nian, director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), told the *Global Times* that except for the Philippines, other ASEAN countries are unwilling to “take sides” in this geopolitical competition. He said that what worries ASEAN countries is that the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines may escalate into a local military confrontation, threatening the peace and prosperity of the region.

Peng noted that countries like Vietnam have not followed the Philippines in provoking the South China Sea issue in the last two years. Obviously, the Philippines is acting as a “pawn” for the US, but not receiving support from regional countries.

In a recent survey in Southeast Asia-the State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report -China became the respondents’ “top choice” for an alliance if the ASEAN were forced to align with one of its strategic rivals (such as the US or China) for the first time since 2020.

The majority of respondents believe that Southeast Asian countries' relationship with China is improving, while confidence in the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security has declined significantly.

A recent wave of visits by state leader and senior foreign affair officials to China has been witnessed among ASEAN member states, which is believed to be a true reflection of China-ASEAN relations growing closer, as well as a vivid practice of regional countries yearning for peace and seeking development.

“If you look at the trend in the region, all ASEAN countries except the Philippines are seeking balanced relations between these two great powers, but the Philippines is becoming more and more pro-American. The interests of the Philippines are the interests of the Filipino people, and the interests of the Filipino people are tied in with the interests of the ASEAN,” said Banlaoi.

The interview can be seen on the *Global Times* page:
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1310381.shtml>.

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by HKCNA on Marcos's New Statement on the SCS Issue

On 8 April, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from *Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA)* on the Philippine President Marcos's new statement on the SCS issue. He analyzed the main reasons and multiple impacts of the statement on the SCS situation and China-Philippine relations.



▲ the interview on the HKCNA page

The interview can be seen on the HKCNA page:

<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100643625&channel=2813>

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by HKCNA on ASEAN dignitaries' Intensive Visits to China

On 3 April, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from *Hong Kong China News Agency (HKCNA)* on ASEAN dignitaries' intensive visits to China. He analyzed the main reasons and multiple impacts of these visits on the China-ASEAN relations.



▲ the interview on the HKCNA page

The interview can be seen on the HKCNA page:

<http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100639972&channel=2813>

RCAS Commentary

Iran-Israel Conflict: Impacts on Regional and Global Politic

Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri

Since Iranian Revolution of 1979, the state of Israel clubbed with United States of America is termed to be enemy number one for Iranian government and the people. On many occasions, the two states have come to bull's-eye situations apparently, but the historians have recorded that these states have never escalated to a war that will vanish existence of either of them. Although, situations with USA have been worsened time and again driven by the atrocities of situations like hostage crisis and assassination of General Qassim Sulaimani, yet not turned into war like scenario.



▲ A cleric chants slogans during an anti-Israeli gathering in front of the British Embassy in Tehran, Iran, early Sunday, April 14, 2024. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi).

Here, by going through the historical facts, analysts can argue and conclude that Iran will never go to war with any state in the contemporary era, but through various means will try to retain its doctrine that Iran is the savior of Al-Quds and other Islamic cultural and religious sites. Iran has tested the atrocities of time and knows how to respond to situations like these. Iran has been successful in retaining its revolution despite a long war with Iraq soon after the revolution. Iran has sacrificed

many things and has been bearing with the unending sanctions on growing economy for retaining revolution and identity as well.

Iran is a rational actor in the global and regional politics and plays its cards very accurately for securing and achieving its national interests. Iranian strategists and policy makers know very well, how to keep equilibrium among the emotions of the general public, the sympathies of Muslims worldwide and achieving of national interests.

Iran's strategic moves can be judged from the facts that how Iran handled The P5+1 and how she got success in Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and that the world is well aware of the fact that how Iran managed and conspired for uranium enrichment and modernizing missile technology.

The historians have also noted that how Iran has made its way to have a sway in the internal politics of Afghanistan. Iran has played as a realpolitik and has managed to balance the relationships with China and India. China has been a vocal and friend in need of Iran and has supported and guided Iran in many occasions. Iran's rapprochement with kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been solely credited to China's sincere intervention and has made the way for Iran's peaceful coexistence with KSA and other like-minded Gulf states.

