



RCAS Commentary

After Sabina Shoal: China-Philippines Disputes in the South China Sea Persist

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About RCAS

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

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

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

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

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On 14 September, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)'s BRP Teresa Magbanua (MRRV-9701) withdrew from Xianbin Jiao ("Escoda Shoal", as referred to by the Philippines) after an almost five-month-long "extended patrol" in the shoal. This occurred following the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism (BCM) on the South China Sea (SCS), held in Beijing on 11 September.



▲ This handout photo from the Philippine Coast Guard taken and received on 15 September 2024 shows the Philippine Coast Guard ship BRP Teresa Magbanua as it arrives at a port in Puerto Princesa, Palawan. (Handout/Philippine Coast Guard/AFP).

During the meeting, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong reiterated China's principled position on the issue of Xianbin Jiao and urged the Philippine side to immediately withdraw its relevant vessels.

China would face enormous internal and external pressures if the Philippines succeeded in grounding their vessel at Xianbin Jiao, such as they did with the BRP Sierra Madre at Ren'ai Jiao.

Worried that the Philippines would replicate tactics at Ren'ai Jiao

China is acutely vigilant regarding the escalating tensions in Xianbin Jiao, as it is concerned that the Philippines is attempting to replicate the Ren'ai Jiao (Second Thomas Shoal) model in Xianbin Jiao. China would face enormous internal and external pressures if the Philippines succeeded in grounding their vessel at Xianbin Jiao, such as they did with the BRP Sierra Madre at Ren'ai Jiao. Therefore, China has taken various coercive measures to compel the Philippine vessels to leave Xianbin Jiao as soon as possible.

These mainly include the collisions between Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessels and the grounded Philippine vessel Magbanua at Xianbin Jiao, as well as the CCG's interception of supplies intended for the Philippine vessel. According to the Philippine online news website Rappler, in August 2024 alone, Xianbin Jiao witnessed at least four incidents involving the Philippines and China. On 24 August, 40 CCG vessels and fishing boats blocked two PCG vessels from delivering supplies to Magbanua. According to the CCG, the Philippines has repeatedly failed to send supplies to Magbanua due to the control measures imposed by the CCG.

Philippines forced to make a retreat this time

Although Manila took the initiative to open a new “battlefield” at Xianbin Jiao, it did not gain any advantages. Not only did the Philippines fail to “occupy” Xianbin Jiao, but the PCG vessel ultimately “retreated” from Xianbin Jiao.

In fact, the Philippines fully recognised its dilemma at Xianbin Jiao. On the one hand, it attempted to “stay” at Xianbin Jiao as long as possible; on the other hand, it wanted to de-escalate tensions in the area.

Moreover, the Philippines faced greater challenges in maintaining its long presence at Xianbin Jiao. For example, there were more intense collisions and strict interceptions

from the CCG at Xianbin Jiao, resulting in a serious crisis for the Philippine vessel and its crew. Given China's strong countermeasures at Xianbin Jiao, the Philippine vessel had to withdraw from the shoal. In fact, the Philippines fully recognised its dilemma at Xianbin Jiao. On the one hand, it attempted to “stay” at Xianbin Jiao as long as possible; on the other hand, it wanted to de-escalate tensions in the area.

Given these developments, undersecretary for bilateral relations and ASEAN affairs Maria Theresa Lazaro at the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed the consistent position of the Philippines while exploring ways to lower tensions in the area during the BCM meeting in Beijing. Furthermore, both sides agreed to maintain communication through diplomatic channels, including the BCM, and to continue discussions on areas of cooperation, especially the hotline mechanism, coast guard cooperation, and marine scientific and technological collaboration.

Dialogue may not bring concrete results

However, one should not overestimate the real effects of the diplomatic dialogues between China and the Philippines on managing disputes in the SCS for different reasons.

First, the BCM addresses the current needs of both sides, which involve decreasing tensions at Xianbin Jiao through diplomatic channels and avoiding the recurrence of another Ren'ai Jiao incident.

Second, the Philippines has not abandoned its consistent position on Xianbin Jiao. Therefore, it may return to Xianbin Jiao in the future and exacerbate tensions once again. Actually, the Philippines' National Maritime Council, a new body that Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Jr set up this year to enhance maritime security, had announced that another ship would “immediately take over” at Xianbin Jiao soon after the withdrawal of Magbanua from this area.

Third, the role of diplomacy in managing the SCS disputes is relatively weak for the Philippine side. An example of this is the failure of the telephone diplomacy last December between Wang Yi and the Philippine Foreign Minister Manalo, which was aimed at managing and controlling the situation on the ground at Ren'ai Jiao.

Cycle of tensions

Last but not least, the joint diplomatic efforts between the two countries may also be disrupted by the Philippines' "irresponsible behaviour" regarding the SCS disputes. (NB: Both sides have called out the other party's "irresponsible behaviour" as a factor in escalating tensions).

On the eve of the BCM meeting, the Philippine ambassador to the US, Jose Manuel "Babe" del Gallego Romualdez, stated that at least 20 countries plan to hold a summit on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly to discuss how to conduct "effective dialogue" with China on the SCS issue. This latest action of internationalising SCS disputes by the Philippine side has been heavily criticised by China and has undoubtedly undermined the mutual trust between the two sides.

To conclude, despite its positive signal, diplomatic dialogue between China and the Philippines is unlikely to change the game situation between the two countries. The Philippines would continue to adopt a multi-pronged, provocative strategy to challenge China's claims in the SCS and gain support and assistance from the US. While China would also retaliate against the Philippines' provocations and firmly safeguard its sovereignty and interests in the SCS.

So there would likely be a new round of tensions if the Philippines successfully sends another vessel to Xianbin Jiao.

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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.