Owing to this prelude, coming towards the burning issue of Iran's direct confrontation with Israel and its impacts on the regional politics, many media houses and analysts have termed the confrontation as just a drama of Iranian government and some have termed it as a genuine retaliation and revenge of Iranian Consulate's bombing of Israel in Damascus a few days ago. Iranian officials have also termed it as a revenge and has shown that no further attacks will be carried out on Israeli installation in the same case.

Moreover, the Irani counter action was very much imminent. United States provided vital and timely information to the Israelis friends thus Israel's aerial defensive assets were on hi-alert. The 300 projectiles from various directions were intercepted by the combined air defense system of Israel land and air based and US sea-based assets. Reportedly, almost 40% of the projectiles have successfully penetrated the Iron Dome and damage done is being ascertained.

Israel is now playing the victim card in UN Security Council and is supported by US, UK and its allies. However, US has distanced itself from any offensive action from Israel against Iran. Despite a long history of atrocities and proxies, it is the first time that Israel and Iran have got engaged in direct confrontation. The expansion of war is in the Israeli interest but looking towards the global and regional scenario it will be

detrimental to the global peace, so the Security Council will definitely adopt a resolution for restraint and de-escalation of the situations.

Russia, because of Israel's engagements and support with Ukraine has already announced that she will support Iran against Israel and it is quite clear that USA will come to the rescue of Israel in such situations will ultimately lead to a full-scale war on global level and allies will be compelled to comply, thus World War three will be ringing the bell along with the destruction of the major part of the world.

Iran has acted under immense internal and external pressure and went for a face saving before its proxies and hardliners in and outside. Most probably, the outcome of this escalation may go in the favor of Hamas, and the chances of ceasefire in Gaza may be prioritized.

Nevertheless, if Israeli government takes a solo flight at the diplomatic plinth and decides to go for a big blow to the Iranian strategic assets, then situations will go the other way and Iranian retaliation will be need of the hour. An incapacitated Iran is in the interests of many neutrals and enemies of Iran, so after the big blow, the peace be imposed. That peace may give a hope certificate to the Palestinians at the cost of Iran de-fanning.

On the other hand, Iran's influence and projection of power may get a boost in the Middle East, if Israel doesn't respond in a big way. In the current situations, it is in the best interest of the whole world to stop Israel from genocide in Palestine, go for ceasefire, allow returning of refugees to their destroyed homes, thus the retaliating nations, like Iran, Yemen, Lebanon and neutralize world public opinion against Israel.

It is the age of technology and any miscommunication or misleading news can turn the world into a dump of ashes so it is strongly advised to the world powers and P5 members to play their due role and go for a permanent solution to the outstanding issue of Palestine and bury this issue for once and for all. Palestine and Gaza are now flash points for the world and clash of civilizations, where humanity should prevail and human rights should be prioritized for the sake of securing a peaceful world.

*The article was first published at RCAS, Hong Kong, Apr.23, 2024,
http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2305.html..*

RCAS Commentary

Terrifying Multidimensional Terrorist Attacks

Zafar Nawaz Jaspal

Pakistan is in the midst of multidimensional terrorist attacks. The sequence and commonality of recent terrorist attacks in Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa reveal that the terrorist groups are home-grown, and they receive foreign material and financial support through Afghanistan. They have sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Therefore, on March 18, Pakistan Air Force precisely struck Tehreek-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) hideouts at Birmal (Paktika province) and at Spera (Khowst province) in eastern Afghanistan.



▲ Govt reaches understanding with TTP for temporary truce-Pakistan Dawn

Terrorist groups such as TTP, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and its affiliated Baloch militant groups have been acting as a proxy of India and other covert anti-Pakistan and anti-China forces. They have been targeting Pakistani law enforcement agencies, innocent people, and Chinese officials and workers working in Pakistan.

The suicide attack in the Bisham area of Shangla district in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) on March 26, 2024, caused six deaths, including five Chinese engineers who were working on the Dasu Hydel Power Project. On March 20, eight armed fighters of the Majeed Brigade of the illegal Balochistan Liberation Army tried to enter the Gwadar Port Authority complex but were killed by security forces personnel. The killing of

Chinese engineers and the attack on the Gawador Port Authority underlines the vulnerability of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.

The CPEC is a harbinger of Pakistan's economic development and sustainable prosperity. That's why the Indians have been hatching conspiracies against the CPEC projects. The Indian ruling elite's hysterical attitude towards CPEC is alarming. It has been endeavoring to create internal discord in Pakistan. The Indians know that once CPEC projects are implemented, they will change the face of Baluchistan, KPK, etc. Indeed, the people of Baluchistan and KPK would be the CPEC project's greatest beneficiaries in the long term. Therefore, the Indian intelligence agency RAW crafted a network in Balochistan to obstruct the construction of CPEC infrastructure and support TTP and BLA to spoil the internal security of the country to hinder foreign investment in the country.

President Zardari and Prime Minister Shahbaz strongly condemned the heinous act and expressed solidarity with the Chinese people in their time of mourning. Both visited China's Embassy in Islamabad to extend heartfelt condolences on behalf of the government and the people of Pakistan. They assured the Chinese Ambassador that the criminals involved in the gruesome act would be apprehended and brought to justice. Moreover, they promised that all necessary measures would be taken to ensure the security of the Chinese citizens working on various projects in Pakistan.

No group had claimed responsibility for the Bisham bombing. In the past, both Baloch militants and religiously inspired fighters targeted Chinese interests in the country. Nevertheless, the official statements testified to the involvement of China and Pakistan's adversaries. For instance,

President Asif Ali Zardari stated the Bisham incident was "orchestrated by the enemies of Pakistan-China friendship." Foreign Office also pointed out that "Pakistan and China are close friends and iron brothers. We have no doubt that the Bisham terror attack was orchestrated by the enemies of Pakistan-China friendship".

The ISPR reported that "Strategic projects and sensitive sites vital for Pakistan's economic progress and the well-being of its people are being targeted as a conscious effort to retard our progress and sow discord between Pakistan and its strategic allies and partners, most notably China." It added, "Certain foreign elements are complicit in aiding and abetting terrorism in Pakistan, driven by their vested interests."

The critical examination of the terrorist attacks in recent months reveals that the TTP might have conducted the suicidal attack targeting Chinese nationals at Bisham. However, Daesh's Afghan branch, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K)—a global terrorist group that has long been active in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries—involvement could not be ruled out. The Daesh was responsible for attacks

in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Notably, many IS-K fighters have come from TTP factions who took refuge in Afghanistan. While the Daesh has been fighting the Afghan Taliban, the group has coexisted with TTP factions in eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan has launched counter-insurgency operations, expanded security infrastructure, and carried out fundamental reforms for two decades. Despite these initiatives, terror incidents increased roughly 43 percent in 2023 over the previous year. Hence, Islamabad needs to revisit its counterterrorism strategy to neutralize these terrorist groups. It needs to use both kinetic (military) and non-kinetic tactics to end the menace of terrorism in the country.

Besides, Islamabad has to engage China and other like-minded states in the diplomatic arena to obstruct foreign material and financial support to the terrorist groups operating in Pakistan. The encouraging development is that the UN Security Council urged all UN member states to actively cooperate with Pakistan and China in apprehending the perpetrators of the Bisham attack.

To conclude, China and Pakistan require increasing counterterrorism cooperation. Hence, a joint China-Pakistan counterterrorism strategy is needed to deal with the common threat. Besides, Islamabad needs to engage Iran and Russia to combat Daesh's violent spree. A transnational terrorist syndicate requires transnational cooperation among regional states.

The article was first published at WE NEWS, Pakistan, Apr.1, 2024, <https://en.wenews.pk/terrifying-multidimensional-terrorist-attacks/>.

RCAS Commentary

Would Marcos's Dialogue Promises Bring Peace and Stability to the South China Sea?

Nian Peng

On 8 April, Philippine President Marcos Jr stated in an interview with reporters in Bacolod city, Negros Occidental, that the Philippines remains committed to maintaining open communication with China and is making every effort to engage with the Chinese leadership to deescalate tensions in the South China Sea (SCS).



▲ Philippine Coast Guard personnel prepare rubber fenders after Chinese Coast Guard vessels blocked their way to a resupply mission at the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, on 5 March 2024. (Adrian Portugal/Reuters).

He further clarified that the joint military drill conducted by the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines in the SCS was aimed at strengthening coordination between the four navies. He also said that the exercise would help deter aggression of Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships in the area.

Following the US's lead

This is the most recent statement by Marcos on SCS disputes and is quite different

from his previous harsh position, as he appears to have adopted a more conciliatory tone to pursue peace and stability in the SCS. Why? The main reasons are: one, to be in step with the US's resumption of military exchanges with China, and two, to reduce war anxiety at home.

It is worth noting that recently, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the US Army have resumed security consultations after a hiatus of some time. This sends a clear message that both giant rivals, the US and China, fully realise the high risks of military confrontation, either in the SCS or in the Taiwan Strait, and are committed to preventing the crisis from escalating to clashes and even war. Therefore, in the tradition of bandwagoning, the Philippines followed the US and took measures to reduce tensions with China.

Nonetheless, neither the US nor the Philippines have given up their deterrence strategies toward China. Instead, they have taken more military action to deter China's "offensives" in the SCS.

This can be inferred from the views of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, which stated that the main objective of the US-Japan-Australia-Philippines military exercise was to demonstrate "the participating countries' commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific through interoperability exercises in the maritime domain". Philippine officers have also said that they need more joint military exercises with their allies and partners in the future.

China responds with combat patrols of its own

However, such so-called "military deterrence" has failed to compel China to retreat from the SCS. In response, China has in fact strengthened its military combat readiness in the SCS, such as by conducting the recent joint naval and air combat patrol conducted by the Southern Theater Command on 8 April, the same day as the US-Japan-Australia-Philippine military exercise.

Hence, the joint military exercises that the Philippines conducted with the US and its allies, either bilaterally or multilaterally, have not only failed to decrease China's "offensives" but also incited its "aggressiveness".

Since the escalation of tensions in the SCS, war anxiety over SCS disputes has prevailed in Philippine society. More recently, Imee Marcos, sister of Marcos Jr and chair of the Philippine Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, voiced her disagreement with the Marcos government's recent measures to counter China in the SCS, arguing that such actions were leading the country "down a dangerous path". Therefore, Marcos had to placate his critics by sending peace messages.

The Philippines' attempts to take the moral high ground

In fact, it is not unprecedented for the Philippines to issue statements seeking dialogue with China after provoking it. In other words, this is a typical tactic employed by Marcos in attempting to seize the moral upper hand. This approach is designed to portray the Philippines as a peaceful advocate, while China is described as an “aggressor” and to shift the blame for tensions and conflicts to China.

An instance of this tactic could be seen from the telephone call between foreign ministers of China and the Philippines in December 2023 and the 8th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea (BCM) meeting in Shanghai in January this year.

The Philippines initiated a request for dialogue during the call, and China responded positively by actively promoting it. However, the Philippines subsequently backtracked from its commitments and persisted in provocative actions, resulting in the situation in the SCS deteriorating even further compared to that of the previous year.

Now, Manila seems to be repeating this tactic. If the Philippines truly aims to resume dialogue with China to de-escalate tensions in the SCS, it must stop holding military exercises with extra-regional countries and stop making provocations in the disputed waters.

Jeopardising Beijing-Manila trust

The first joint exercises between the four navies of the Philippines, the US, Japan, and Australia have not only heightened SCS tensions but also further undermined the political trust between China and the Philippines. Such military actions are incompatible with creating a conducive atmosphere for the resumption of dialogue between the two countries, and it is challenging for China to have full faith in Marcos’s sincerity regarding bilateral dialogue.

Even worse, there will be more diplomatic and military actions between the Philippines, the US and Japan in the next few days, mainly including the first US-Japan-Philippine leaders summit on 11 April and the annual “Balikatan” exercise between the US and the Philippines on 22 April- 8 May, which will definitely escalate tensions in the SCS.

Although the Philippines could place greater pressure on China and secure greater benefits from closer alignment with the US and Japan, such a selfish approach is highly dangerous and risky and jeopardises Beijing-Manila trust.

To date, the SCS dispute has been edging closer to the brink of military confrontations; there are fewer effective measures to halt this momentum. Thus, the self-restraint of all claimants and external actors and the resumption of peace talks

between China and the Philippines are needed more than ever. It is imperative that the Philippines stops its provocations and returns to the dialogue track.

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RCAS Commentary

Iranian Nukes Could Kick Horizontal Proliferation in Region

Zafar Nawaz Jaspal

Since the United States exited the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has been enriching uranium near-weapons grade levels. Tehran's decision to produce high-enriched uranium is a violation of the NPT and also alarms about the probability of its withdrawal from the Treaty.



▲ IAEA

On December 26, 2023, The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran was producing approximately nine kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent uranium-235 per month. Notably, uranium enriched to 60 percent U-235 can be quickly enriched to weapons-grade levels or 93 percent. Many experts believe Iran has enough enriched uranium to produce at least five nuclear weapons.

The alarming assumption is that Iran's advances in nuclear programs and ballistic missile capabilities would unravel the nonproliferation system in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Besides, it compels regional powers, to revisit their nuclear policy to sustain strategic equilibrium in the region.

The Gaza war has spoiled peace initiatives and dashed Iran's nuclear restraint policy. Israeli Cabinet members' signaling of nuclear weapons use and increasing tension between Iran and the United States reinvigorated the nuclear hawks in Tehran.

No stakeholder in the region can ignore IAEA's chief Rafael Grossi's warning that Iran continues to enrich uranium well beyond the need for commercial nuclear use despite U.N. pressure to stop it. On February 19, he opined, "There is a concerning rhetoric; you may have heard high officials in Iran saying they have all the elements for a nuclear weapon lately."

Admittedly, presently, Iran does not possess nuclear weapons and thereby has no nuclear capability to harm Israel and the United States. However, Israel's nuclear signaling and the Biden administration's current MENA policy could be a cause for Iran's decision to enrich weapon-grade uranium and expand its nuclear infrastructure. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear hawks could argue that in January, Iran was attacked by nuclear-armed Pakistan. Therefore, to prevent nuclear blackmail, Iran needs nuclear weapons.

Pakistan and Iran quickly de-escalated the crisis in the aftermath of airstrikes on each other's territory in January 2024. The Iranian nuclear hawks could use this crisis to justify exiting from the NPT and manufacturing nuclear devices. Indeed, Iran initiated the crisis by violating the sovereignty of a nuclear-armed Pakistan. But it is an acceptable conclusion that a nuclear-armed state attacked Iranian territory.

Iran did not violate the JCPOA until President Trump pulled the U.S. out of the agreement in 2018. Thus, America's exit from the JCPOA ended the Iranian nuclear program's restriction on uranium enrichment to only 3.67%. Nevertheless, the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA resulted in the revival of Iran's nuclear weapons drive.

Recently, Iran announced building a new 10-megawatt nuclear research reactor in Isfahan and constructing a nuclear power plant complex in Sirik, on the Strait of Hormuz. It is expected to be fully operational by 2031. Mohammad Eslami, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said, "We must reach the production capacity of 20,000 megawatts of nuclear power in the country" by the year 2041.

Importantly, NATO members are equally concerned about instability in the MENA, which the Alliance refers to as the Southern Flank. On July 11, 2023, during the Vilnius Summit, the members agreed that MENA provides fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations. They believe that Iran is the main supporter of the axis of resistance in the region.

The NATO's Vilnius Summit Communiqué underlines the members concerned about Iran's escalation of its nuclear program and therefore, determined that Iran must never develop a nuclear weapon. They called on Iran to stop all ballistic missile activities inconsistent with UNSCR 2231 (2015), which was based on the assumption that Iran would take the necessary steps toward restoring confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program.

To conclude, Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs are viewed by a few countries as threatening across the region and beyond. Therefore, the advances in these programs could cause a horizontal proliferation in the area.

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